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THEORY

Relationshiping nations: Philippines/US fan art and fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—Three fan productions are analyzed that delve into the question of what the Philippines and the United States have meant to one another, what the nature of their multifaceted involvement has been for more than a century, what Filipinos feel about the United States of America, and what Americans feel about the Philippines. Fan art and fan fiction are often laden with affect because it is the fact that fan creators are so affected by their favorite media texts that leads them to create fan works in the first place, and that makes their fellow fans, who understand the affects that inspire them, appreciate their works so deeply. Fan productions about the Philippines/United States are similarly suffused with feelings—the feelings that two nations and two peoples have for one another, which are difficult to define, articulate, and express for Filipinos, Americans, and Filipino Americans.

[0.2] Keywords—Affect; Colonialism; Fan production; Fan work; Filipino; Postcolonialism; United States

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I. Introduction

[1.1] Fans' transformative works tend to focus on relationships between popular

characters; fans call the practice of pairing two characters romantically or sexually relationshiping or shipping. Fan creators indicate character pairings with a slash mark between two names, as in Kirk/Spock. Here I examine three fan works that center not on a pairing of fictional characters but on a pairing of two nations: the Philippines and the United States of America.

[1.2] The Philippine Islands and the United States have been entangled in a relationship since 1898, when the United States won the Spanish-American War and took control of three of Spain's colonies: the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Philippine resistance fighters had joined forces with the United States military against Spain, believing that the United States would grant the Philippines independence if Spain was defeated, but after Spain withdrew from the islands and the United States announced its intention to become the Philippines' new colonial power, Filipinos launched a three-year war of resistance against US occupying forces, from 1899 to 1902. The United States governed the Philippines as a colony until 1946, and even after the Philippines became an independent republic, it maintained neocolonial ties with the United States, cooperating closely with the US military, serving as a major market for US consumer goods in Asia, and periodically being subjected to heavy political intervention and control by the US government, as when the United States supported the 21-year kleptocratic dictatorship of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos because it valued Marcos's anticommunist orientation during the Cold War. Since the 1965 Immigration Act removed quotas that restricted the immigration of Asians to the United States, Filipinos have constituted one of the largest immigrant groups to the States, but while Filipinos and Filipino Americans can never forget their long and complex history with the United States, Americans have cultivated "political amnesia" with respect to their history of imperialism in the Philippine Islands and elsewhere (Devitt 2008, 117), which has given rise to a situation in which Filipinos feel both deeply connected to the United States and largely invisible to or misunderstood by American culture and society.

[1.3] The relationship between the Philippines and the United States was represented from the start in terms of family and friendship. For example, when the United States annexed the Philippines, William Howard Taft, first American governor of the Philippines (who would later become president of the United States), "assured President McKinley that 'our little brown brothers' would need 'fifty or one hundred years' of close supervision 'to develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills'" (Miller 1982, 134). From 1900 to 1902, American military officers called the Filipinos' style of insurgency "'Amigo warfare' (from the Spanish word *amigo*, meaning 'friend') [because the] Filipinos were friends [with the Americans] during the day or when confronted, but at night or when no one was looking, they were guerillas" working to undermine the American occupation (Ileto 2001, 110). Americans deployed a narrative of brotherhood to justify racist attitudes and an imperialist war, and Filipinos constantly enacted friendliness in order to distract from and disguise their anti-American insurrection. Thus, from 1899 to the present, the two countries have performed affection for one another, and those performances have covered over myriad other feelings, including, at times, hatred and violent opposition.

[1.4] In this essay, I will discuss three fan works that represent the complex affects that suffuse the Philippines/US relationship. The first is a fan illustration that uses the Disney animated film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as source material, depicting the main characters in traditional Filipino dress. The second fan work I will analyze is a fan fiction set in the universe of the comedy anime series *Hetalia* (2009–15), which personifies countries as teenagers who have highly emotional and drama-filled relationships with one another; the fan author tells the story of a college-aged girl named Amihan (the Philippines) and her romantic dealings with Antonio (Spain) and Alfred (United States). The third piece I will describe is a fan fic that places two characters from the CW sci-fi series *The 100* (2014–) in a modern-day setting and portrays the white American female character, Clarke, falling in love with the half-white American, half-Filipino male character, Bellamy, as she comes to understand his struggle to learn about his Filipino roots. I build on the work of Anna Wilson (2016) and Natalia Samutina (2017) to argue that each of these three fan productions offers viewers and readers "an affective hermeneutics—a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling" (Wilson 2016, ¶ 1.3). In other words, by eliciting and encouraging certain affective experiences in their viewers/readers and by characterizing the Philippines/US relationship as itself heavily charged with affect, the creators of these fan works make available new or unusual ways of learning about and understanding the complicated and continually evolving history of the two nations. By extension, these pieces reveal the potential of transformative fan productions to make legible complex power dynamics between political entities in ways that may be more memorable than straightforward reportage or pedagogy, because fan productions deliver information through affect rather than trying to divorce affect from the presentation of facts, as news journalism and historical scholarship do.

2. *Beauty and the Beast* fan art: "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw"

[2.1] The first Philippines/US fan work that I will discuss is a work of racebending fan art. Racebending fan works appropriate mass media and replace white characters/actors with characters/actors of color; in other words, they bend the race of well-known white characters so that they are markedly, visibly, nonwhite.

[2.2] "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw" ("Beauty and the beast" or "The beauty and the monster" in Tagalog) is a 2015 illustration by James Claridades, aka squeeegool, posted to his Tumblr account (<https://squeeegool.tumblr.com/post/111665601959/ang-maganda-at-ang-halimaw-late-post-of-my>) (figure 1). Claridades's social media accounts list his gender as male and his location as Manila, and his Tumblr and Deviant Art sites are full of Philippine-themed drawings, so we might assume that he is a Filipino artist based in the Philippines' capital city. The caption beneath the Tumblr post of the drawing reads: "'Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw' late post of my Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast yes, beast has Carabao (Philippine water buffalo) horns." As of this writing in November 2018, the post has over 8,100 notes (on Tumblr,

notes are the sum of a post's likes and reblogs).



Figure 1. "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw" ("Beauty and the Beast" in Tagalog) by James Claridades (aka squeegool), 2015. Fan art based on the iconic image of Beauty and the Beast from the 1991 animated film, transforming Belle and the Beast into Filipino characters, wearing traditional Filipino dress instead of eighteenth-century European formal wear. The caption beneath the Tumblr post of the drawing reads: "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw' late post of my Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast yes, beast has Carabao (Philippine water buffalo) horns."

[2.3] "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" is instantly recognizable to any Disney fan as an illustration based on the main characters of the 1991 animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise). The female figure's brown hair and partial updo, her facial features, and her wide yellow-gold skirt all closely resemble the attributes of Belle, the titular Beauty of the 1991 film. The animal-man's wavy brown pelt, horns, claws, hooves, two-legged stance, and incongruous formal attire bear striking similarities to the features and dress of the Disney movie's Beast. However, Maganda, Claridades's version of Belle, has a darker complexion than the Disney princess, and she wears a yellow sampaguita flower in her hair (the sampaguita is the national flower of the Philippines), while Belle's coiffure lacks floral adornment. Most notably, Maganda wears not an eighteenth-century French ballgown as Belle does but a nineteenth-century traditional Filipina formal style of dress called a *terno*, consisting of four pieces: "the *camisa* (blouse with sleeves), the *saya* (skirt), the *panuelo* (a cloth worn over the *camisa*), and the *tapis* (worn over the skirt)" (Burns 2011, 203).

Claridades explicitly marks Halimaw, his refiguration of the Beast, as a Philippine water buffalo, called a carabao, instead of a cross between a North American buffalo and a bull, as the Disney Beast seems to be. Just as Maganda has a darker skin color than Belle, Halimaw has darker, curlier fur than Disney's Beast. A golden religious medallion, an accessory commonly worn by Filipino men, hangs around Halimaw's neck. Although Halimaw wears a European-style suit similar to the Beast's, beneath Halimaw's black suit jacket, he sports a light blue *barong tagalog*, a traditional formal shirt for men in the Philippines.

[2.4] The *terno* and *barong tagalog* are, according to Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (2011), "the Philippine national costumes" (209), belonging to the broader category of Filipiniana, that is, styles of dress that strongly evoke Philippine national identity (204). Claridades describes "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" as his "Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast," demonstrating his consciousness of the significance of the clothes in which he depicts the heroine and hero. One of Claridades's accomplishments with "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" is the insertion of Filipino characters into the American media archive. Claridades's piece offers a racebent *Beauty and the Beast*, transforming white Disney characters into brown Filipino characters. As Zina Hutton states, racebending can provide "a necessary form of representation for folks in fandom that may otherwise not get to see themselves in media" (quoted in Klink et al. forthcoming, 131, 134–35). However, I also understand the illustration to be more than a tacit criticism of Hollywood's exclusions. The fan art also merges Disney, a symbol of the United States, with Filipiniana, representative of the Philippines, in one image, and calls upon the reader to consider the meanings of that merger.

[2.5] It may not be immediately obvious that a Disney film should be understood as a stand-in for the United States as whole. However, Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells argue that Disney has long encouraged its fans to think of "Disney as [a] metonym for 'American'—clean, decent, industrious" (1995, 3), and Steven Watts (1995) chronicles how "Disney's postwar movies...legislated a kind of cultural Marshall Plan. They nourished a genial cultural imperialism that magically overran the rest of the globe with the values, expectations, and goods of a prosperous middle-class United States" (107). The Philippines has been flooded with American media products since the turn of the twentieth century, so Filipinos have been particularly impacted and influenced by the cultural imperialism that conflates Disney with Americanness.

[2.6] I mentioned above that traditional Filipiniana fashion signifies the Philippine national identity, but it is important to consider how that style of formal dress has been used, and by whom, in Philippine history. The *terno* and *barong tagalog* worn by Maganda and Halimaw in Claridades's fan art harken back to the preferred formal wear of the Philippines' most famous and notorious first couple, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda (figure 2). Burns (2011) writes, "In the 1970s, the Marcoses actively reenvisioned Philippine history through their own lives and made good use of the *terno* in these nation-remaking efforts. The then-Philippine president/dictator Ferdinand Marcos and first lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos popularized the *terno* and the *barong tagalog*. The *terno*, for a particular generation, is almost synonymous with

the deposed president's wife. Dressing played a role in what the Marcoses declared as the 'New Society,' where the *terno* and the *barong tagalog* [were] instrumental in fashioning the image of the modern Filipino and democratic Philippines" (205). Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos wore the *terno* and *barong tagalog* frequently and popularized these garments as markers of Filipino tradition, in order to signal that they were leading the Philippines into a bright future while continuing to honor the country's past. Of course, as history has shown, the Marcoses did not stand for modernity and democracy in their country but for extreme socioeconomic inequality, corruption, cronyism, and authoritarianism (Hamilton-Paterson 2014). Given how strongly these traditional styles of dress are associated with the Marcos dictatorship of 1972–1986, we must look closely at Claridades's "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" illustration and ask whether and how this image invokes or references the Marcoses.

[2.7] One marked difference between the *terno* worn by Maganda in Claridades's drawing and the *ternos* worn by Imelda Marcos during her husband's rule and long afterwards is that Maganda does not wear the butterfly sleeve *terno* associated with Imelda. (The exaggerated standing butterfly sleeves that Imelda favored are clearly visible on her gown in figure 2.) Instead of butterfly sleeves, Maganda's gown has the "tulip-shape sleeves of the nineteenth century" *terno* (Burns 2011, 203).



Figure 2. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, 1984. President Marcos wears a *barong tagalog*, and first lady Marcos wears a *terno* with butterfly sleeves, a style of dress so closely associated with her that one of her nicknames was "steel butterfly." Photo by SSGT Marvin D. Lynchard, USAF. Public domain.

[2.8] Alfredo Roces states that the butterfly sleeves, which are pleated to stand up sharply at the shoulders "to create the impression of a butterfly on tiptoe for a flight" (quoted in Burns 2011, 203), were invented in the 1920s by designer Pacita Longos. The twentieth-century *terno*—Imelda's style of *terno*—is a one-piece gown, distinct from the nineteenth-century *terno* with its four-part construction. Because Claridades clearly renders his Maganda wearing a nineteenth-century *terno* and not a twentieth-century *terno*, fans who see the illustration (and who know Filipino fashion history) grasp that they are not meant to associate this Filipina beauty with the beautiful but sinister Imelda Marcos. Maganda is dressed to evoke pangs of nostalgic longings for an imaginary Philippine past, a time before the 1898 Spanish-American War, before the 1899–1902 Philippine-American War, before the period of US colonization of the islands and before the postwar era in which the United States shored up the political life of its puppet Ferdinand Marcos (Karnow 1989).

[2.9] And yet, the Marcoses, and the fraught, complex relationship between the Philippines and the United States, are not completely absent from Claridades's artwork. Let us consider "Ang Maganda" beside figure 3, a photograph of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos standing with US President Richard Nixon and first lady Pat Nixon.



Figure 3. Pat Nixon, Imelda Marcos, Richard Nixon, and Ferdinand Marcos, 1969. The US president and first lady stand with the Philippine president and first lady. Both presidents wear a *barong tagalog* (traditional Filipino dress shirts), and both first ladies wear *ternos* (traditional Filipino formal gowns). National Library of the Philippines (distributed by Philippine Presidential Museum and Library). Public domain.

[2.10] In this 1969 photograph, both presidents wear *barong tagalogs* and both first ladies wear *ternos*. The Nixons publicly embody the United States' alliance with, and backing of, Marcos's presidency by donning the Filipiniana fashion favored by the

Marcoses and allowing themselves to be photographed with the Philippine first couple. (However, interestingly, Pat Nixon's *terno* is multipiece and has tulip sleeves, characteristic of the nineteenth-century version of the dress, rather than the butterfly sleeves characteristic of Imelda's *ternos*. Is the American first lady here subtly establishing some distance between herself and Imelda?) Filipiniana thus served not only as Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos's favorite style of costume for their performances of modern leadership and good governance of the islands but also as a costume that could be put on by US officials for performances of the closeness of US-Philippine relations. George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all sported *barong tagalogs* on official visits to the country (Jeneverre's Travels 2017). Thus, the Marcoses succeeded in establishing Filipiniana as the defining costume of their performances as national leaders and of the performances of US presidents as maintainers of the supposedly long-lasting Philippine/American friendship.

[2.11] In light of these many public appearances in Filipiniana costume by heads of state intending to reinforce the Philippine/American relationship, Claridades's "Ang Maganda" illustration cannot be said to be completely devoid of references to the Marcos dictatorship or to the complicated history of connections between the two countries. Above, I interpreted "Ang Maganda" as a refutation or evasion of the Marcos era, but the fan work can also be read as a wish for a better Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos than the Philippines got, a wish for a Filipiniana-clad first couple whose beauty and finery would have been matched by their honesty, fairness, and sense of justice—in other words, a wish for Filipino leaders who would have been as uncomplicatedly good as Disney heroines and heroes. Yet another way to interpret Claridades's piece is as a wish for Maganda and Halimaw to take the place of both the Marcoses and Nixons in the 1969 photograph in figure 3, for the animated figures to take back the *terno* and *barong tagalog* from the dictators as well as from their Western enablers, and to again render the often-toxic Philippine/US relationship as a magical combination of American animation and Filipino embodied traditions, an intertwining of two cultures that honors the value of each one. "Ang Maganda" can be seen as representative of a desire for a Philippine/US relationship that is not rooted in destructive military, financial, and political entanglements nor in the imposition of US media and culture (with its privileging of whiteness and Euroamericanness) on the Philippines, but instead takes the form of an appealing mix of two seemingly opposite aesthetics: Filipiniana + Disney. Philippines/US could have been more of a romance between seeming opposites, not unlike the tale of Beauty and the Beast (with the countries occupying both the beautiful and beastly roles in different respects), rather than a perennially troubled colonial and neocolonial dynamic.

[2.12] "Ang Maganda" provides a means by which Filipinos can access wistfulness, rage, sorrow, yearning, and regret over the way that the story of the United States and the Philippines has unfolded. Samutina (2017) argues that fan fiction can help readers to know themselves better, and that this fostering of self-knowledge should be highly valued: "Fan fiction readers read by immersing themselves in the text and internalizing—allowing it to become inseparable from the self. Realization of one's (at times rather diverse) emotional needs through experiencing the text is practiced here as a version of

the 'care of the self': in other words, as one of the methods of self-cognition and emotional development" (260). "Ang Maganda" shows not only that fan productions can serve fan readers and viewers as mechanisms that allow them to know themselves and their emotional landscape, individually, but also that a fan work that references larger political themes (and indeed, what fan work doesn't?) can work against large-scale, structural silencings and assist a people in uncovering and articulating their feelings about their own disempowerment, which can be a collective form of self-care, self-cognition, and emotional development—valuable and necessary remedies for some of the wounds inflicted by historical oppression.

3. Hetalia fan fiction: "A Modest Woman"

[3.1] The second fan work about the Philippines/US pairing that I will discuss is a fan fiction story titled "A Modest Woman," written by Sasha Landau and published on AO3 (<https://archiveofourown.org/works/294724>) in 2011, which takes place in the universe of the Japanese anime *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (2009–2010, dir. Bob Shirohata). *Hetalia* is a humorous animated series that personifies entire nations as individual teenagers with distinctive personalities. *Hetalia*'s creator, Hidekaz Himaruya, has given human names to the characters, so Italy is called Feliciano, Germany is Ludwig, America is Alfred, and so on.

[3.2] The *Hetalia* fan fic "A Modest Woman," tells a story about three nations: Spain (whose name is Antonio), America (or Alfred), and the Philippines, which is a character that never appears in the *Hetalia* series but whom Landau personifies as a girl named Amihan. Landau is a white American who was only 15 years old when she wrote the fic; she did a prodigious amount of research into the Philippines' colonizations by Spain and the United States in preparation (she offers a summary of these histories in a long Notes section that follows the body of the story). Though Landau is not Filipino, her eagerness to immerse herself in Philippine history and to create a fan work based on her findings shows that the urge to understand colonial and postcolonial relationships is not only felt by the colonized peoples but also by some members of the colonizing group.

[3.3] "A Modest Woman" centers on two ships or pairings: Philippines/Spain and Philippines/America. Above, I argued that the fan art work "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" could be interpreted as a wish for US-Philippine relations to be more of a courtly romance and less a tangled knot of political, cultural, and financial promises, impositions, and transactions. "A Modest Woman" literalizes the concept of the United States and the Philippines being romantically involved—but depicts that involvement as complex, multifaceted, often confusing, sometimes terrifying, just as the alliance between the two nations has been over the past hundred and twenty years.

[3.4] At the beginning of "A Modest Woman," Amihan (the Philippines) is introduced as a university student who is cooking a late-night supper for herself in her apartment, reflecting on her romantic liaisons. Amihan first considers her relationship with Antonio (Spain): they met when Amihan was a young girl in primary school.

Amihan lacked confidence and friends, and Antonio took her under his wing, integrating her quickly into his social network and showering her with attention. They began to date, but as they grow older, Amihan begins to question whether she should break up with Antonio, because she asks herself, "Will I always be this way? Will I always be so...looked after?"

[3.5] Soon after her breakup with Antonio, Amihan meets Alfred (the United States) at a party. Alfred instantly takes a proprietary attitude toward her, giving her a nickname that she does not particularly like (Ami), calling her cute and short though she resists this description, and asking her to dance but not waiting for her response before he gets her on her feet. Alfred quickly begins to pursue Amihan romantically, and when she rejects him, he "simply laughed." This laugh, at first, "had made her blood run cold—he was laughing at her? Was it her destiny to never be taken seriously?" But then, Alfred puts her at ease, telling her that it's fine if she doesn't want to date him "but that doesn't mean I'm going to give up." And he laughs at her again.

[3.6] Amihan thinks back on her acquaintance with Alfred: "Part of her had been terrified, and part of her had been pleased" by Alfred's attention at first, but "[i]n the end she really had no choice" but to become friends with him, because "Alfred proved to be unrelenting." What ensues is a relationship that Amihan knows is friendship and suspects may be a romance, even though she is reluctant to call it that. She enjoys many of Alfred's traits: "Alfred was always bursting with energy, and whilst some called him over-bearing, she couldn't help but be drawn to it. It was like he was her own private sun, showing her color and light and warmth, things she hadn't realized she had been missing. She found him charming. He made her feel very *alive*." But however much Amihan likes Alfred, she calls their relationship a "strange bond" and refuses to think of it as romantic:

[3.7] At some point it had become obvious that technically what she and Alfred had would be called dating, but at the same time that seemed not quite the right thing to call it; she felt very close to Alfred, and could honestly say by now that she felt some sort of love for him...but it wasn't as if they were bound to one another. Perhaps what they had really *could* be considered dating, and she was just too stubborn to say so—still rooted in the wish to be independent.

[3.8] The story ends with Amihan and Alfred still locked in ambiguity. Amihan hears that Alfred has been asked out by another girl, but then he texts her to say that he would rather take Amihan to the movies than go on a date with someone else. Amihan agrees to see the movie with him the following day, and when she puts her phone down, she smiles to herself, thinking, "It may be selfish, but just let us stay like this a little longer. (Just a little longer.)"

[3.9] Both colonizations are represented in the fan fiction as consensual liaisons based in affection rather than as brutal conquests, which may lead the reader to assume that the author is ignorant of, or may wish to excuse, the various forms of violence

intrinsic to both colonial periods. However, upon closer examination, the author does represent the Philippines' relationships with Spain and the United States as asymmetrical and imbalanced, not by writing the colonizing nations as overtly abusive but by characterizing Spain as highly paternalistic and condescending toward the Philippines and by depicting the United States as covertly coercive and controlling toward the Philippines while ceaselessly courting it (her).

[3.10] The story captures well what Zeus Leonardo and Cheryl E. Matias (2013) call "Spain's paternalism and the United States' imperialistic tutelage of the Philippines" (6). Amihan's chafing against how Antonio treats her like a child, though presumably he loves her, dramatizes how, "in the eyes of the Spanish [colonizers], the natives [of the Philippines had to] be saved from themselves, like children who do not know what is good for them" (Leonardo and Matias 2013, 8). In historical analyses, the United States' colonization of the Philippine Islands is often described as a continuation of Spain's paternalism. But in Landau's fic, the Philippines/US relationship differs from the relationship of Spain/Philippines in key ways. Amihan thinks of Alfred as far less controlling than Antonio was; she thinks that Alfred is courting her with fun and adventure, and she must decide whether or not to accept Alfred's suit. But the reader readily deduces that Alfred does not really give Amihan the option of refusing him. As soon as Alfred meets Amihan, he makes clear that he believes that she belongs to him. He establishes ownership over her by giving her a nickname she does not ask for and dislikes and by inserting himself into her space and time. Alfred tells Amihan that it's fine if she doesn't want to date him but that he won't give up, and then he proceeds to behave as if they are dating anyway, which convinces all of their friends and even Amihan that they are indeed romantically involved. Alfred's invitation to Amihan to meet him at the movies at the end of the story, and her agreeing to go, alludes to the popular Filipino saying, "300 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood," which refers to Spain's subjection of Filipinos via the Catholic Church and the United States' subjection of Filipinos by means of saturating the Filipino market with American films, popular music, and literature (Watts's cultural imperialism). In other words, Alfred may frame his advances as a courtship in which Amihan has the ability to accept or reject him, but at every point in the story, Alfred decides how their relationship will go and either strongly influences Amihan to bend to his will or creates conditions that make it impossible for her to choose otherwise.

[3.11] What makes "A Modest Woman" a fascinating representation of the Philippine's history with the United States is that it points to the complex affects experienced by a colonized peoples for their colonizers. In the story, the Philippines' attitude toward both nations can best be summarized as ambivalent and complicated. She both loves and resents Antonio; she appreciates him and she desperately needs to break away from him. She feels attracted to Alfred, she sometimes enjoys being with him and sometimes doesn't, she explicitly tells him that she doesn't want to date him and yet she falls into a pattern with him that cannot be called anything else. When he asks her to the movies, she wants to go, and while she still doesn't want to be romantically involved with him at the end of the story, she does pray for their relationship, ill-defined as it is, to continue. Importantly, Amihan does not envision that

bond as one that will last forever—she enjoys Alfred, but at no point does she want to marry him or make any sort of long-term or even a very serious commitment to him. This story works to express a set of affects and attitudes experienced by a colonized peoples for their colonizer beyond either organized resistance or delusional admiration.

[3.12] This fan fiction tells a story of a relationship that is a mixture of many different moods and positionalities between the two nations. The Philippines has been forced to develop a strong fandom for US culture (De Kosnik 2018), and Filipinos want to keep enjoying that culture, but they have no wish for their culture to merge or disappear completely into a globalized form of Americanness. The Philippines has been a free nation since 1946, but the United States has never let it slip out of its sphere of influence and has at times dictated arrangements that the Philippines has, in essence, had no choice but to accept. However, the Philippines has not understood itself to be the loser in these transactions, even if it is the weaker partner. Rather, Sharon Delmendo (2005) characterizes the postcolonial US-Philippine agreements as means by which "both countries seek to achieve the benefits of an officially disavowed neocolonial dynamic" (5). That is, the Philippines and the United States outwardly maintain that they are not deeply involved, but they are and they have been since the turn of the twentieth century, and they both want that involvement to go on. It is this strange interconnection between the Philippines and the United States, which is at once formal and informal, known and unknown, real but disavowed, coercive but framed as consensual, that Landau captures in her fan fic.

[3.13] Above, I argued that Claridades's "Ang Maganda" fan illustration sparks a variety of affective responses in the viewer and in doing so has the potential to help not only individual fans but Filipinos as a collective to access and identify their own feelings about the source material (in this case, the source text is the Philippines/US relationship), which Samutina (2017) frames as practices of self-care and self-knowledge (260). Landau's "A Modest Woman" fic does a similar kind of affective work, work that aids the individual fan reader but also contains concepts and frameworks that can be useful to Filipinos as a group. Wilson (2016, ¶ 2.4) writes that a fan writer's "imaginative projection of a [character's] backstory increases both her and her readers' emotional understanding of the character's canonical actions and further develops empathy and intimacy with the character." Along these lines, "A Modest Woman" invites Filipino readers and those interested in the Philippines (who is the main character of the story) to know the country more deeply, to better grasp the multifaceted nature of its relationships with its colonial powers, and to feel more for the Philippines than they might have otherwise. In this way, fan works like Claridades's and Landau's "increase...readers' emotional understanding" of the canon, that is, the history, of the Philippines. They effectuate, to slightly rephrase Wilson, a learning through feeling about a country that is largely considered to be only a minor player in global politics, economics, and culture. This heightened knowledge of the Philippines can counteract, in some small measure, the absence or marginalization of colonized, indigenous, darker-skinned, and Global South peoples in world history textbooks and curricula. If readers finish Landau's fan fic only with the vague impression that the Philippines' double colonization resulted in Filipinos having contradictory, confusing,

powerful, and long-lasting attitudes and feelings toward the Spanish and American governments and peoples, that would be a more nuanced comprehension of those nations' interactions than is taught in most classrooms.

4. *The 100* fan fiction: "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us"

[4.1] The third and final Philippine/US fan work that I will discuss is a fan fiction titled "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" by an author named Thea, posted on Tumblr (<http://kylorenvevo.tumblr.com/post/94388500746/these-arbitrary-islands-that-define-us-bellamy-x>) in 2014. Thea's Tumblr profile states that they live in Metro Manila, so it is likely that they, like Claridades, are Filipino. The story is based on a television series called *The 100* (The CW, 2014–), a sci-fi action-adventure drama in which a group of people try to survive on postapocalyptic Earth. Two of the leaders of the group are Clarke, a girl who is 17 at the start of the series, and Bellamy, a man in his early 20s. Clarke is played by white Australian actress Eliza Taylor, and Bellamy is played by another Australian, Bob Morley, who is half-Filipino and half-white. Although Taylor and Morley are Australian, they and all of the actors in *The 100* use standard American accents, and the series takes place in what is currently the state of Virginia in the United States, so Clarke and Bellamy come across as culturally American.

[4.2] Although Bellamy has never been identified in the show as Filipino, *The 100* fans have written a number of fan fiction stories in which Bellamy explicitly discusses his Filipino ancestry. "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" is one such story (its author appends the following tags to the Tumblr post of her fan fic: "#I'M SO HAPPY THAT BOB MORLEY IS HALF-FILIPINO AND THEREFORE BELLAMY BLAKE IS HALF-FILIPINO #YOU CAN'T TELL ME OTHERWISE"). The fan fic is set not in the dystopian future of *The 100* but in a high school in the United States in 2014. Clarke has grown up with Bellamy and Bellamy's younger sister Octavia (who is also a character in *The 100*) as her neighbors. For most of the story, Bellamy is absent from their hometown, as he is in his senior year at university. Clarke, still in high school, asks Octavia if she can borrow Bellamy's old English textbook, and Octavia agrees. The textbook is full of Bellamy's marginalia, much of it about the Philippines. Over the course of the fic, Clarke pores over Bellamy's writings about the Philippines, reading notes such as, "The most celebrated Visayan vessel was the warship called 'karakoa,'" "'Tagalog' itself is from 'taga-ilog,' or 'river dweller,' and our ancient syllabary is known as 'baybayin,' or 'the shore.'" She reads Bellamy's summary of Emilio Aguinaldo's resistance to the US occupation, which includes descriptions of brutal violence. After reading this, Clarke thinks, "It's not the first anecdote of its ilk that [she] has read in Bellamy's scrawl, this long history soaked in blood, one martyr after another, the face of the enemy changing but the nature of the fight the same. It resounds with his stubborn streak, his absolute disregard for the consequences, his tendency to strike first and ask questions later. He's a product of revolution and aftermath, a patchwork child of

tragedies that she will never know."

[4.3] The connection that Clarke makes between the Aguinaldo resistance and Bellamy's anger and angst resonates with *The 100* fans, as in the series Bellamy often leads his group in fierce armed conflicts against many different enemies. The fic creates a link between Bellamy's most prominent traits—his hotheadedness and his determination to defend his people at all costs—to his Filipino ancestry. But it also shows Clarke, a white American girl, learning that Bellamy's Filipino identity both makes him who he is and makes him not completely knowable to her. After reading Bellamy's reflections, she realizes that while she is learning more about Bellamy's understanding of his father's homeland, there is much about him "that she will never know."

[4.4] Thea's writing here may seem to have an essentialist bent—"He's a product of revolution and aftermath" might be taken as a characterization of Filipinos as savages or as innately warlike. But the next phrase, "[he is] a patchwork child of tragedies," establishes that the tragedies of Filipino history constitute only one patch in the quilt of Bellamy's personality. The phrase "patchwork child" can also be taken as a reference to the fact that the majority of Filipino people are mestizo, or racially mixed, and gestures to Bellamy's half-Filipino, half-white ancestry: there is an individual as well as a collective character to the patchwork. The tragedies that make up Bellamy are similarly simultaneously communal and unique to him. The successive colonizations of the Philippines by Spain and the United States, with Aguinaldo's failed war of resistance separating them by a few years, comprise a common set of tragedies for Filipinos, but Bellamy also suffers from his father's having left his mother when Bellamy was little (in *The 100*, Bellamy is also the son of a single mother; the identity and fate of his father remains, as of this writing, unknown to the audience). This fan fic repeatedly weaves together Bellamy as one person and the Philippines as an entire nation. The title, "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us," indicates that Bellamy feels defined by the Philippine Islands, even though his link to them seems arbitrary, the result of his being fathered by a Filipino man, which Bellamy experiences as pure happenstance. The fan fic's strongest statement about the connection between the individual Filipino American and their ancestral country, between Bellamy's personal story and the history of the Philippines, comes in the scene in which Clarke and Bellamy see each other again for the first time since Clarke began studying the scribbles in Bellamy's textbook, when Bellamy returns home for winter break and Clarke is hanging out in the kitchen of Octavia and Bellamy's house. Clarke shows Bellamy a poem that he had written in the book and compliments it.

[4.5] "Oh, yeah," he says, with a nod. "I found that online. It's about the diaspora. You know—the migrant communities."

"I know what 'diaspora' means," Clarke says.

"No, you don't," Bellamy says softly... "And neither do I. I grew up here, and my old man disappeared before he could teach me anything. I had to learn it

all by myself."

[4.6] In this exchange, Bellamy tells Clarke that though she may have become more educated about the Philippines through his marginalia, she does not truly "know what 'diaspora' means." The implication is that Clarke does not identify as a member of a diaspora herself, as white European immigrants to the United States tend to shed their immigrant and diasporic status after one generation, while nonwhite immigrants and their descendants are perpetually othered, that is, made to feel that they "are *other than* the norm" (Kumashiro cited in Borrero et al. 2012, 3) and "do not belong to dominant cultural or national identity groups" (Devine, Kenny, and Macneela, quoted in Borrero et al. 2012, 3). Bellamy tells Clarke sharply that she cannot know what it is to be othered, as he is, nor can she understand what it means to feel distant from a home country, as he does. Unbeknownst to Bellamy, Clarke has already come to understand that there are limits to her identification with and comprehension of Bellamy's Filipino American identity, when she earlier concluded that "she will never know" all of the tragedies, individual and collective, that define him. However, Bellamy's harshness toward Clarke—telling her that she cannot possibly know what diaspora means, or rather, what it means and how it feels to be part of a diaspora—is matched by his confession of the limits of his own understanding: "And neither do I." Because Bellamy's Filipino father did not raise him, Bellamy has had to forge his connection with the Philippines by himself, by doing research. Bellamy did not grow up with a deep knowledge of who he is in the context of the Philippines' migrant communities but, according to what Clarke recalls and what she discovers in "These Arbitrary Islands," Bellamy has been working on discovering his place in the diaspora for most of his life.

[4.7] The story concludes with a scene set six years after it begins. Clarke is waiting for Bellamy's flight from Manila to land in their home city; he is returning from his first trip to the Philippines, where he has met his father's family. We learn that Clarke and Bellamy have just begun to date. I propose that we can think of Clarke, a quintessentially all-American girl, as a stand-in for the United States, and Bellamy as epitomizing the Philippine diaspora, and that we can find in Clarke and Bellamy's bond yet another representation of the Philippines/US relationship as a romance.

[4.8] Bellamy struggles to come to terms with a history and culture that are lost to him, pieces of his patchwork that have long been missing. Bellamy's feeling of being separated from his ancestral home reflects the state that Leonardo and Matias (2013) call "the *Filipino as exile*":

[4.9] In the specific context of the United States, it is difficult for the Filipino exile to claim either the Philippines or the United States as his home...He is both/and as well as neither/nor a Filipino and American. To the extent that he has rightful claims to the history of the Philippines as continuity and belongs to the United States because he contributes to it, he is both. Yet the Filipino American is neither because the claim to a "homeland"...is denied through geographical and cultural distance from the

Philippines at the same time that the land he does occupy denies him full access to its privileges as a perpetual foreigner. (13–14)

[4.10] Bellamy feels exiled from the Philippines twice over, by virtue of having been born in the United States and by not having been initiated into Filipino culture by his father, and he is exiled from the United States because he is not white and cannot identify as wholly American. Clarke, however, defies the description of the United States as a colonizing country that cannot recognize the people of its former colony as its own, a country that cannot take Filipinos or the Philippines into its heart. Clarke does not see Bellamy as a perpetual foreigner because of his Filipino heritage but eagerly absorbs what he has learned about his heritage, and she recognizes the limits of her own understanding of Bellamy's ancestral home and culture. She is an American who respects Bellamy's "both/and as well as neither/nor" nationality and admires his efforts to create an inhabitable hybrid identity.

[4.11] In Thea's "These Arbitrary Islands," Bellamy resembles a fan writer and Clarke resembles a fan reader. Bellamy is a fan of Philippine history and language and culture and writes marginalia about these subjects that is a form of fan commentary. Clarke is a fan of Bellamy and avidly consumes his fan writing, giving her a feeling of intimacy with his subject, the Philippines. Wilson (2016, ¶ 1.4) states that the reader's experience of "intimacy" with a fan text and its source matter "has an erotic inflection," and in "These Arbitrary Islands," the readerly eroticism that Clarke feels when she pores over Bellamy's notes leads to an erotic and romantic relationship with Bellamy himself. Thea thus conflates the intimacy of reading fan fic with the intimacy between fictional characters that is the subject of most fan fic. In a way, then, the story functions almost as a self-insert fic, as the fan reader is invited to strongly identify with the heroine because she is portrayed as a fan reader herself. Thea's fic invites an even more powerful affective response than other fics because it is fundamentally about the act of avidly consuming fan writing—it mirrors the reader's experience back to her as she reads the fic. One possible goal of Thea's centering her story on how reading fan work can evoke powerful feelings of intimacy and love is to encourage the reader to be especially attentive to Bellamy's writings on the Philippines. In other words, Thea structures her story so that the reader is incited to learn quite a bit about a Southeast Asian country, the relationship between that country and the United States, and that country's global diaspora, through their affective investment in the Clarke/Bellamy (or Bellarke, as fans call it) romance.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] In "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw," a seamless blending of Filipino and American visual styles hints slyly at the misuse of the national costumes by the US government's puppet Marcos and pictures a form of international cooperation that could have been but wasn't. "A Modest Woman" shows the Philippines incarnated as a woman who wishes to extend a romance with America that balances on the knife point of coercion and excitement; her goal of keeping up a dynamic that fills her with

ambivalence at every turn is anything but modest. "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" tells a wish-fulfillment story of Filipino/Americanness: a son of the two nations finds himself seen, known, understood, and loved completely by a white American, standing in for her entire nation; she loves him in and for his hybridity, never wishing to erase or ignore the limits of her understanding of his otherness. The three fan works may strike the reader as problematic in the way they refrain from open criticism of the United States' exercise of power over the Philippines, before, during, and after the period of official colonialism. However, if the pieces fail to deliver direct critique of the Philippine/US dynamic, they succeed in surfacing some of the complexity that inheres in the slash.

[5.2] These three texts also demonstrate the potential power of fan productions to teach fans about minority identities, histories, and cultures, and about the fraught and multilayered relationships that develop over long stretches of time between minoritarian and majoritarian (brown and white, Asian and American, colonized and colonizing, Global South and Global North) groups. Fan artists and authors can raise awareness and comprehension of these undertaught situations and dynamics by creating the conditions for their users to engage in "affective hermeneutics" (Wilson 2016, ¶ 1.4), learning through feeling. Fan creators who intentionally and directly play to the "ostentatiously emotional culture" (Samutina 2017, 258) of fan communities can foster and deepen their audiences' felt connections with not only with fictional characters and worlds but also with actual places, peoples, and politics.

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THEORY

Relationshiping nations: Philippines/US fan art and fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—Three fan productions are analyzed that delve into the question of what the Philippines and the United States have meant to one another, what the nature of their multifaceted involvement has been for more than a century, what Filipinos feel about the United States of America, and what Americans feel about the Philippines. Fan art and fan fiction are often laden with affect because it is the fact that fan creators are so affected by their favorite media texts that leads them to create fan works in the first place, and that makes their fellow fans, who understand the affects that inspire them, appreciate their works so deeply. Fan productions about the Philippines/United States are similarly suffused with feelings—the feelings that two nations and two peoples have for one another, which are difficult to define, articulate, and express for Filipinos, Americans, and Filipino Americans.

[0.2] Keywords—Affect; Colonialism; Fan production; Fan work; Filipino; Postcolonialism; United States

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I. Introduction

[1.1] Fans' transformative works tend to focus on relationships between popular

characters; fans call the practice of pairing two characters romantically or sexually relationshiping or shipping. Fan creators indicate character pairings with a slash mark between two names, as in Kirk/Spock. Here I examine three fan works that center not on a pairing of fictional characters but on a pairing of two nations: the Philippines and the United States of America.

[1.2] The Philippine Islands and the United States have been entangled in a relationship since 1898, when the United States won the Spanish-American War and took control of three of Spain's colonies: the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Philippine resistance fighters had joined forces with the United States military against Spain, believing that the United States would grant the Philippines independence if Spain was defeated, but after Spain withdrew from the islands and the United States announced its intention to become the Philippines' new colonial power, Filipinos launched a three-year war of resistance against US occupying forces, from 1899 to 1902. The United States governed the Philippines as a colony until 1946, and even after the Philippines became an independent republic, it maintained neocolonial ties with the United States, cooperating closely with the US military, serving as a major market for US consumer goods in Asia, and periodically being subjected to heavy political intervention and control by the US government, as when the United States supported the 21-year kleptocratic dictatorship of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos because it valued Marcos's anticommunist orientation during the Cold War. Since the 1965 Immigration Act removed quotas that restricted the immigration of Asians to the United States, Filipinos have constituted one of the largest immigrant groups to the States, but while Filipinos and Filipino Americans can never forget their long and complex history with the United States, Americans have cultivated "political amnesia" with respect to their history of imperialism in the Philippine Islands and elsewhere (Devitt 2008, 117), which has given rise to a situation in which Filipinos feel both deeply connected to the United States and largely invisible to or misunderstood by American culture and society.

[1.3] The relationship between the Philippines and the United States was represented from the start in terms of family and friendship. For example, when the United States annexed the Philippines, William Howard Taft, first American governor of the Philippines (who would later become president of the United States), "assured President McKinley that 'our little brown brothers' would need 'fifty or one hundred years' of close supervision 'to develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills'" (Miller 1982, 134). From 1900 to 1902, American military officers called the Filipinos' style of insurgency "'Amigo warfare' (from the Spanish word *amigo*, meaning 'friend') [because the] Filipinos were friends [with the Americans] during the day or when confronted, but at night or when no one was looking, they were guerillas" working to undermine the American occupation (Ileto 2001, 110). Americans deployed a narrative of brotherhood to justify racist attitudes and an imperialist war, and Filipinos constantly enacted friendliness in order to distract from and disguise their anti-American insurrection. Thus, from 1899 to the present, the two countries have performed affection for one another, and those performances have covered over myriad other feelings, including, at times, hatred and violent opposition.

[1.4] In this essay, I will discuss three fan works that represent the complex affects that suffuse the Philippines/US relationship. The first is a fan illustration that uses the Disney animated film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as source material, depicting the main characters in traditional Filipino dress. The second fan work I will analyze is a fan fiction set in the universe of the comedy anime series *Hetalia* (2009–15), which personifies countries as teenagers who have highly emotional and drama-filled relationships with one another; the fan author tells the story of a college-aged girl named Amihan (the Philippines) and her romantic dealings with Antonio (Spain) and Alfred (United States). The third piece I will describe is a fan fic that places two characters from the CW sci-fi series *The 100* (2014–) in a modern-day setting and portrays the white American female character, Clarke, falling in love with the half-white American, half-Filipino male character, Bellamy, as she comes to understand his struggle to learn about his Filipino roots. I build on the work of Anna Wilson (2016) and Natalia Samutina (2017) to argue that each of these three fan productions offers viewers and readers "an affective hermeneutics—a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling" (Wilson 2016, ¶ 1.3). In other words, by eliciting and encouraging certain affective experiences in their viewers/readers and by characterizing the Philippines/US relationship as itself heavily charged with affect, the creators of these fan works make available new or unusual ways of learning about and understanding the complicated and continually evolving history of the two nations. By extension, these pieces reveal the potential of transformative fan productions to make legible complex power dynamics between political entities in ways that may be more memorable than straightforward reportage or pedagogy, because fan productions deliver information through affect rather than trying to divorce affect from the presentation of facts, as news journalism and historical scholarship do.

2. *Beauty and the Beast* fan art: "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw"

[2.1] The first Philippines/US fan work that I will discuss is a work of racebending fan art. Racebending fan works appropriate mass media and replace white characters/actors with characters/actors of color; in other words, they bend the race of well-known white characters so that they are markedly, visibly, nonwhite.

[2.2] "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw" ("Beauty and the beast" or "The beauty and the monster" in Tagalog) is a 2015 illustration by James Claridades, aka squeeegool, posted to his Tumblr account (<https://squeeegool.tumblr.com/post/111665601959/ang-maganda-at-ang-halimaw-late-post-of-my>) (figure 1). Claridades's social media accounts list his gender as male and his location as Manila, and his Tumblr and Deviant Art sites are full of Philippine-themed drawings, so we might assume that he is a Filipino artist based in the Philippines' capital city. The caption beneath the Tumblr post of the drawing reads: "'Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw' late post of my Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast yes, beast has Carabao (Philippine water buffalo) horns." As of this writing in November 2018, the post has over 8,100 notes (on Tumblr,

notes are the sum of a post's likes and reblogs).



Figure 1. "Ang Maganda at Ang Halimaw" ("Beauty and the Beast" in Tagalog) by James Claridades (aka squeegool), 2015. Fan art based on the iconic image of Beauty and the Beast from the 1991 animated film, transforming Belle and the Beast into Filipino characters, wearing traditional Filipino dress instead of eighteenth-century European formal wear. The caption beneath the Tumblr post of the drawing reads: "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw' late post of my Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast yes, beast has Carabao (Philippine water buffalo) horns."

[2.3] "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" is instantly recognizable to any Disney fan as an illustration based on the main characters of the 1991 animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise). The female figure's brown hair and partial updo, her facial features, and her wide yellow-gold skirt all closely resemble the attributes of Belle, the titular Beauty of the 1991 film. The animal-man's wavy brown pelt, horns, claws, hooves, two-legged stance, and incongruous formal attire bear striking similarities to the features and dress of the Disney movie's Beast. However, Maganda, Claridades's version of Belle, has a darker complexion than the Disney princess, and she wears a yellow sampaguita flower in her hair (the sampaguita is the national flower of the Philippines), while Belle's coiffure lacks floral adornment. Most notably, Maganda wears not an eighteenth-century French ballgown as Belle does but a nineteenth-century traditional Filipina formal style of dress called a *terno*, consisting of four pieces: "the *camisa* (blouse with sleeves), the *saya* (skirt), the *pañuelo* (a cloth worn over the *camisa*), and the *tapis* (worn over the skirt)" (Burns 2011, 203).

Claridades explicitly marks Halimaw, his refiguration of the Beast, as a Philippine water buffalo, called a carabao, instead of a cross between a North American buffalo and a bull, as the Disney Beast seems to be. Just as Maganda has a darker skin color than Belle, Halimaw has darker, curlier fur than Disney's Beast. A golden religious medallion, an accessory commonly worn by Filipino men, hangs around Halimaw's neck. Although Halimaw wears a European-style suit similar to the Beast's, beneath Halimaw's black suit jacket, he sports a light blue *barong tagalog*, a traditional formal shirt for men in the Philippines.

[2.4] The *terno* and *barong tagalog* are, according to Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (2011), "the Philippine national costumes" (209), belonging to the broader category of Filipiniana, that is, styles of dress that strongly evoke Philippine national identity (204). Claridades describes "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" as his "Filipiniana version of Beauty and the Beast," demonstrating his consciousness of the significance of the clothes in which he depicts the heroine and hero. One of Claridades's accomplishments with "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" is the insertion of Filipino characters into the American media archive. Claridades's piece offers a racebent *Beauty and the Beast*, transforming white Disney characters into brown Filipino characters. As Zina Hutton states, racebending can provide "a necessary form of representation for folks in fandom that may otherwise not get to see themselves in media" (quoted in Klink et al. forthcoming, 131, 134–35). However, I also understand the illustration to be more than a tacit criticism of Hollywood's exclusions. The fan art also merges Disney, a symbol of the United States, with Filipiniana, representative of the Philippines, in one image, and calls upon the reader to consider the meanings of that merger.

[2.5] It may not be immediately obvious that a Disney film should be understood as a stand-in for the United States as whole. However, Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells argue that Disney has long encouraged its fans to think of "Disney as [a] metonym for 'American'—clean, decent, industrious" (1995, 3), and Steven Watts (1995) chronicles how "Disney's postwar movies...legislated a kind of cultural Marshall Plan. They nourished a genial cultural imperialism that magically overran the rest of the globe with the values, expectations, and goods of a prosperous middle-class United States" (107). The Philippines has been flooded with American media products since the turn of the twentieth century, so Filipinos have been particularly impacted and influenced by the cultural imperialism that conflates Disney with Americanness.

[2.6] I mentioned above that traditional Filipiniana fashion signifies the Philippine national identity, but it is important to consider how that style of formal dress has been used, and by whom, in Philippine history. The *terno* and *barong tagalog* worn by Maganda and Halimaw in Claridades's fan art harken back to the preferred formal wear of the Philippines' most famous and notorious first couple, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda (figure 2). Burns (2011) writes, "In the 1970s, the Marcoses actively reenvisioned Philippine history through their own lives and made good use of the *terno* in these nation-remaking efforts. The then-Philippine president/dictator Ferdinand Marcos and first lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos popularized the *terno* and the *barong tagalog*. The *terno*, for a particular generation, is almost synonymous with

the deposed president's wife. Dressing played a role in what the Marcoses declared as the 'New Society,' where the *terno* and the *barong tagalog* [were] instrumental in fashioning the image of the modern Filipino and democratic Philippines" (205). Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos wore the *terno* and *barong tagalog* frequently and popularized these garments as markers of Filipino tradition, in order to signal that they were leading the Philippines into a bright future while continuing to honor the country's past. Of course, as history has shown, the Marcoses did not stand for modernity and democracy in their country but for extreme socioeconomic inequality, corruption, cronyism, and authoritarianism (Hamilton-Paterson 2014). Given how strongly these traditional styles of dress are associated with the Marcos dictatorship of 1972–1986, we must look closely at Claridades's "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" illustration and ask whether and how this image invokes or references the Marcoses.

[2.7] One marked difference between the *terno* worn by Maganda in Claridades's drawing and the *ternos* worn by Imelda Marcos during her husband's rule and long afterwards is that Maganda does not wear the butterfly sleeve *terno* associated with Imelda. (The exaggerated standing butterfly sleeves that Imelda favored are clearly visible on her gown in figure 2.) Instead of butterfly sleeves, Maganda's gown has the "tulip-shape sleeves of the nineteenth century" *terno* (Burns 2011, 203).



Figure 2. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, 1984. President Marcos wears a *barong tagalog*, and first lady Marcos wears a *terno* with butterfly sleeves, a style of dress so closely associated with her that one of her nicknames was "steel butterfly." Photo by SSGT Marvin D. Lynchard, USAF. Public domain.

[2.8] Alfredo Roces states that the butterfly sleeves, which are pleated to stand up sharply at the shoulders "to create the impression of a butterfly on tiptoe for a flight" (quoted in Burns 2011, 203), were invented in the 1920s by designer Pacita Longos. The twentieth-century *terno*—Imelda's style of *terno*—is a one-piece gown, distinct from the nineteenth-century *terno* with its four-part construction. Because Claridades clearly renders his Maganda wearing a nineteenth-century *terno* and not a twentieth-century *terno*, fans who see the illustration (and who know Filipino fashion history) grasp that they are not meant to associate this Filipina beauty with the beautiful but sinister Imelda Marcos. Maganda is dressed to evoke pangs of nostalgic longings for an imaginary Philippine past, a time before the 1898 Spanish-American War, before the 1899–1902 Philippine-American War, before the period of US colonization of the islands and before the postwar era in which the United States shored up the political life of its puppet Ferdinand Marcos (Karnow 1989).

[2.9] And yet, the Marcoses, and the fraught, complex relationship between the Philippines and the United States, are not completely absent from Claridades's artwork. Let us consider "Ang Maganda" beside figure 3, a photograph of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos standing with US President Richard Nixon and first lady Pat Nixon.



Figure 3. Pat Nixon, Imelda Marcos, Richard Nixon, and Ferdinand Marcos, 1969. The US president and first lady stand with the Philippine president and first lady. Both presidents wear a *barong tagalog* (traditional Filipino dress shirts), and both first ladies wear *ternos* (traditional Filipino formal gowns). National Library of the Philippines (distributed by Philippine Presidential Museum and Library). Public domain.

[2.10] In this 1969 photograph, both presidents wear *barong tagalogs* and both first ladies wear *ternos*. The Nixons publicly embody the United States' alliance with, and backing of, Marcos's presidency by donning the Filipiniana fashion favored by the

Marcoses and allowing themselves to be photographed with the Philippine first couple. (However, interestingly, Pat Nixon's *terno* is multipiece and has tulip sleeves, characteristic of the nineteenth-century version of the dress, rather than the butterfly sleeves characteristic of Imelda's *ternos*. Is the American first lady here subtly establishing some distance between herself and Imelda?) Filipiniana thus served not only as Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos's favorite style of costume for their performances of modern leadership and good governance of the islands but also as a costume that could be put on by US officials for performances of the closeness of US-Philippine relations. George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all sported *barong tagalogs* on official visits to the country (Jeneverre's Travels 2017). Thus, the Marcoses succeeded in establishing Filipiniana as the defining costume of their performances as national leaders and of the performances of US presidents as maintainers of the supposedly long-lasting Philippine/American friendship.

[2.11] In light of these many public appearances in Filipiniana costume by heads of state intending to reinforce the Philippine/American relationship, Claridades's "Ang Maganda" illustration cannot be said to be completely devoid of references to the Marcos dictatorship or to the complicated history of connections between the two countries. Above, I interpreted "Ang Maganda" as a refutation or evasion of the Marcos era, but the fan work can also be read as a wish for a better Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos than the Philippines got, a wish for a Filipiniana-clad first couple whose beauty and finery would have been matched by their honesty, fairness, and sense of justice—in other words, a wish for Filipino leaders who would have been as uncomplicatedly good as Disney heroines and heroes. Yet another way to interpret Claridades's piece is as a wish for Maganda and Halimaw to take the place of both the Marcoses and Nixons in the 1969 photograph in figure 3, for the animated figures to take back the *terno* and *barong tagalog* from the dictators as well as from their Western enablers, and to again render the often-toxic Philippine/US relationship as a magical combination of American animation and Filipino embodied traditions, an intertwining of two cultures that honors the value of each one. "Ang Maganda" can be seen as representative of a desire for a Philippine/US relationship that is not rooted in destructive military, financial, and political entanglements nor in the imposition of US media and culture (with its privileging of whiteness and Euroamericanness) on the Philippines, but instead takes the form of an appealing mix of two seemingly opposite aesthetics: Filipiniana + Disney. Philippines/US could have been more of a romance between seeming opposites, not unlike the tale of Beauty and the Beast (with the countries occupying both the beautiful and beastly roles in different respects), rather than a perennially troubled colonial and neocolonial dynamic.

[2.12] "Ang Maganda" provides a means by which Filipinos can access wistfulness, rage, sorrow, yearning, and regret over the way that the story of the United States and the Philippines has unfolded. Samutina (2017) argues that fan fiction can help readers to know themselves better, and that this fostering of self-knowledge should be highly valued: "Fan fiction readers read by immersing themselves in the text and internalizing—allowing it to become inseparable from the self. Realization of one's (at times rather diverse) emotional needs through experiencing the text is practiced here as a version of

the 'care of the self': in other words, as one of the methods of self-cognition and emotional development" (260). "Ang Maganda" shows not only that fan productions can serve fan readers and viewers as mechanisms that allow them to know themselves and their emotional landscape, individually, but also that a fan work that references larger political themes (and indeed, what fan work doesn't?) can work against large-scale, structural silencings and assist a people in uncovering and articulating their feelings about their own disempowerment, which can be a collective form of self-care, self-cognition, and emotional development—valuable and necessary remedies for some of the wounds inflicted by historical oppression.

3. Hetalia fan fiction: "A Modest Woman"

[3.1] The second fan work about the Philippines/US pairing that I will discuss is a fan fiction story titled "A Modest Woman," written by Sasha Landau and published on AO3 (<https://archiveofourown.org/works/294724>) in 2011, which takes place in the universe of the Japanese anime *Hetalia: Axis Powers* (2009–2010, dir. Bob Shirohata). *Hetalia* is a humorous animated series that personifies entire nations as individual teenagers with distinctive personalities. *Hetalia*'s creator, Hidekaz Himaruya, has given human names to the characters, so Italy is called Feliciano, Germany is Ludwig, America is Alfred, and so on.

[3.2] The *Hetalia* fan fic "A Modest Woman," tells a story about three nations: Spain (whose name is Antonio), America (or Alfred), and the Philippines, which is a character that never appears in the *Hetalia* series but whom Landau personifies as a girl named Amihan. Landau is a white American who was only 15 years old when she wrote the fic; she did a prodigious amount of research into the Philippines' colonizations by Spain and the United States in preparation (she offers a summary of these histories in a long Notes section that follows the body of the story). Though Landau is not Filipino, her eagerness to immerse herself in Philippine history and to create a fan work based on her findings shows that the urge to understand colonial and postcolonial relationships is not only felt by the colonized peoples but also by some members of the colonizing group.

[3.3] "A Modest Woman" centers on two ships or pairings: Philippines/Spain and Philippines/America. Above, I argued that the fan art work "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw" could be interpreted as a wish for US-Philippine relations to be more of a courtly romance and less a tangled knot of political, cultural, and financial promises, impositions, and transactions. "A Modest Woman" literalizes the concept of the United States and the Philippines being romantically involved—but depicts that involvement as complex, multifaceted, often confusing, sometimes terrifying, just as the alliance between the two nations has been over the past hundred and twenty years.

[3.4] At the beginning of "A Modest Woman," Amihan (the Philippines) is introduced as a university student who is cooking a late-night supper for herself in her apartment, reflecting on her romantic liaisons. Amihan first considers her relationship with Antonio (Spain): they met when Amihan was a young girl in primary school.

Amihan lacked confidence and friends, and Antonio took her under his wing, integrating her quickly into his social network and showering her with attention. They began to date, but as they grow older, Amihan begins to question whether she should break up with Antonio, because she asks herself, "Will I always be this way? Will I always be so...looked after?"

[3.5] Soon after her breakup with Antonio, Amihan meets Alfred (the United States) at a party. Alfred instantly takes a proprietary attitude toward her, giving her a nickname that she does not particularly like (Ami), calling her cute and short though she resists this description, and asking her to dance but not waiting for her response before he gets her on her feet. Alfred quickly begins to pursue Amihan romantically, and when she rejects him, he "simply laughed." This laugh, at first, "had made her blood run cold—he was laughing at her? Was it her destiny to never be taken seriously?" But then, Alfred puts her at ease, telling her that it's fine if she doesn't want to date him "but that doesn't mean I'm going to give up." And he laughs at her again.

[3.6] Amihan thinks back on her acquaintance with Alfred: "Part of her had been terrified, and part of her had been pleased" by Alfred's attention at first, but "[i]n the end she really had no choice" but to become friends with him, because "Alfred proved to be unrelenting." What ensues is a relationship that Amihan knows is friendship and suspects may be a romance, even though she is reluctant to call it that. She enjoys many of Alfred's traits: "Alfred was always bursting with energy, and whilst some called him over-bearing, she couldn't help but be drawn to it. It was like he was her own private sun, showing her color and light and warmth, things she hadn't realized she had been missing. She found him charming. He made her feel very *alive*." But however much Amihan likes Alfred, she calls their relationship a "strange bond" and refuses to think of it as romantic:

[3.7] At some point it had become obvious that technically what she and Alfred had would be called dating, but at the same time that seemed not quite the right thing to call it; she felt very close to Alfred, and could honestly say by now that she felt some sort of love for him...but it wasn't as if they were bound to one another. Perhaps what they had really *could* be considered dating, and she was just too stubborn to say so—still rooted in the wish to be independent.

[3.8] The story ends with Amihan and Alfred still locked in ambiguity. Amihan hears that Alfred has been asked out by another girl, but then he texts her to say that he would rather take Amihan to the movies than go on a date with someone else. Amihan agrees to see the movie with him the following day, and when she puts her phone down, she smiles to herself, thinking, "It may be selfish, but just let us stay like this a little longer. (Just a little longer.)"

[3.9] Both colonizations are represented in the fan fiction as consensual liaisons based in affection rather than as brutal conquests, which may lead the reader to assume that the author is ignorant of, or may wish to excuse, the various forms of violence

intrinsic to both colonial periods. However, upon closer examination, the author does represent the Philippines' relationships with Spain and the United States as asymmetrical and imbalanced, not by writing the colonizing nations as overtly abusive but by characterizing Spain as highly paternalistic and condescending toward the Philippines and by depicting the United States as covertly coercive and controlling toward the Philippines while ceaselessly courting it (her).

[3.10] The story captures well what Zeus Leonardo and Cheryl E. Matias (2013) call "Spain's paternalism and the United States' imperialistic tutelage of the Philippines" (6). Amihan's chafing against how Antonio treats her like a child, though presumably he loves her, dramatizes how, "in the eyes of the Spanish [colonizers], the natives [of the Philippines had to] be saved from themselves, like children who do not know what is good for them" (Leonardo and Matias 2013, 8). In historical analyses, the United States' colonization of the Philippine Islands is often described as a continuation of Spain's paternalism. But in Landau's fic, the Philippines/US relationship differs from the relationship of Spain/Philippines in key ways. Amihan thinks of Alfred as far less controlling than Antonio was; she thinks that Alfred is courting her with fun and adventure, and she must decide whether or not to accept Alfred's suit. But the reader readily deduces that Alfred does not really give Amihan the option of refusing him. As soon as Alfred meets Amihan, he makes clear that he believes that she belongs to him. He establishes ownership over her by giving her a nickname she does not ask for and dislikes and by inserting himself into her space and time. Alfred tells Amihan that it's fine if she doesn't want to date him but that he won't give up, and then he proceeds to behave as if they are dating anyway, which convinces all of their friends and even Amihan that they are indeed romantically involved. Alfred's invitation to Amihan to meet him at the movies at the end of the story, and her agreeing to go, alludes to the popular Filipino saying, "300 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood," which refers to Spain's subjection of Filipinos via the Catholic Church and the United States' subjection of Filipinos by means of saturating the Filipino market with American films, popular music, and literature (Watts's cultural imperialism). In other words, Alfred may frame his advances as a courtship in which Amihan has the ability to accept or reject him, but at every point in the story, Alfred decides how their relationship will go and either strongly influences Amihan to bend to his will or creates conditions that make it impossible for her to choose otherwise.

[3.11] What makes "A Modest Woman" a fascinating representation of the Philippine's history with the United States is that it points to the complex affects experienced by a colonized peoples for their colonizers. In the story, the Philippines' attitude toward both nations can best be summarized as ambivalent and complicated. She both loves and resents Antonio; she appreciates him and she desperately needs to break away from him. She feels attracted to Alfred, she sometimes enjoys being with him and sometimes doesn't, she explicitly tells him that she doesn't want to date him and yet she falls into a pattern with him that cannot be called anything else. When he asks her to the movies, she wants to go, and while she still doesn't want to be romantically involved with him at the end of the story, she does pray for their relationship, ill-defined as it is, to continue. Importantly, Amihan does not envision that

bond as one that will last forever—she enjoys Alfred, but at no point does she want to marry him or make any sort of long-term or even a very serious commitment to him. This story works to express a set of affects and attitudes experienced by a colonized peoples for their colonizer beyond either organized resistance or delusional admiration.

[3.12] This fan fiction tells a story of a relationship that is a mixture of many different moods and positionalities between the two nations. The Philippines has been forced to develop a strong fandom for US culture (De Kosnik 2018), and Filipinos want to keep enjoying that culture, but they have no wish for their culture to merge or disappear completely into a globalized form of Americanness. The Philippines has been a free nation since 1946, but the United States has never let it slip out of its sphere of influence and has at times dictated arrangements that the Philippines has, in essence, had no choice but to accept. However, the Philippines has not understood itself to be the loser in these transactions, even if it is the weaker partner. Rather, Sharon Delmendo (2005) characterizes the postcolonial US-Philippine agreements as means by which "both countries seek to achieve the benefits of an officially disavowed neocolonial dynamic" (5). That is, the Philippines and the United States outwardly maintain that they are not deeply involved, but they are and they have been since the turn of the twentieth century, and they both want that involvement to go on. It is this strange interconnection between the Philippines and the United States, which is at once formal and informal, known and unknown, real but disavowed, coercive but framed as consensual, that Landau captures in her fan fic.

[3.13] Above, I argued that Claridades's "Ang Maganda" fan illustration sparks a variety of affective responses in the viewer and in doing so has the potential to help not only individual fans but Filipinos as a collective to access and identify their own feelings about the source material (in this case, the source text is the Philippines/US relationship), which Samutina (2017) frames as practices of self-care and self-knowledge (260). Landau's "A Modest Woman" fic does a similar kind of affective work, work that aids the individual fan reader but also contains concepts and frameworks that can be useful to Filipinos as a group. Wilson (2016, ¶ 2.4) writes that a fan writer's "imaginative projection of a [character's] backstory increases both her and her readers' emotional understanding of the character's canonical actions and further develops empathy and intimacy with the character." Along these lines, "A Modest Woman" invites Filipino readers and those interested in the Philippines (who is the main character of the story) to know the country more deeply, to better grasp the multifaceted nature of its relationships with its colonial powers, and to feel more for the Philippines than they might have otherwise. In this way, fan works like Claridades's and Landau's "increase...readers' emotional understanding" of the canon, that is, the history, of the Philippines. They effectuate, to slightly rephrase Wilson, a learning through feeling about a country that is largely considered to be only a minor player in global politics, economics, and culture. This heightened knowledge of the Philippines can counteract, in some small measure, the absence or marginalization of colonized, indigenous, darker-skinned, and Global South peoples in world history textbooks and curricula. If readers finish Landau's fan fic only with the vague impression that the Philippines' double colonization resulted in Filipinos having contradictory, confusing,

powerful, and long-lasting attitudes and feelings toward the Spanish and American governments and peoples, that would be a more nuanced comprehension of those nations' interactions than is taught in most classrooms.

4. *The 100* fan fiction: "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us"

[4.1] The third and final Philippine/US fan work that I will discuss is a fan fiction titled "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" by an author named Thea, posted on Tumblr (<http://kylorenvevo.tumblr.com/post/94388500746/these-arbitrary-islands-that-define-us-bellamy-x>) in 2014. Thea's Tumblr profile states that they live in Metro Manila, so it is likely that they, like Claridades, are Filipino. The story is based on a television series called *The 100* (The CW, 2014–), a sci-fi action-adventure drama in which a group of people try to survive on postapocalyptic Earth. Two of the leaders of the group are Clarke, a girl who is 17 at the start of the series, and Bellamy, a man in his early 20s. Clarke is played by white Australian actress Eliza Taylor, and Bellamy is played by another Australian, Bob Morley, who is half-Filipino and half-white. Although Taylor and Morley are Australian, they and all of the actors in *The 100* use standard American accents, and the series takes place in what is currently the state of Virginia in the United States, so Clarke and Bellamy come across as culturally American.

[4.2] Although Bellamy has never been identified in the show as Filipino, *The 100* fans have written a number of fan fiction stories in which Bellamy explicitly discusses his Filipino ancestry. "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" is one such story (its author appends the following tags to the Tumblr post of her fan fic: "#I'M SO HAPPY THAT BOB MORLEY IS HALF-FILIPINO AND THEREFORE BELLAMY BLAKE IS HALF-FILIPINO #YOU CAN'T TELL ME OTHERWISE"). The fan fic is set not in the dystopian future of *The 100* but in a high school in the United States in 2014. Clarke has grown up with Bellamy and Bellamy's younger sister Octavia (who is also a character in *The 100*) as her neighbors. For most of the story, Bellamy is absent from their hometown, as he is in his senior year at university. Clarke, still in high school, asks Octavia if she can borrow Bellamy's old English textbook, and Octavia agrees. The textbook is full of Bellamy's marginalia, much of it about the Philippines. Over the course of the fic, Clarke pores over Bellamy's writings about the Philippines, reading notes such as, "The most celebrated Visayan vessel was the warship called 'karakoa,'" "'Tagalog' itself is from 'taga-ilog,' or 'river dweller,' and our ancient syllabary is known as 'baybayin,' or 'the shore.'" She reads Bellamy's summary of Emilio Aguinaldo's resistance to the US occupation, which includes descriptions of brutal violence. After reading this, Clarke thinks, "It's not the first anecdote of its ilk that [she] has read in Bellamy's scrawl, this long history soaked in blood, one martyr after another, the face of the enemy changing but the nature of the fight the same. It resounds with his stubborn streak, his absolute disregard for the consequences, his tendency to strike first and ask questions later. He's a product of revolution and aftermath, a patchwork child of

tragedies that she will never know."

[4.3] The connection that Clarke makes between the Aguinaldo resistance and Bellamy's anger and angst resonates with *The 100* fans, as in the series Bellamy often leads his group in fierce armed conflicts against many different enemies. The fic creates a link between Bellamy's most prominent traits—his hotheadedness and his determination to defend his people at all costs—to his Filipino ancestry. But it also shows Clarke, a white American girl, learning that Bellamy's Filipino identity both makes him who he is and makes him not completely knowable to her. After reading Bellamy's reflections, she realizes that while she is learning more about Bellamy's understanding of his father's homeland, there is much about him "that she will never know."

[4.4] Thea's writing here may seem to have an essentialist bent—"He's a product of revolution and aftermath" might be taken as a characterization of Filipinos as savages or as innately warlike. But the next phrase, "[he is] a patchwork child of tragedies," establishes that the tragedies of Filipino history constitute only one patch in the quilt of Bellamy's personality. The phrase "patchwork child" can also be taken as a reference to the fact that the majority of Filipino people are mestizo, or racially mixed, and gestures to Bellamy's half-Filipino, half-white ancestry: there is an individual as well as a collective character to the patchwork. The tragedies that make up Bellamy are similarly simultaneously communal and unique to him. The successive colonizations of the Philippines by Spain and the United States, with Aguinaldo's failed war of resistance separating them by a few years, comprise a common set of tragedies for Filipinos, but Bellamy also suffers from his father's having left his mother when Bellamy was little (in *The 100*, Bellamy is also the son of a single mother; the identity and fate of his father remains, as of this writing, unknown to the audience). This fan fic repeatedly weaves together Bellamy as one person and the Philippines as an entire nation. The title, "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us," indicates that Bellamy feels defined by the Philippine Islands, even though his link to them seems arbitrary, the result of his being fathered by a Filipino man, which Bellamy experiences as pure happenstance. The fan fic's strongest statement about the connection between the individual Filipino American and their ancestral country, between Bellamy's personal story and the history of the Philippines, comes in the scene in which Clarke and Bellamy see each other again for the first time since Clarke began studying the scribbles in Bellamy's textbook, when Bellamy returns home for winter break and Clarke is hanging out in the kitchen of Octavia and Bellamy's house. Clarke shows Bellamy a poem that he had written in the book and compliments it.

[4.5] "Oh, yeah," he says, with a nod. "I found that online. It's about the diaspora. You know—the migrant communities."

"I know what 'diaspora' means," Clarke says.

"No, you don't," Bellamy says softly... "And neither do I. I grew up here, and my old man disappeared before he could teach me anything. I had to learn it

all by myself."

[4.6] In this exchange, Bellamy tells Clarke that though she may have become more educated about the Philippines through his marginalia, she does not truly "know what 'diaspora' means." The implication is that Clarke does not identify as a member of a diaspora herself, as white European immigrants to the United States tend to shed their immigrant and diasporic status after one generation, while nonwhite immigrants and their descendants are perpetually othered, that is, made to feel that they "are *other than* the norm" (Kumashiro cited in Borrero et al. 2012, 3) and "do not belong to dominant cultural or national identity groups" (Devine, Kenny, and Macneela, quoted in Borrero et al. 2012, 3). Bellamy tells Clarke sharply that she cannot know what it is to be othered, as he is, nor can she understand what it means to feel distant from a home country, as he does. Unbeknownst to Bellamy, Clarke has already come to understand that there are limits to her identification with and comprehension of Bellamy's Filipino American identity, when she earlier concluded that "she will never know" all of the tragedies, individual and collective, that define him. However, Bellamy's harshness toward Clarke—telling her that she cannot possibly know what diaspora means, or rather, what it means and how it feels to be part of a diaspora—is matched by his confession of the limits of his own understanding: "And neither do I." Because Bellamy's Filipino father did not raise him, Bellamy has had to forge his connection with the Philippines by himself, by doing research. Bellamy did not grow up with a deep knowledge of who he is in the context of the Philippines' migrant communities but, according to what Clarke recalls and what she discovers in "These Arbitrary Islands," Bellamy has been working on discovering his place in the diaspora for most of his life.

[4.7] The story concludes with a scene set six years after it begins. Clarke is waiting for Bellamy's flight from Manila to land in their home city; he is returning from his first trip to the Philippines, where he has met his father's family. We learn that Clarke and Bellamy have just begun to date. I propose that we can think of Clarke, a quintessentially all-American girl, as a stand-in for the United States, and Bellamy as epitomizing the Philippine diaspora, and that we can find in Clarke and Bellamy's bond yet another representation of the Philippines/US relationship as a romance.

[4.8] Bellamy struggles to come to terms with a history and culture that are lost to him, pieces of his patchwork that have long been missing. Bellamy's feeling of being separated from his ancestral home reflects the state that Leonardo and Matias (2013) call "the *Filipino as exile*":

[4.9] In the specific context of the United States, it is difficult for the Filipino exile to claim either the Philippines or the United States as his home...He is both/and as well as neither/nor a Filipino and American. To the extent that he has rightful claims to the history of the Philippines as continuity and belongs to the United States because he contributes to it, he is both. Yet the Filipino American is neither because the claim to a "homeland"...is denied through geographical and cultural distance from the

Philippines at the same time that the land he does occupy denies him full access to its privileges as a perpetual foreigner. (13–14)

[4.10] Bellamy feels exiled from the Philippines twice over, by virtue of having been born in the United States and by not having been initiated into Filipino culture by his father, and he is exiled from the United States because he is not white and cannot identify as wholly American. Clarke, however, defies the description of the United States as a colonizing country that cannot recognize the people of its former colony as its own, a country that cannot take Filipinos or the Philippines into its heart. Clarke does not see Bellamy as a perpetual foreigner because of his Filipino heritage but eagerly absorbs what he has learned about his heritage, and she recognizes the limits of her own understanding of Bellamy's ancestral home and culture. She is an American who respects Bellamy's "both/and as well as neither/nor" nationality and admires his efforts to create an inhabitable hybrid identity.

[4.11] In Thea's "These Arbitrary Islands," Bellamy resembles a fan writer and Clarke resembles a fan reader. Bellamy is a fan of Philippine history and language and culture and writes marginalia about these subjects that is a form of fan commentary. Clarke is a fan of Bellamy and avidly consumes his fan writing, giving her a feeling of intimacy with his subject, the Philippines. Wilson (2016, ¶ 1.4) states that the reader's experience of "intimacy" with a fan text and its source matter "has an erotic inflection," and in "These Arbitrary Islands," the readerly eroticism that Clarke feels when she pores over Bellamy's notes leads to an erotic and romantic relationship with Bellamy himself. Thea thus conflates the intimacy of reading fan fic with the intimacy between fictional characters that is the subject of most fan fic. In a way, then, the story functions almost as a self-insert fic, as the fan reader is invited to strongly identify with the heroine because she is portrayed as a fan reader herself. Thea's fic invites an even more powerful affective response than other fics because it is fundamentally about the act of avidly consuming fan writing—it mirrors the reader's experience back to her as she reads the fic. One possible goal of Thea's centering her story on how reading fan work can evoke powerful feelings of intimacy and love is to encourage the reader to be especially attentive to Bellamy's writings on the Philippines. In other words, Thea structures her story so that the reader is incited to learn quite a bit about a Southeast Asian country, the relationship between that country and the United States, and that country's global diaspora, through their affective investment in the Clarke/Bellamy (or Bellarke, as fans call it) romance.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] In "Ang Maganda at ang Halimaw," a seamless blending of Filipino and American visual styles hints slyly at the misuse of the national costumes by the US government's puppet Marcos and pictures a form of international cooperation that could have been but wasn't. "A Modest Woman" shows the Philippines incarnated as a woman who wishes to extend a romance with America that balances on the knife point of coercion and excitement; her goal of keeping up a dynamic that fills her with

ambivalence at every turn is anything but modest. "These Arbitrary Islands That Define Us" tells a wish-fulfillment story of Filipino/Americanness: a son of the two nations finds himself seen, known, understood, and loved completely by a white American, standing in for her entire nation; she loves him in and for his hybridity, never wishing to erase or ignore the limits of her understanding of his otherness. The three fan works may strike the reader as problematic in the way they refrain from open criticism of the United States' exercise of power over the Philippines, before, during, and after the period of official colonialism. However, if the pieces fail to deliver direct critique of the Philippine/US dynamic, they succeed in surfacing some of the complexity that inheres in the slash.

[5.2] These three texts also demonstrate the potential power of fan productions to teach fans about minority identities, histories, and cultures, and about the fraught and multilayered relationships that develop over long stretches of time between minoritarian and majoritarian (brown and white, Asian and American, colonized and colonizing, Global South and Global North) groups. Fan artists and authors can raise awareness and comprehension of these undertaught situations and dynamics by creating the conditions for their users to engage in "affective hermeneutics" (Wilson 2016, ¶ 1.4), learning through feeling. Fan creators who intentionally and directly play to the "ostentatiously emotional culture" (Samutina 2017, 258) of fan communities can foster and deepen their audiences' felt connections with not only with fictional characters and worlds but also with actual places, peoples, and politics.

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THEORY

On [dis]play: Outlier resistance and the matter of racebending superhero cosplay

Ellen Kirkpatrick

[0.1] Abstract—Within this essay, I consider minoritarian fan responses to minoritarian representation within the Western mainstream superhero genre. Minoritarian representation within the genre—on and off page and screen—is notoriously problematic. Yet despite the absences, exclusions, and periodic hostility, the genre remains popular with minoritarian fans and audiences. But how do fans of color keep a beloved, yet often toxic, genre alive and meaningful? This essay considers this question by reviewing resistive and transgressive meaning-making strategies adopted by excluded and maligned superhero fans. Through the lenses of ethno- and Afrofuturism, it unpacks racebending cosplay: an embodied costuming practice—anchored in broader activist traditions of racebending—that reworks the source character's established race and ethnicity. Spotlighting lived experience as a distinguishing and critical aspect of resistance this essay witnesses how, by calling out and disrupting the whiteness of mainstream Western superhero culture, racebending cosplayers perform a powerful form of resistance.

[0.2] Keywords—Affirmational/transformative binary; (Counter)storytelling; Fan activism; Representation

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[0.3] We have to enact the world we are aiming for: nothing less will do.

—Sara Ahmed (2017)

[0.4] Stories hold our cure.

I. Introduction

[1.1] Minoritarian representation within the Western mainstream superhero genre—on and off page and screen—is notoriously problematic. With a few valuable exceptions, such as Netflix's *Marvel's Luke Cage* (2016–18) and Marvel Studios' film *Black Panther* (2018), mainstream superheroes are straight white men living in straight white worlds. Yet despite this homogeneity, the genre remains popular with minoritarian fans and audiences. But how do fans of color keep a beloved, yet often hostile, genre alive and meaningful? ([note 1](#)). Mimetic, remediative, and transformative activity informs all kinds of fan work, but my focus here rests on racebending cosplay: an embodied costuming practice that reworks—bends—the source character's race and ethnicity to create "alternative and more viable images" (Bobo 1995, 26) ([note 2](#)). Radicalized modes of cosplay perform powerful genre critiques as minoritarian cosplayers aim to illuminate and fill representational gaps and omissions, but their fan work also resists and highlights wider institutionalized systems of privilege and oppression that allow the superhero genre to persist, even flourish, while using deleterious and exclusionary practices:

[1.2] For people of color to traverse racial boundaries by cosplaying as white characters is to traverse literature and media that seek to make us invisible. It is a revolutionary act that turns the normative white male or female character on its head because many of these characters represented by white faces easily could have been a person of color. (Swaminathan 2015)

[1.3] Examining the methods and motivations behind minoritarian performances, alongside their effect, will paint a fuller picture of strategies used to navigate, survive, and transform exclusionary realms. To this end, I creatively engage Sara Ahmed's extensive work on minoritarian resistance and survival within majoritarian spheres; for as I have discovered, Ahmed's ideas of "killjoys," "breathing spaces," "lifelines," and disruptive and disorientated bodies echo through racebending cosplay—a resonance unexplored until now.

[1.4] I open by pointing to the transformative, connective power of stories and storytelling. I do so to start locating racebending and transgressive minoritarian superhero cosplay within a broader context of resistive, futuristic meaning making and storytelling. Here the term *futurism* refers not to the twentieth-century cultural movement emphasizing technology and speed but rather to the practice of speculating about the future and thereby (re)imagining the present and past. Yet futurist speculations are vulnerable to the same controls and biases structuring the real world; stories told about the future thus tend to center the straight white male subject. Afrofuturism is only one of several modes of futuristic cultural production to respond to the various washings of the future by centralizing marginalized subjects, experiences,

and communities. Building on this discussion, I move to introduce the concept of [dis]play and point to the empowered possibilities of minoritarian fans as transgressive meaning makers and world makers. I observe that bending identity is currently most often enacted—and theorized—across single categories, primarily gender and sexuality, before moving to spotlight and parse lived experience as a distinguishing and critical aspect of resistance within all kinds of racebending traditions. This allows me to start to theorize moments and spaces of transference characterizing racebending cosplay; to this end, I bring in the concept of embodied translation and unpack the affirmation/transformative binary. I close by exploring racebending cosplay as it touches on the superhero canon and on superhero fandom—historically and stereotypically white male spaces—but I end on a positive note by witnessing how, by calling out and resisting the whiteness of superhero culture, racebending cosplayers perform a powerful form of resistance.

[1.5] In theorizing racebending cosplay as an act of resistance, I have been guided by the experiences and online theorizations of real-life racebending cosplayers, many of them women of color. Alongside spotlighting their voices and the usual citational practices, I also shared this essay with the cosplayers I cite (those I could locate) as a way of acknowledging their—often poached—intellectual labor and their critical, yet routinely overlooked, role in the conversation around racebending praxis as activism; I also hope it forms part of the ongoing conversation. But I write as a white female scholar, one deeply aware of concerns around scholars working outside their range or for which their lived experience has not prepared them. My intention in writing this "critically celebratory" (Nama 2009, 135) essay is not to speak for racebending cosplayers but rather to foreground their voices and (counter)stories, and in so doing illuminate, undermine, and problematize the neutrality of whiteness in scholarship and fandom. (Indeed, this small declaration is intended to contribute to the broader project of undermining the invisibility of whiteness within fan scholarship.) But I also write as an intersectional feminist scholar—one not claiming to be a critical race theorist, but one continually motivated by the tenets of that standpoint and methodology, namely centering race, skepticism regarding liberal approaches to race and racism (neutrality, color-blindness, and merit), and emphasizing the voices and experiences of people of color (Bergerson 2003; Mutua 2006; Wallace 1978; Davis 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1991). I wish to add my voice to those who speak to and harness the expansiveness of cosplay as a storified, socially disruptive force—one capable of transforming not only perceptions of superheroes but also sociocultural hierarchies and relations (Figa 2015b). I close by exploring racebending cosplay as it touches superhero canon and superhero fandom—historically and stereotypically white male spaces—but I end on a positive note by witnessing how, by calling out and resisting the whiteness of superhero culture, racebending cosplayers perform a powerful form of resistance.

2. The unsettling power of (counter)storytelling

[2.1] Storytelling is a site of control and resistance (Meretoja and Davis 2018). In

terms of control, Sara Ahmed (2004), discussing heteronormativity, points to how repetitious stories shape—control and regulate—our lives, our ways of living, and our bodies, causing feelings of comfort for some and discomfort for others. But the stories I share here demonstrate a resistance, a counter, to these kinds of oppressive, institutional, and ideological master narratives (Lyotard [1979] 1984).

(Counter)storytelling—"a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32)—sits at the heart of this essay, just as it sits at the heart of many social justice movements and theoretical frameworks grappling with the cultural dominant (e.g., critical race theory, queer, feminist, indigenous, environmental). Within these intersecting domains, the transformative, connective power of stories is universally acknowledged and utilized. Ahmed, for instance, bases her powerful account of diversity on a series of interviews with diversity practitioners: "My aim has been to retell the many stories you told me. This book is thus the product of our collective labor" (2012, ix). Ahmed here recognizes and enacts the metamorphic, entwining power of surfacing and sharing overlooked, long-hidden stories—stories all the more powerful for emerging through lived experience. We might also look to the recent hashtag evocation of "Me Too," a phrase and movement originating with Tarana Burke in 2006, to see this force exemplified: "It's about the millions and millions of people who, one year ago, raised their hands to say, 'Me too'" (Burke 2018). Ahmed, Burke, and all those sharing their lived experience, their stories of exploitation, oppression, suppression, and exclusion—but also resistance, resilience, and survival—believe in the transformative, world- and self-making power of telling (counter)stories. By sharing their stories, cosplayers of color tap into these traditions of resistance; they exemplify and/or embody the idea that there is power in a story shared, a connection made, a tradition broken—"that we can be connected by what we come up against" (Ahmed 2013). And cosplayers of color come up against a lot in their play—a lot of hostility, misconception, and derision. This enmity, as I come to discuss—via Ahmed, Rukmini Pande, and Rebecca Wanzo—is rooted in the broader recurring tradition of "talking about the problem, becoming the problem." To this end, I suggest that cosplayers of color not only resist and (re)materialize the dominant narrative shaping the who's who of superhero culture, but also, by sharing their stories, become, with every line they write and image-laden column they share, "life-lines" (Ahmed 2013)—lifelines for each other and for those of us also seeking an alternative past-present-future superhero culture.

[2.2] (Counter)storytelling is activism—here, action challenging hegemony with the aim of inciting change—and social media and alternative media are critical spaces for voices, practices, and stories marginalized within the dominant culture (Delgado 1989). Superhero cosplayers of color resist exclusion and hostility by not only creating and sharing their stories of other kinds of superheroes but also by performing an embodied mode of (counter)storytelling. Their aberrant, "willful" (Ahmed 2010a, 2011) superheroic performances—literally making the invisible visible and the impossible possible—resist and (re)shape the dominant narrative of superheroes and superhero fans. By (re)envisaging the genre's present and past, cosplayers of color also (re)imagine and (re)materialize the future possibilities of mainstream superhero culture. Superhero cosplayers of color rankle the comfortable idea of superheroes and superhero

fans as white men. They also suspend Ahmed's (2007) feelings of "comfort/discomfort," as those traditionally discomforted, or disorientated, within mainstream superhero culture become comforted by the legibility of superheroes (and superhero fans) of color, and those usually at ease, or oriented, within mainstream superhero culture become discomfited. As Kristen J. Warner (2015) observes, and indeed this special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* demonstrates, women of color are, despite the stereotype, present and active within media fandom. By attending conventions, posting photographs, blogging about their experiences, and generally sharing their stories, racebending cosplayers of color are performing multifaceted activism: the resistive act itself (racebending superhero cosplay), and the act of creating and sharing stories that disrupt and undermine dominant narratives (genre, fandom, and cultural)—stories that not only sustain and serve their own practice and communities but also through their visibility inspire and embolden others to perform similar resistive fan work. Storytelling, consciousness raising, and community building are, after all, foundational forms of grassroots (fan) activism. Cosplayer of color Chaka Cumberbatch (2013b) recalls, for instance, an interaction with a young female blerd (black nerd) at a convention. The girl was excited to see Cumberbatch cosplaying Huntress (an established white female superhero) and told her that "she didn't know black girls were 'allowed' to cosplay, that she hardly knew any black female superheroes, and that she had no idea 'people like us' could join in on things like comic books, cosplay, and conventions." This encounter perfectly illustrates the transformative power, the activism, inherent in creating "imagined moments of identification and representation for an audience that rarely gets to see an actress of color in a leading role" (Warner 2015, 34). Through her disidentificatory cosplay performance, Cumberbatch was able to tell the young girl a different story, one where women of color get to play the hero and be superhero fans. Cumberbatch's story echoes Warner's assertion that "one of the main ways that Black female fandom makes Black femininity visible is by consciously moving mediated women of color, who often occupy supporting roles, to the center, transforming them into leads in fan-produced discourse" (2015, 34).

3. On representation, Afrofuturism, and [dis]play

[3.1] Representation connects intimately with knowledge production and power relations. It can work to encourage, support, and critique hegemony. An unrepresentative image overwhelms our mediascape: that of the affluent, white, cis, straight, nondisabled male subject. This predominant image, and agent, has successfully suppressed diverse media representation. Fortunately, hegemonic agendas can be checked. Foucault suggests that resistance is always a possibility: "There is no power without potential refusal or revolt" (1988, 83–84). There are several intersecting routes to resistance: to realize that "real world image-making is political" (hooks 1992, 5); to alter our way of looking at images; and to come to control, and thereby alter, representational schemas. For marginalized subjects, such strategies create and sustain agency. The feminist reworking of Edouard Manet's painting "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe" (1863) evidences these forms of representational resistance, as does the similarly focused genderswap fan-art project *The Hawkeye Initiative*, or, as we shall see, Orion

Martin's racebending superhero art project. Marvel's recasting of white male characters as white women (e.g., Thor/Jane Foster and Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers)—a broadly pacifying move responding to increasing pressure from sections of superhero fandom to diversify its stable of characters—also speaks to these "bending" practices, as, of course, does transgressive minoritarian cosplay. Bending practices represent and embody radically altered images—images that challenge aspects of (genre) orthodoxy.

[3.2] Racebending is only one mode of fan resistance to a homogenous mediascape. Transformative fans—those who "take a creative step to make worlds and characters their own" (Busse and Hellekson 2014, 3–4)—rescript all kinds of identity markers through their many and varied practices. Yet although rescripting can traverse several planes of identity simultaneously, it works predominantly across single dimensions. Taking cosplay, the fan practice at the heart of this essay, as our example, we might note segregated descriptors: alongside racebending cosplay, we have crossplay (genderswap cosplay); we also have cosability (cosplayers with disabilities) and—currently without a snappy neologism—cosplaying across age boundaries, as when an older cosplayer cosplays a younger source character. These labels and practices, as well as their theorization, suggest segregated performances, but some moments of cosplay see identity markers blur: a queer black woman may cosplay a Clark Kent version of Superman. In creating alternative images and new ways of looking—at both the original image and the new image—these kinds of bending practices transform not only the look of the present but also how we view the past and (re)imagine the future.

[3.3] Speculating about the future is a tenet of the superhero genre, as is, through plot devices such as time travel and alternative realities, revisioning the past and present. These qualities—alongside a liking for transformation—lock the superhero genre into Western science fiction and fantasy traditions. Yet as with any speculative genre, the other worlds that the superhero genre creates hold fast to the synergistic hierarchies and interlocking oppressions structuring our material world (carrington 2016b). Many of the world's intersecting futurist movements (queer, feminist, ethno- and Afrofuturistic) work to centralize minoritarian bodies and identities, lived experiences, and belief systems. In so doing, they decentralize, decolonize, and problematize the homogeneity stifling the world's stories (and the world's storytellers): typically, tales of straight, cisgender, white, nondisabled, affluent, Western males. Ethno- and Afrofuturism, cultural movements bearing down on what andré carrington (2016a) describes as the "unbearable whiteness of science fiction," are crucial here ([note 3](#)). They flow through all kinds of media, including music, visual art, literature, film, games, superhero comics (Nama 2009), and bodies. Of bodies, we might think of the otherworldliness of Grace Jones, Janelle Monáe's visual, thematic, and musical aesthetic, and, more recently, the trend for Wakandan fashion, inspired by the remixed Afrocentric hairstyling and costumes portrayed in the widely acclaimed Afrofuturistic superhero film *Black Panther* (2018). I explore racebending cosplay as an empowering practice steeped in ethno- and Afrofuturist sensibilities. Indeed, I imagine it as an embodied mode of these futurities. Racebending cosplayers reimagine, rescript—as I come to discuss, they translate—the established embodiment of the Western mainstream superhero. In so doing, they do not merely imitate but become hybrid, embodied cultural artifacts.

[3.4] Transgressive minoritarian cosplay, or as I prefer to think of it, [dis]play—a transitory embodiment opening an experimental space in which marginalized and excluded cosplaying fans may (re)imagine themselves and their source character—intimately connects with all kinds of futurist discourse. Inspired by José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) work on disidentification, the embracing bracketed [dis] in "[dis]play" is meant to evoke notions of displacing, disruptive, discredited, disidentificatory play; "display" itself speaks to ideas of showing feeling and temporarily arranging something often spectacular, even carnivalesque—like a fireworks display or a Body Worlds exhibition—for public viewing. The bracketing is also intended to symbolize the suspended, precarious, ephemeral, and offset nature of the performance. This is not to undermine the radicalism of these performances; although the act itself may be temporary, its impact in the shape of a digital footprint via its social media presence can be deep and lasting (Broadnax 2015; Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles 2017).

[3.5] [Dis]play is a ludic fan practice with a radical heart, one beating through three interconnecting spheres: genre, fandom, and the personal/sociopolitical. It resists the strangling "network of norms" (Jakobsen 1997, 136) and speaks to the pragmatic presentism of queer world making (Muñoz 2009). [Dis]players trouble superhero canon; their rebellious practices reimagine and repurpose the ideology, ontology, and aesthetics of mainstream superheroes. Some performers aim to do so, but for others, it is a by-product of the collision of idealistic representations with outsider materialities. Queer and arresting visualities and performances make the invisible visible and the personal political. They can effect change on a range of intersecting levels, including textual, sociopolitical, fannish, and personal. Yet [dis]play is not only a response to the overwhelming failure of superhero culture to imagine, represent, and embrace diverse, inclusive worlds; it also illuminates and creatively transforms that dereliction. It casts into sharp relief the neutrality of dominant, privileged identity markers such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness. Through activist [dis]play, official, dominant meanings are challenged, resisted, recast, and stretched as unrepresented fans create ways of inserting themselves into often beloved exclusionary texts and surrounding culture, thereby making it anew.

[3.6] [Dis]players see beyond the limits of exclusionary mainstream texts to a place and time where they can be, unproblematically, superheroes, superhero fans, and superhero creators, and in so doing suspend not only the limiting logics of the textual realm but also the lived one. They not only see that future but also recreate that future world in the present of today. Their performances enfold textual and material realms to create riotous and rebellious breathing spaces, empowering lacunae where meaning and traditions are upended. In the brave display of their transgressive superhero bodies, they materialize a better today and hint at an alternative tomorrow ([note 4](#)).

4. Activating and theorizing racebending: What lies beneath?

[4.1] Racebending became formalized as a term of fan protest during the white casting of the live-action film *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010), which brought to life the animated TV series of the same name featuring Asian characters (Nelson 2009; Lopez 2011). Indeed, a coalition of *Avatar* fans went on to found Racebending.com (<http://www.racebending.com/>), a grassroots activist movement advocating and lobbying for, as their website notes, "underrepresented groups in entertainment media." But racebending is a dynamic term; it refers to both mainstream entertainment traditions of white casting (that is, casting established characters of color with white actors) and to diversifying, resistive practices—grassroots and mainstream—that see established white characters (re)cast as/by people of color—for example, Marvel's decision to cast black actor Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury, an established white character. But as comics blogger Kelly Kanayama observes of racebent X-Men, when adopting racebending as a diversifying strategy, industry efforts must holistically increase quantity and improve quality:

[4.2] With the original coloring, I don't think people would say that crazy-eyes Jean [an X-Men character] is a stereotype of white women, or that the aggressive Wolverine is a stereotype of white men. That's because we see so many white characters in comics and popular media in general that one problematic portrayal and one grizzled/savage portrayal doesn't contribute to building a stereotype...Even if these two characters are somehow seen as carrying negative implications, they're drops in the ocean. But once you visibly portray them as non-white, that ocean shrinks to a puddle, and every drop counts for a lot more. (Demby 2014)

[4.3] But my focus lies with racebending as a transgressive, grassroots resistive meaning- and world-making practice, and with fannish rather than mainstream media practices—although for many minoritarian superhero fans, racebending works holistically and within the real/imaginary binary. Many racebending cosplayers want their resistive fan work to trouble and reimagine canon and speak to the possibilities of defying social and representational norms. Yet as the example of Jackson becoming Fury illustrates, when it comes to modifying the identity of established and/or source characters, transformation, within both grassroot and mainstream spheres, is currently most often enacted—and theorized—across single dimensions, primarily gender (McClellan 2014) and sexuality (Kreisinger 2012), although increasingly race (Gilliland 2016) ([note 5](#)). Indeed, this fracturing of identity echoes the broader theoretical condition of the field of fan studies where attention also concentrates on single issues, notably gender and sexuality, to the detriment (and separation) of other dimensions of identity (Pande 2018; Wanzo 2015; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007). Focalized, centralizing work, or "identity hermeneutics," creates opportunities to recover lost and overlooked (hi)stories that "might change our understanding of what a fan is" (Wanzo 2015, ¶ 1.6). It is critical in illuminating and correcting what Pande fittingly describes as the "field's recurrent blindspots" (Pande 2018, 319), but it also, just as critically, opens debate on fan identity and fan communities to intersectional standpoints and understandings (Pande and Moitra 2017).

[4.4] As we might imagine, racebending as resistance is a largely visual affair ([note 6](#)). But there is more to racebending than changing an established character's skin color. Discussing racebending in superhero comics, Albert S. Fu notes that comic books, "as a medium based on colour and lines[,] provide a particularly interesting case in examining how the colour-line is constituted and reconstituted via fan discourses" (2015, 270)—an observation that transfers well to racebending (fan) art traditions. Image-driven online platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr are popular repositories for racebending fan art and fan recastings, in which fans recast whitecentric mainstream texts with nonwhite actors (Gilliland 2016; Bennett 2015). But we also find this kind of color-line work displayed outside these venues.

[4.5] In December 2013, contemporary artist and X-Men fan Orion Martin previewed a racebending superhero art project that featured twelve iconic X-Men covers and panels that had been recolored "so that every mutant had a skin color that was some shade of brown." This visually arresting project was designed to activate debate around representation and to undermine the neutrality of whiteness within the superhero genre; it also pointed to a moment of racebending as whitewashing ([note 7](#)). But it did a little more than that. One revised series of panels is based on a scene featuring a white Piotr Rasputin, aka Colossus, standing up to an angry white mob; not surprisingly, the panel's meaning changes greatly after it is recolored. As Martin (2013) observes, "Reading about black teenagers standing up to a largely white mob is different than reading about white teenagers in the same situation." As with other modes of superhero racebending, Martin's remixed images distort and disturb canon; however, understood as an ethnofuturistic (re)imagining, its power lies in exhorting the audience to think beyond canon and to look beneath the surface of race and racebending. What does it mean, in a sociocultural sense, to change the skin color of an established character? As Fu argues when discussing negative fan responses to Marvel's decision to racebend Spider-Man, "Much of the tension may not be about a black Spider-Man, but of a black Peter Parker" (2015, 276). Elizabeth Gilliland similarly observes this sociocultural dimension within some Tumblr-based racebending fan casting, presenting the case of a practitioner who is careful to "establish a cultural background within her neo-narrative...to truly create a narrative that engages in the culture of the minorities being represented instead of just appropriating their faces" (2016, ¶ 4.10).

[4.6] Racebending becomes a particularly powerful form of activism when it brings lived experience to the surface—something the embodied practice of racebending cosplay is particularly attuned to. This is as true of mainstream genre production as it is of fan works. As Martin's (2013) project indicates, it is not enough to simply increase the number or prominence of nonwhite characters, or to alter the skin color of existing characters, and expect impactful change ([note 8](#)). There must be breadth and depth to any industry revisions to avoid characterizations becoming mere token gestures (Warner 2011; Beltran 2010). For instance, for all the furor surrounding Miles Morales becoming—at the hands of a white creative team—Spider-Man in 2011, Spider-Man's meaning has changed little in the intervening years. Even after the release of the acclaimed animated Morales-centered film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), type "Who is Spider-Man?" into Google and you will see a series of white men looking

back at you. Further, when seeking to improve superhero diversity, it is not productive for all, or predominantly all, white creative teams to racebend or create new nonwhite characters. This egregious practice leaves the creative process open to the possibility of creators simply recoloring characters, with white creators applying a veneer of color over their (white mainstream) ideas of what a superhero is and what a nonwhite superhero should be ([note 9](#)). Systemic creative conditions such as this risk the production of surface-level nonwhite characters and subvert the opportunity to meaningfully disrupt metanarratives. It also speaks to the assertion that when looking at representations of black people created by white people, "you are looking at representations crafted by white supremacy...it's not actually black people you are looking at" (Oluo 2017). Diversity—diverse lived experience—within creative teams is an essential facet of increasing and improving minoritarian representation and storytelling within the superhero genre, thereby purposefully changing the superhero meaningscape: ontologically, aesthetically, and ideologically. To authentically enfold superheroes of color into official genre meanings and culture, attention must be directed toward increasing quantity and improving quality, but such diversifying moves must be informed by lived experience. But—and shifting back to fannish realms—how might we begin to better understand and foreground the role lived experience plays within resistive embodied superhero fan practices, such as racebending cosplay?

5. On [dis]play: Racebending cosplay

[5.1] I now turn to theorizing moments and spaces of transference—the imaginary (fantastical, textual) to the lived (mundane, material), and the invisible (unseen, absent) to the visible (seen, present)—as well as the affirmational (mimetic) and/or transformative quality of this transference. (As discussed below, mimetic/affirmational modes align with and value authorial intent, and transformative expressions explore textual gaps and create new possibilities.) For although some performances are mimetic in intention, all are transformative. But if mimesis involves replication and simulation, questions arise: How can minoritarian fans perform mimetically? How can they replicate what is not originally there? There is, for instance, no black Clark Kent/Superman or Bruce Wayne/Batman in the genre, yet minoritarian cosplayers frequently—and, I submit, mimetically—perform these characters.

[5.2] Superhero cosplay transfers the fantastic—and, regarding [dis]play, the invisible—into the realm of the mundane; in this sense, it is always more about translation than transformation. All superhero cosplayers disrupt and rewrite the ontology and aesthetics of superheroes. Unlike their heroes, they will never become a real superhero by changing their mode of dress. Their bounded performances demonstrate that superheroes can only really exist in the genre's imaginary realms: cosplay eliminates the "super" from the superhero. Elsewhere I have theorized this delimited process as embodied translation (Kirkpatrick 2013). I describe translation as a continuous, fluid, and unassured meaning-making process and cosplayers, as translators, as empowered makers of meaning. Embodied translation speaks to the processes involved in performing the extraordinary within the limits of the ordinary. It

is "uniquely enacted within the frame and bounds of the material body of the cosplayer. Thus, in translating an established character, cosplayers are implicated in a process of (re)creation, they produce simultaneously a new character and a revised version of the original" (Kirkpatrick 2013, 64). However, because there are only a few minoritarian source characters to draw from, [dis]players perform an additional layer of imaginary work through their lived experience. Through their empiric performances, [dis]players deliver the extraordinary idea of minoritarian superheroes from their imaginations into the material realm. Superhero cosplay creates the idea of a Superman who cannot fly and a Spider-Man sans Spidey sense, but its [dis]play modes also reveal the possibility of a black disabled Superman and a Muslim female Captain America. Each is in its own way a radical reimagining—embodied translation—of the superhero.

[5.3] [Dis]play makes it possible to see superheroes largely unseen, or unimaginable, within official contexts ([note 10](#)). Racebending cosplayers and activists such as Chaka Cumberbatch, Vishavjit Singh, and Briana Lawrence make the invisible visible and the unthinkable doable (Smith-Strickland 2016; Sikh Captain America 2014; Danielle 2015). By transcribing and layering idealistic body norms through their outsider bodyscapes, [dis]players perform a deep, radical form of embodied translation. [Dis]players might reject or misrecognize some superhero characteristics (whiteness, maleness, wealth) while embracing others (costume motifs, names, centrality). By layering the remaining desirable qualities through their own outsider bodies, they reimagine the idea of the superhero and the superhero fan. Even when performing mimetically, [dis]players are in a bilingual, border-smashing dialogue with their source characters—for example, extraordinary/ordinary, imaginary/lived, textual/material, idealistic/deviant, inside(r)/outside(r), seen/unseen, past/future. By redrawing the superhero aesthetic, [dis]players materialize the idea of minoritarian superheroes and minoritarian superhero fans, thereby opening a dialogue—which can turn hostile—with the genre and with mainstream segments of its fandom. By increasing visibility in one realm, they stir revolution in others.

[5.4] Singh, for example, lives in New York and regularly cosplays as a skinny, bearded Sikh Captain America (Hills 2014a). Singh's narrow physique and beard play a prominent role in his mash-up cosplay, as does his blue turban—in place of Cap's helmet—emblazoned with the iconic silver capital "A." Singh's costuming clearly remixes Sikh and superhero traditions. Through his activist performances, Singh aims to dispel preconceptions and stereotypes about Sikhs, superheroes, and, I submit, superhero fans. Writing about his journey from drawing a Sikh Captain America to coming to cosplay this "white-bread" character, Singh (2016) describes how he "re-created a superhero vision from 1941 penned by Jack Kirby. I illustrated a new Captain America with a turban and beard ready to fight intolerance." Singh's personal story echoes ethnofuturist strategies of reimagining alternative universes; it collapses space and time to reimagine a more inclusive, diverse reality. Captain America's—and Singh's—meaning is here both lost and reimagined in translation.

[5.5] As Singh discovered, superhero cosplay can be an empowering practice. Many performers want to animate their beloved heroes and thereby bring a little of the

superhero into their own lives. Yet these heroes tend to be (super)privileged, affluent, cishet, nondisabled white men, causing a quandary for minoritarian cosplayers as they negotiate power structures. The question of minoritarians identifying with and in some way wanting to be like extraordinary white characters raises obvious concerns that transgressive fan work might actually be working to buttress real-world racial hierarchies. As Nama observes, "White superheroes pose a problematic incongruity for blacks who as victims of white racism are further victimised by reading and identifying with white heroic figures in comic books" (2009, 134). But rather than follow the binary logic that minoritarians reading superhero comics is either problematic or unproblematic, Nama advocates adopting, as do I, a more nuanced, even strategic, stance. Indeed, within superhero scholarship, several scholars have noted how superhero fans of color regularly negotiate and feel an affinity with the—qualified—outsiderness of many superheroes (Nama 2009; Fawaz 2016; Brown 2001), yet they do not feel compelled to compromise their racial identity or lived experience ([note 11](#)). For example, a minoritarian Kent/Superman cosplayer clearly wants to be read as Superman, but not as a straight white man: "Some people think that Black cosplayers are just trying to be White. No, we don't wish we were White. We can be geeks and still love our melanin" (Gooden 2016). [Dis]players are in materialistic dialogue with nearly eight decades of unrepresentative canon. Their performances reveal and query gaps, omissions, and exclusions, but they also provide (rebuking) answers to those elisions and erosions. Of course, there are a few minoritarian superheroes that create a small window for unambiguous mimetic performances, but what of the other numerous occasions of transgressive costuming and identity play? What is happening within those disruptive, borderland performances?

[5.6] As indicated, embodied translation can help us understand the complexities of these textured performances. But I want to now examine how unraveling the mimetic-transformative binary can also shed light on how racebending cosplayers resist and reform exclusionary meanings—text, lived, and fandom—without compromising their racial identity (lived experience). Established modes of fan scholarship, which often hinge on binaries such as mimetic/transformative, cannot adequately explain the mechanics and radicalism of resistive modes of minoritarian fan work such as racebending cosplay. Moving beyond these modes and binaries can usefully illuminate the complexities and layered nature of such practices.

6. Dispelling the binary of affirmation versus transformation

[6.1] Fan practices and cultures are still often unhelpfully categorized as either mimetic/affirmational or transformative, where "affirmational fandom reproduces the source material...while transformational fandom remediates the source material to reflect the fans' desires and interests" (Cherry 2011, 23; see also [obsession_inc](#) 2009). This binary has been increasingly problematized within fandom and fan studies (Booth 2015; Rehak 2012; Godwin 2015). Matt Hills (2010, 2014b), for instance, works to

dispel it through his gendered considerations of the often veiled transformative qualities of building prop replicas. Drawing from Hills's early work on mimetic fandom, Suzanne Scott writes that cosplay "typically presents itself as a form of mimetic fan production" (2015, 146)—a practice that seeks to replicate rather than "create radical mash-ups, or 'read' in provocative ways, [or] transformatively rework the object of fandom" (Hills quoted in Scott 2015, 146). Alongside suggesting the affirmational or mimetic/transformative binary, this presupposes a nondisruptive fan body/character body equivalency (where cosplayers can unproblematically replicate the source character's visuality), but as we have seen, many modes of cosplay collapse or undermine this opposition. For instance, cosplayer embodiments can interrupt mimetic cosplay, causing it to become radically transformative; such cosplay becomes simultaneously affirmational and transformative. This shift in reading may be intentional or unintentional. Cosplayers of color do not always aim for a radical reworking in their cosplay—they just want to cosplay a beloved character—but given the whiteness of the genre, their cosplay often stops being mimetic and becomes revisionist as they create an original version of the character. Minoritarian cosplayers often, as we have heard, want to perform as a beloved majoritarian superhero and work hard to replicate costumes, props, and mannerisms. Their cosplay is, I assert, just as mimetic as majoritarian cosplay. The effect may be different (transformative), but the motivation and method are the same (mimetic). Hills (2010), although working with a different focus, also affirms that a mimetic/affirmational emphasis does not necessarily impinge on the transformative possibilities of fan work: "Perhaps converting textual visions (back) into material artefacts is the greatest transformative work of all."

[6.2] Hills, in developing his ideas on mimetic fandom, productively (re)phrases its practices as intermediary and oscillatory as well as capable of deconstructing the "binary of fan productions that either transform or imitate mainstream media content, just as textual/material productivities can also blur together" (2014b, ¶ 1.2). Utilizing Derrida's concept of *economimesis*, Hills usefully restores the productive quality of mimesis: "'True' mimesis is between two producing subjects and not between two produced things" (Derrida quoted in Hills 2014b, ¶ 3.2). This expansive view of mimesis covers not only imitating objects but also imitating production processes (Gebauer and Wulf cited in Hills 2014b, ¶ 3.2) ([note 12](#)). Mimetic fan work thus escapes classification as purely affirmational: "Fans who participate in mimetic fandom may ultimately imitate the original media text, [but] certain transformative details that individualize each item surface as well" (Booth 2015, 18).

[6.3] For Hills (2014b), mimetic fandom also pursues a "kind of ontological bridging or unity—from text to reality"—an "authentic," "objective" transference of an object across realms, and during his discussion notes that cosplay may also be able to perform this kind of ontological unity, adding embodiment as a potential site of contradiction. Although cosplay clearly transfers visualities from text to reality, [dis]play is, I contend, less a bridging maneuver—crossing from one side to another—and more an interspatial occupation as minoritarian cosplayers translate extraordinary, idealistic characters though their (paradoxically) ordinary and outsider materialities. [Dis]players occupy the liminal spaces between mimetic and transformative practices. Hills's conceptualization

also suggests a one-way crossing, from text to reality, whereas I suggest, in the case of cosplay, the interaction is more of a two-way process, where fan work can potentially impact—by affirming, undermining, or transforming—the textual realm. Although considering dissimilar materials—Hills with inanimate objects and me with animate bodies—these theories and reconceptualizations speak to some of the motivations and methods of [dis]play. Identifying the mimetic-transformative interplay characterizing [dis]play provides a way of navigating these textured performances to reveal [dis]play as a possible survival strategy, one offering minoritarian fans a way of resisting dominant ideology by opening breathing spaces within exclusionary meaningscape —text, lived, fandom—without compromising their racial identity (lived experience).

7. Canon and fandom's killjoys: Representation, exclusion, and resistance

[7.1] Given the genre's notorious systemic issues with representation, inclusivity, and diversity, minoritarian superhero cosplayers have little choice but to perform [dis]play ([note 13](#)). Thinking again about the quality and quantity of representation draws out issues around racial hierarchy and the popularity and recognizability of minoritarian characters and their prominence within the genre. There are, for instance, several minoritarian versions of Superman as well as Icon, the Superman-inspired character from Blackcentric comics house Milestone Comics, yet the white-bread Clark Kent version remains popular with minoritarian cosplayers. These alternative versions of Superman are less well known, leaving many cosplayers reluctant to perform them. Racebending cosplay thus draws attention to the predominance and centrality of white characters even as it spotlights the lack of big-name minoritarian characters and, relatedly, the marginalized positioning of characters of color when they do appear in text, often in sidekick or supporting roles ([note 14](#)). Arguing that minoritarian cosplayers should play within "their range" (Cumberbatch 2013b) would currently see cosplayers of color adopting a disempowering secondary role within their own performances—role-play echoing real-world inequalities and oppressions (see also Jenkins 2018). But through their disobedient performances, [dis]players make a play for alternative ways of being and seeing superheroes, minoritarian subjects, and minoritarian fans. Priya Rehal (2016) notes that she uses her "disruptive" (activist) form of "cosplay to challenge the future and the whiteness of the media I enjoy...I want to make space for people who look like me in my fandoms." And, thinking back to the young blerd in the opening section, we are reminded of the power of telling different kinds of stories, and in the case of cosplayers, of literally becoming an alternative body of knowledge. By not "sticking to their range" (Cumberbatch 2013b), [dis]players embody the frustration they feel with a beloved genre that consistently fails to represent them: "I'm tired of not seeing faces like mine. I've had it with people telling me to 'stick to my range' when I cosplay my favorite characters, knowing all the while that my 'range' is maybe in the double digits on a good day while their [white cosplayers] 'range' is almost endless" (Cumberbatch 2013a). Chaka Cumberbatch, the frustrated cosplayer—and founder of the social media (counter)storytelling hashtag

#28DaysOfBlackCosplay—here describes the policing tactics of (fannish) white privilege. This is something that Henry Jenkins (2018) also discusses, pointing to how white privilege tries to stifle not only the character options available to cosplayers of color (their range) but also, relatedly, the ways that the concepts of authenticity (and connectedly) canon are deployed to push back against instances of racebending cosplay.

[7.2] [Dis]play is a powerful challenge to the textual, canonical supremacy of the affluent, white, male, cishet, nondisabled, youthful superhero and superhero fan. But challenging canon on any front is a critical, even perilous, strategy, as many nonprogressive fans couch their bigotry and prejudice as concerns for canonical accuracy (Zina 2015; Demby 2014; Fu 2015) ([note 15](#)). By materially writing themselves into the genre's exclusionary story- and meaningscape, [dis]players generatively transform and subvert superhero genre canon while simultaneously resisting and challenging the fan stereotype of the straight white fanboy. As Tai Gooden (2016) notes, "Because of this power structure, it can be particularly difficult to fight for change—but that hasn't stopped the marginalized members of the cosplay community from doing so. Despite all the challenges, women of color cosplay artists refuse to back down." Ahmed also evokes the fortitude and resilience—backbone—needed to put an already disempowered body on the line to spotlight another line—the color line: "The body 'going the wrong way' is the one that is experienced as 'in the way' of the will that is acquired as momentum. For some bodies, mere persistence, 'to continue steadfastly,' requires great effort, an effort that might appear to others as stubbornness or obstinacy, as insistence on going against the flow" (2011, 245).

[7.3] By calling out and resisting the whiteness of the superhero genre and its attendant culture, racebending cosplayers perform a powerful form of resistance. Through their [dis]play, they unmask the notion of fandom as, as it is too often assumed, "a homogenously normative band of Othered outsiders" (Warner 2015, 36). Their performances illustrate the difficult, currently uncomfortable kinds of stories. They embody awkward questions. They are akin to feminist killjoys, fandom's killjoys: "The one who gets in the way of other people's happiness. Or just the one who is in the way—you can be in the way of whatever, if you are already perceived as being in the way. Your very arrival in a room is a reminder of histories that get in the way of the occupation of that room" (Ahmed 2010a, 5). And talking more broadly about race and racism in fandom, alongside Wanzo (2015), Pande too asserts the quandary of "observing the problem, becoming the problem" and white entitlement/ownership of fan spaces:

[7.4] It's that position of the feminist killjoys... You talk about it, you're the problem. Everybody else is having fun...for a lot of people who perhaps have been sailing along in their particular experiences of fandom are saying, "well, this was never a problem earlier, I don't see why you guys are coming in"—you know and *taking over our spaces* and spoiling our fun. (Klink and Minkel 2016)

[7.5] As [dis]players, racebending cosplayers get pushback from all quarters of

superhero fandom. But genre critique—the desire to transform canon—is only one thread of their resistance. The very act of racebending cosplayers' coming together to form another line—lineage, family, life (and perhaps even battle)—is a critical part of their activism ([note 16](#)). This line stretches at least eighty years into the past, as they reimagine established white characters, and stretches into the future, as their resistive practice and critique spark a genre renaissance that sees the genre and its surrounding culture's becoming an inclusive, diverse—indefinitely better—version of itself.

[Dis]players give pause to the li(n)e that superheroes can only be one thing because they have always only ever been one thing; in this way they refuse to toe or walk the line. Through their performances, cosplayers of color rewrite the genre's past and thereby rematerialize its present and future. Warner, discussing black female fandom as resistance, examines three interventions, identified by Jacqueline Bobo (1995), that are open to black women engaging exclusionary texts: "imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and Black women's social condition" (2015, 38). Each is clearly in play within racebending cosplay (performances and communities). Acts of [dis]play are meaningful in their own right, but when witnessed by another Other, their resistive power intensifies. Ahmed's (2013) utilization of the lifeline speaks to the power of this kind of solidarity:

[7.6] A lifeline can be...the quiet words of an encouraging friend, an unexpected alliance with a stranger, the sounds of a familiar landscape, or of an unfamiliar one; it can be a revelation that comes to you when you are seated quietly trying to escape from the busyness of a world; or it can be when you are caught up in the buzz of a pressing intense sociality and are caught out by a thought. A lifeline can be the words sent out by a writer, gathered in the form of a book, words that you hang on to, that can pull you out of an existence, which can, perhaps later, on another day, pull you into a more livable world.

[7.7] And it can also be the sight, story, or rumor of a person of color boldly dressing up as a beloved white superhero—despite, and perhaps because of, the flak—to embody a different reality where people of color have moved from the margins to occupy the center ground. Yet the power of [dis]play is not just that it offers a lifeline but also that it offers the possibility of becoming a lifeline—to not only receive comfort but also to give it.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] Within the bounds of this critically celebratory essay, I seek to create a moment, a space, to commemorate the story of racebending cosplay. I want to celebrate rather than censure the conjurings and activism of [dis]players. In other hands, this essay might have focused on examining the effect of racebending cosplay on the echo chamber of official genre production: to what extent does this niche fan work encourage a more inclusive, diverse genre? It might have stressed the limited effect this kind of resistive work has on official genre meaning making. But that would have been a

different essay. Within my theorization of racebending cosplay, I aim to prioritize the story of resistive meaning making, focusing on how racebending cosplay impacts participants personally and socially, and of course how this intersects and informs their engagement with a largely exclusionary, often hostile genre. As we have seen, the transformative effect of racebending cosplay is deeply felt within the realms of marginalized (fan) communities. It is—in the greatest traditions of grassroots activism and ethno- and Afrofuturism—a powerful storytelling, consciousness-raising, and community-building tool. Of course, many other complexities remain to be unraveled when it comes to [dis]play and racebending cosplay, but this essay seeks to illuminate how minoritarian superhero fans resist their exclusion from mainstream US-based superhero culture (genre and fandom). In so doing, I work to spotlight a much-overlooked, marginalized segment of fandom, one that chooses to exist despite its "invisibility and exclusion from mainstream fan space" (Warner 2015, 35)—to which I would also, in this case, add broad derision, spectaclization, and fetishization. I want to recognize and tap into the idea that the contestation of the cultural dominant is "never a zero-sum game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it" (Hall [1992] 1996, 471). Racebending cosplay is a powerful resistive meaning-making strategy, one enabling excluded fans to remain meaningfully engaged with a troublesome genre, but as a site of minoritarian resistance and survival, it is so much more.

9. Notes

1. See Pande (2018) for an invaluable discussion of the "fans of color" descriptor and Dyer (1997) for similar concerns around the homogenizing effect of the use of the term "people of color." Pande (2018) advocates a negotiated, strategic adoption of the term.
2. Cosplay is an expansive fan-based performance art that involves dressing up as and/or role-playing fictional characters. The motivations to cosplay a character are complex and include being a favorite character, sharing physical attributes, or enjoying a trending character (Winge 2006; Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012; Kirkpatrick 2013). Cosplay is closely allied to the costuming practices and identity play marking the superhero genre (Kirkpatrick 2013). It is a manifold practice, but costuming, bodies, identities, transformation, and community are constituent elements. Although cosplay is deeply connected to the material realm, it is not limited to it; see Booth (2015) for a discussion of digital cosplay.
3. See Gilliland (2016) for a comprehensive discussion of racebending and Afrofuturism.
4. I draw the idea of breathing spaces from Ahmed (2010b, 120). In adopting it, I stress my focus on minoritarian (fan) embodiment as a "killjoying" source of difference and site of resistance that underscores the idea of [dis]play as a survival strategy for fans of color living in a white world, enjoying a largely white genre, and being a member of a

predominantly, and stereotypically, white fandom. Racebending cosplay creates a breathing space for the cosplayer of color and for observers of the cosplay performance.

5. There are rare instances when character modifications traverse more than one vector, as when Ms. Marvel's representation transformed from a straight white (European American) woman to a brown (Pakistani American) Muslim girl.

6. But not always. Racebending fan fiction is, for instance, a popular category on story-sharing sites such as Archive of Our Own and Wattpad. Warner's (2015) discussion of visual racebending also touches on racebending fan fiction.

7. The X-Men franchise is a powerful example of white culture appropriating minoritarian history and experiences, and Martin seeks to examine these contradictory meanings. Martin's (2013) project asks how this work represents minoritarian lived experiences, in that although it is a "work of fiction that focuses on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s except that in this work white men have replaced all the people of color," the characters of "Martin Luther King and Malcolm X both have white stand-ins and white followers. In fact, all of the characters are white men."

8. See Dyer (1997) for a discussion of the problematics of the nonwhite descriptor.

9. This is not to suggest that people cannot write outside their range but rather to argue against the erasure of minoritarian experiences and voices within the official production of the superhero genre (both characterization and narratives).

10. Although conventions and geek culture can provide safe spaces for queer or minoritarian cosplayers, it is not always so (Figa 2015a, 2015b; Micheline 2015; Gooden 2016). Cosplaying as a person of color in public spaces carries an increased risk to personal safety—even, as the police killing of cosplayer of color Darrien Hunt demonstrates, a risk to life (Broadnax 2014). Cosplayers who are women of color are vulnerable to a particularly virulent and brazen strain of abuse (Cumberbatch 2013a). Flame Con (<https://www.flamecon.org/>), NYC's first queer comics con, provides a much-needed guaranteed safe space.

11. See also Alanna Bennett's (2015) similarly sophisticated discussion of similar issues in relation to identifying—as a woman of color—with Hermione Granger from the whitecentric Harry Potter mythos. For discussions on the systemic invisibility or the unmarkedness of whiteness, see Dyer (1997) and Ahmed (2007).

12. This speaks to my concept of embodied translation, which I propose elsewhere (Kirkpatrick 2013, 2015) as a way of theorizing the connections and repetitions surfacing between diegetic superhero costuming practices and superhero cosplay.

13. Citing James Spooner's documentary *Afro-Punk* (2003), Wanzo (2015) draws our attention to the complexities involved when thinking about minoritarian fan engagement with whitecentric genres. Wanzo observes the fluidity of the categories of otherness and normativity within these kinds of fannish engagements. See Kilgore

(2003) and carrington (2016b) for discussions around black engagement with the predominantly white science fiction genre.

14. With exceptions, cosplayers tend to seek recognition and regard for the accuracy of their cosplay performance, not misrecognition or obscurity, and it is easier to reap such rewards if the audience has an awareness of the source character. Performing an obscure character may provide self and niche pleasure, but it will not secure much-desired general plaudits.

15. This speaks to the fanon-versus-canon debates within fandom and fan studies, and thus to ideas of power, privilege, and entitlement—and consequently toxic fandom (Proctor et al. 2018; Klink and Minkel 2016). Witness the 2018 Comicsgate debacle, echoing 2014's Gamergate. Both are ongoing neocon pop culture movements rooted in white supremacy and intolerance, with fans working to shut down the rise of inclusion and diversity within the comics and gaming industries (and media more generally); see Micheline (2017), Francisco (2018), and Byron (2018). Wanzo points to the critical idea that "some fans of speculative work depend on the centrality of whiteness and masculinity to take pleasure in the text" (2015, ¶ 1.4).

16. Warner's (2015) work on Black female resistance to deleterious representation, summoning the formative work of Jacqueline Bobo and Patricia Hill Collins, speaks clearly to the activism of female racebending cosplayers.

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THEORY

Rewriting the school story through racebending in the Harry Potter and Raven Cycle fandoms

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[0.1] *Abstract*—Racebending fan work has the potential to be a productive site of postcolonial critique. A close analysis of fans' racebending of the primary characters of two young adult literature texts—the titular hero of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007) and major character Ronan Lynch from Maggie Stiefvater's Raven Cycle (2012–16)—finds that fans' racebending permits postcolonial revision by challenging the predominantly white worlds the books depict as well as recuperating the erasure of diaspora by other fans who insist Britishness and Irish-Americanness equate to whiteness. In addition, many racebending Harry and Ronan fan works center on queer romances: Harry with school rival Draco Malfoy and Ronan with his in-series boyfriend, Adam Parrish. Racebent Harry fan work, particularly work incorporating a queer romance with Draco, creates a space for fans to imagine alternative possibilities for the series beyond the heteronormative, hegemonic conclusion represented in Rowling's epilogue. Similarly, racebent queer Ronan fan works offer depictions of a soft black masculinity that subverts the common association of blackness with anger and aggression. By depicting two characters of color at the center of queer schoolboy romances, fans disrupt the white homoeroticism and imperialism of the school story genre upon which both series draw.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan art; J. K. Rowling; Maggie Stiefvater; Photo edits; Postcolonialism; Queer-of-color critique; Queer theory; Race;

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I. Introduction

[1.1] This article provides a close analysis of two popular cases of racebending in young adult literature fandom: the titular Harry Potter from J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007) and major character Ronan Lynch from Maggie Stiefvater's Raven Cycle (2012–16). Elizabeth Gilliland defines racebending as "'fan cast[ing]' (recast[ing] an established book, series, franchise, and so forth, with one's own preferred choices) people of color into markedly white fandoms" (2016, ¶ 1.6). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo state "that [race]bending is one...process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences...often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse...which young people use...to inscribe themselves into existence" (2016, 313). While still attending to the possibilities of racebent fan work to allow fans to write themselves into existence, in this essay I both expand and narrow that focus to explore the ways racebent fan work can subvert the conventions of one particular mainstream genre: in this case, the school story.

[1.2] Racebent Harry and Ronan fan work offers queer-of-color revisions of the characters, centering around queer ([note 1](#)) romances for both boys—Harry with school rival Draco Malfoy, and Ronan with his in-series boyfriend Adam Parrish. By depicting two characters of color at the center of these queer schoolboy romances, fans disrupt the white homoeroticism and imperialism of the school story genre, which both series draw upon. Such revisions also allow fans to challenge perceptions of national identity solidified by such genres. Thus, fans' racebending of Harry and Ronan offers postcolonial revisions of Harry Potter and the Raven Cycle by challenging the predominantly white worlds they depict as well as recuperating the erasure of people of color by other fans who insist Britishness and Irishness equate to whiteness.

2. Rewriting the imperialism of the school story genre in queer-of-color fan works

[2.1] The Western-centric school story is one of the touchstone genres of children's literature. Beverly Lyon Clark defines the school story genre, which emerged from nineteenth-century British works like *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), as follows:

[2.2] The key distinguishing feature of the school story is that it be a story

set at school, generally at the secondary level (in contrast with what have been called university novels). It is often—though not always—addressed to children, and it is often written from the perspective of a child...And given the genre ambiguities of stories set at day schools—when a story focuses on the out-of-class-room activities of a child attending a day school, we are not apt to consider it a school story—I am primarily concerned with stories set at boarding school. (1996, 3)

[2.3] Readers and scholars alike have long considered the Harry Potter series part of this long generic tradition, with each of the books depicting a full school year and primarily set at the magical boarding school Hogwarts ([note 2](#)). The Raven Cycle fits less easily in the genre, with much of the action involving out-of-class-room activities taking place outside the confines of the boarding school walls; however, the majority of the series' protagonists attend the all-boys preparatory boarding school Aglionby Academy, and the series includes enough of the features traditionally associated with the genre to be defined as a school story.

[2.4] The worlds created in school stories share a few significant elements reproduced in the Harry Potter and Raven Cycle series, elements critiqued in racebent Harry and Ronan fan work. First, although rarely noted, the world of the boarding school novel is almost exclusively white. As Thomas A. Atwood and Wade M. Lee note in their survey of American boarding school fiction, "Taken as a whole, these works appear to share several demographic commonalities—they are set in New England during the mid-twentieth century and their characters are predominantly white, upper-middle-class Christian males" (2007, 108). Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Raygine DiAquoi's survey of students of color at actual elite American boarding schools demonstrates that this depiction is inaccurate yet founded in reality: their work clearly demonstrates the presence of students of color in such spaces while simultaneously acknowledging the space of the elite boarding school as "defined by whiteness" (2010, 59). In spite of the presence of characters of color in each series, both Harry Potter and the Raven Cycle reproduce this privileging of whiteness by focusing on exclusively white protagonists and relegating characters of color to secondary or background roles.

[2.5] In addition to their overwhelming whiteness, school stories often reproduce the order of hegemonic institutions and imperialistic overtones from the origin of the genre. Roberta Seelinger Trites states, "School settings exist in adolescent literature to socialize teenagers into accepting the inevitable power social institutions have over individuals in every aspect of their lives" (1998, 33). Elizabeth A. Galway (2012) argues, contrary to much of the praise for the series, that Rowling's work does very little to subvert or challenge these conventions of the school story. Through an analysis of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Galway establishes the imperialistic project at the heart of most nineteenth-century British school stories: "Tom [learns] sacrifice, loyalty, and courage; these are traits that Hughes extols and presents as crucial to the development of an ideal young Englishman ready to serve his country upon graduation. He draws a clear connection between the education of young men and the future of the British Empire," "imply[ing] that boarding school will be the most important factor in Tom's

becoming an ideal Englishman" (70–72). She goes on to argue that Rowling does little to challenge this paradigm, with the Harry Potter series "upholding the basic premise that the boarding school setting has a positive and necessary influence on the hero's development into an ideal citizen" (82) by presenting "the school setting [as] the chance to see how authority, exercised properly, can be a positive force" (75). Rowling molds protagonist Harry Potter into the ideal British citizen through the homogenizing forces of the traditional school story, teaching him respect for the institutionalized authority through which he learns to access power, due in no small part to his whiteness, established heterosexuality, and traditional masculinity. Racebent Harry fan work, particularly works in which he is in a queer relationship with Draco Malfoy, however, challenges this portrait of the ideal British citizen; clearly, if Harry represents quintessential Britishness, a queer, black Harry rewrites hegemonic notions of Britishness, challenging the common equating of Britishness with white heterosexuality.

[2.6] This brings us to the final commonality: the paradox of homoeroticism in the school story. In the popular imagination, the boarding school has become nearly synonymous with queer possibility, as Catherine Tosenberger argues in her analysis of Harry Potter slash fiction, attributing the prevalence of queer rewritings of the series in part to the setting: "Hogwarts is a British boarding school, an institution that is so consistently coded as queer space that it's practically shorthand for homosexuality, British-style" (2008, 199). However, in the traditional school story, the boarding school, depicted as a homogenizing institution deeply paranoid about fulfilled homosexual desire, doggedly seeks to repress such queer potential. As Holt McGavran writes, "Such traditional patriarchal societies as those of the white English-speaking world—and most certainly that of the elite boys' boarding school—almost set up boys and young men to fall in love with each other and yet threaten them with social ostracism and mental and physical abuse if they express their feelings openly" (2002, 69). This homoeroticism was actually a key part of nineteenth-century British school stories, which depicted the creation of male homosocial bonds as vital to maintaining the empire, as long as any queer desire remained unrequited (Tribunella 2011). Thus, the unrequited (implicitly white) homoeroticism of the school story served to sustain hegemonic, imperialistic institutions of power. While Stiefvater subverts the tradition of unrequited homoeroticism through the romantic relationship between Adam and Ronan in the Raven Cycle, Rowling represses the queer potential of the genre in favor of maintaining hegemonic heteronormativity throughout the entirety of the Harry Potter franchise ([note 3](#)). Furthermore, though Stiefvater does break with the conventions of the school story by depicting a requited queer romance, she upholds the dominance of white queer representation in young adult literature, a genre that until fairly recently had a relative lack of queer characters of color in comparison to white queer characters, with queer characters of color being relegated to supporting roles, if present at all. Racebent Ronan fan work disrupts the tradition of white homoeroticism in the school story and young adult literature more broadly, while Harry Potter fan work depicting Harry as a queer man of color subverts the imperialistic, hegemonic institution of the boarding school that Rowling preserves through the privileging of whiteness and repression of potential queerness.

3. Racebent Harry Potter as the quintessential British schoolboy

[3.1] In the case of Harry Potter, fans' depiction of Harry as a person of color undermines the image of ideal British masculinity constructed by the school story genre, particularly in fan work that depicts him in a queer romance with Draco Malfoy. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and other similar school story novels, unrequited schoolboy crushes on ideal representations of British masculinity and citizenship were encouraged, as "promoting the crush of a younger boy on an ideal older specimen of young manhood help[ed] socialize the boys into effective and respected leaders" (Tribunella 2011, 463). As mentioned above, within this construction, the qualities of boys who represented ideal British masculinity included wealth and high status, an eventual leadership role in the British empire, and, of course, whiteness. Most racebent Drarry (Draco/Harry) fan work depicts Draco as having an unrequited crush on Harry, a common reinscription of Draco's preoccupation with Harry throughout the book series. By positioning nonwhite Harry as the unrequited object of Draco's affections, such fan work presents nonwhiteness as representative of idealized British masculinity, subverting the typical nature of this construction.

[3.2] Tumblr artist saltysalmonella, for example, has a number of comics set during the pairs' school days which depict Draco's botched attempts to flirt with Harry. For example, in one comic, posted to Tumblr on May 14, 2016, Harry bemoans Draco's hatred of him, not understanding why he hates him so much. The Tumblr artist then depicts a series of flashbacks where Draco bestows Harry with compliments like "Nice hair, Potter" and "You look...good today, Potter," all of which Harry misconstrues as insults, responding with phrases like "Fuck off, Malfoy" and "Whatever, Malfoy" (<http://saltysalmonella.tumblr.com/post/146518298565/it-begins>). Similarly, fan artist jam-art posted a series of drawings to Tumblr on September 5, 2016, depicting Harry and Draco standing in front of the Mirror of Erised, a mirror enchanted to show those who look into it whatever their heart most desires. When Harry asks Draco, "What do you see?" Draco sarcastically retorts, "What, Potter, forgot how mirrors work?" inadvertently revealing that his innermost desire has already been achieved by standing side by side with Harry (<http://jam-art.tumblr.com/post/128432472203/what-if-like-draco-didnt-know-what-the-mirror-of>).

[3.3] Each of these pieces of fan art replicates the dynamics of the unrequited school boy crush as described by Tribunella. However, by racebending Harry, fans challenge hegemonic notions of desirability, constructing black or Indian Harry as the object of white, blonde Draco's affections. In addition, this disruption reinscribes the typical dynamic of the school boy crush in school story fiction, transcribing idealized British masculinity onto Harry's nonwhite body. By challenging the notion of white British masculinity as the ideal and replacing this construction with a nonwhite figure, racebent Harry Potter fan work depicting a queer relationship between Harry and Draco undercuts the imperialism of homoeroticism in the school story genre.

[3.4] Fan work set in an imagined eighth year at Hogwarts after the war is another trend in racebent Drarry fan work which further exemplifies the political possibilities of Draco and Harry's relationship and its potential to subvert the hegemonic ending of the book series. Galway argues that the commercially published book series does little to deviate from the hegemonic structure of the school story genre; rather than subverting the imperialist impulses inherent to the genre, it frequently reinforces them: "Rowling's novels...ultimately serve...to help validate existing power structures and notions of authority" (2012, 81). Many fans have expressed a similar dissatisfaction with the lack of resolution of the systemic issues in the wizarding world at the conclusion of the series. While the final Harry Potter book details the defeat of Voldemort and thus implies a presumed end of the conflict over blood purity, the series does not depict the fallout from this devastating war. Instead, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) skips from the final battle to an epilogue set nineteen years later, which wraps up the story with each of the major characters neatly paired up into heteronormative couples and little indication that the major issues of the wizarding world that led to war have been resolved.

[3.5] So derided in fandom spaces is the epilogue that there is an entire category of fan work referred to as "EWE," or "Epilogue? What Epilogue?" (Fanlore 2016). Much of the Drarry fan work featuring a nonwhite Harry falls into the category of EWE, ignoring the final conclusion of the series to instead pick up immediately after the war in an imagined eighth year of Hogwarts during which the boys finish their education. By setting racebent Drarry fan work during this period, fans can deal with some of the fallout from the series much more directly, making explicit the racial undertones of the novels by recasting Harry as a person of color as well as subverting the heteronormativity of the epilogue.

[3.6] In a postwar series of comics in which Harry and Draco strike up a tentative friendship-turned-romance, blogger simrell (2016a; 2016b) explores the couple's attempt to navigate the complicated postwar dynamics of their relationship. In one such comic, captioned "hermione is only giving him a second chance to make harry happy," simrell depicts Draco's attempt to apologize to Harry for all of the terrible things he did to him while they were in school (2016b). Harry responds by taking Draco to meet Ron and Hermione and suggesting that if Draco really wants to apologize, he should apologize to them. Here, Harry holds Draco accountable for his prior behavior, implicitly accepting Draco's apology through companionship while still acknowledging the fraught nature of their relationship. In commentary tags on the comic, simrell also notes the shift in Draco's character post-war: "I strongly believe that post war draco would feel nothing but regret and shame it probably took him a while to get there but he realized it eventually and this one apology is by no means the end of his self discovery" (2016b). Rather than the nicely resolved portrait provided by Rowling in the epilogue, simrell here depicts characters actually grappling with the fallout of the events of the war and the conflicts they have struggled with throughout their time at school. Unlike Rowling's rather empty allusions to a wizarding world at peace in the epilogue, simrell's (2016b) comic actively depicts characters who were on opposing sides of the war tentatively moving toward dialogue about what transpired and eventual reconciliation.

[3.7] Racebending in the Harry Potter fandom reinscribes the subtextual racial implications of the pureblood-privileging wizarding society onto actual bodies of color, repairing the political potential of the metaphorical conflict in the series. While the racial implications of the conflict around purebloodedness are not directly discussed in simrell's (or many others) fan works, most of the racebent Drarry fan work set during eighth year that fans produce is visual, consisting primarily of fan art and comics. The visual representation of Harry's nonwhite body in these works, which frequently consist of conversations between Harry and Draco about the wizarding war, serve as a constant reminder of the racial element of the war that fans seek to emphasize. Fans take advantage of the possibilities of visual adaptation to avoid the failings of the Harry Potter series in regards to racial representation; as described by Gizelle Lisa Anatol, "While all of the students mentioned might be visually apparent to the characters within the fictional storyline, their visual difference for the reader quickly disappears and their racial identities fade into the background" (2003, 173). Fans utilize visual representation to ensure the race of their racebent characters cannot be erased in the same way.

[3.8] Much racebent Drarry fan work sees the boys finding comfort from their postwar trauma in their relationship with one another. For example, in a caption to their fanart of a black Harry comforting a clearly guilt-ridden Draco, Tumblr user goddamshinyrock explains the appeal of setting Drarry fan work after the war: "I love year 8 fics, where they're figuring out the people they're going to be after the war, but still stuck in hogwarts making up for the disrupted (or skipped) year 7. And if those fics have hurt/comfort dealing with the aftermath of, well, of everything, then I am 10000% there for that" (2015). Similarly, in an earlier comic in her series, simrell (2016a) depicts Harry and Draco blatantly flirting with one another while their dynamic still holds the tinge of their past involvement in the war. When Harry asks why Draco does not have a girlfriend, Draco responds, "[A]nd get ~all this~ Pssh, who'd want to date a death eater?" "I dunno, Malfoy," Harry replies, "~all of this~ is actually pretty fit" (simrell 2016a). Draco then turns a bright shade of red and has to look away from Harry's gaze. In tags to the comic, simrell describes how their relationship will serve as a means of healing for the couple: "They still have to talk about the war and about the trauma they went thru and about the bullying and the scars draco will have to deal with not only harry's underlying resentments but hermione and ron's too (harry and draco have been spending more time together)" (2016a).

[3.9] The depiction of Draco and Harry's queer relationship as a means of healing from the traumas of war clearly inverts the typical role of homoeroticism in the school story genre. While homoeroticism in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century school stories was meant to replicate the eventual military bonds between young men and engender loyalty to the British empire, racebent Drarry fan work uses a realized queer relationship to heal after war has taken place and, furthermore, as a means of reconciliation between two people who fought on opposing sides of the battle. Via her caption, simrell (2016a) encapsulates the justifiable uncertainties and insecurities both Draco and Harry feel toward one another. However, she also notes such interactions and conversations are significant to overcoming the wounds of the war, and the developing

romantic relationship between the boys serves as a new space where healing can begin and in which the boys can renegotiate the political and racial tensions of wizarding Britain. Companionship within a queer interracial romantic relationship serves as a means of navigating shifting British identities, colonialist power dynamics, and racial tensions.

[3.10] Eighth-year Hogwarts becomes a site for imagining alternative possibilities to the conclusion of the series as well as for renegotiating the central messages of the school story genre. Racebent Drarry fan work breaks the mold of the homoerotic subtexts of the school story genre in another fundamentally important way: homoeroticism is realized as queer desire and reciprocated queer romance. Fans subvert both the extremely heteronormative ending of the Harry Potter series and the strict parameters of unrequited homoerotic desire in the school story genre at large, where queer romantic feelings must always remain unconsummated, lest the boy succumb to "sexual vice" and ultimately perish for his failings (Tribunella 2011, 467). The queer interracial relationship that fans depict between Harry and Draco subverts "the tradition of this colonial genre...[through] a discourse of resistance from within...confronting authoritative discourses on a colonial system of values perpetuated through the educational institutions [and] compulsory heterosexuality" (Bakshi 2015, 1). Such fan work "invests the genre with a disruptive potential, unknown to its original form" (1). Racebent Drarry fan work utilizes the space of the boarding school and the homoeroticism of the typical English school story genre to subvert the genre's heteronormative and imperialist impulses by realizing a queer interracial relationship that works to heal wartime traumas. While most of this fan work does not directly address systemic change within the wizarding world at large, the rewriting of racial and homoerotic subtexts as text, the subversion of the epilogue, and the depiction of former enemies healing together through a queer interracial relationship in racebending Drarry fan work gestures toward the beginnings of change in a way left unrealized by the series.

4. Disrupting "white-by-default" British identity

[4.1] The challenge to the assumption of whiteness that racebending fan work offers is vital. With their racebent fan work, fans critique the overwhelming whiteness of Rowling's series, contesting the predominant association throughout the Harry Potter books of Britishness with whiteness. Karin E. Westman argues that, in spite of accusations of the series' being extremely Edwardian and Rowling's own insistence that the wizarding world is not informed by the politics of the muggle world, "The wizarding world struggles to negotiate a very contemporary problem in Britain: the legacy of a racial and class caste system that, though not entirely stable, is still looked upon by a minority of powerful individuals as the means to continued power and control" (2002, 306). This struggle is entirely metaphorical in the series. The magical politics in the series, in which a war breaks out over blood purity and purebloods seek to exterminate mudbloods, obviously parallels white supremacist rhetoric and the racism that people of color experience in the real world. However, because the victims

of this prejudice in the text are largely presented as white, the series falls into the narrative trappings of what is colloquially known as fantastic racism, or the use of fictional forms of racism in fantasy and science fiction as a metaphor or parallel to real-world racism without centering this narrative around actual characters of color.

[4.2] Although Rowling attempts to write a narrative that exposes the evils of prejudice, her centering of assumed whiteness and restriction of characters of color to the background inadvertently reinforces a hegemonic formulation of quintessential British identity supported by political figures like Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose "regime characteristically rested upon an 'ethnic absolutism' which identified the 'nation' with 'whiteness'" (Hill 1999, 216) as well as "excluding both racial and sexual minorities" (Barron 2007, 9). This inadvertent reinforcement of the norm aligns with Anatol's argument "that although the Potter series attempts to embrace ideas of global equality and multiculturalism, the stories actually reveal how difficult it is for contemporary British subjects such as Rowling to extricate themselves from the ideological legacies of their ancestors" (2003, 165).

[4.3] This failing comes in spite of Rowling's continually expressed antiracist sentiments. For example, Rowling openly supported the casting of black actress Noma Dumezweni as Hermione in the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016) and racebent interpretations of the character, tweeting, "Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair, and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione" (2015). However, this comment rings disingenuous, as Rowling fails to acknowledge the white-as-default nature of her work, in which she indicates every nonwhite character by the prose while describing major (presumably white) characters with no racial tags. Furthermore, Rowling's "strong investment in the [film adaptations], in their production, and in the casting of actors" elided any incidental racial ambiguity in the text, as the casting of white actors in most major roles confirmed Rowling's vision of these characters as white (Cuntz-Leng 2015, 65): "The visual nature of the movie... closed the formerly underdetermined narrative space of what the [characters] could look like and filled it with a concrete image," undermining Rowling's claims that "white skin was never specified" (56). Only now are fans beginning to challenge this foreclosure and recuperate the racial ambiguity and possibility of the novels through their reparative racebending fan works. Thus, in spite of her support for alternate interpretations, Rowling's white-as-default writing and her confirmation of whiteness in these adaptations demonstrates her inability to think outside her own experience, inverting her attempts at dismantling the mechanisms of prejudice through her fantasy narrative; "It is the mythic absence, and the violently repressed but very real presence of racially marginalized peoples, that reinforces White supremacist fantasies" in former British colonies (Carrington 2016, 207) and, I would argue, Britain itself. As Abigail De Kosnik writes, fan practices like racebending challenge white supremacist practices of erasure, and as such, this fan practice "symbolically annihilates not white *characters*...but white dominance and white privilege in media representations" (2016, 169). Fans use racebent Harry Potter fan work to think outside Rowling's limited presentation of Britain and recuperate the radical potential of the series to oppose white supremacist rhetoric.

[4.4] The equating of whiteness to British identity continues to be extremely pervasive, as proven by the intense backlash many fans have received for their racebent Harry Potter fan work. Many fans resisting interpretations of Harry and best friend Hermione Granger as nonwhite use their British identity as evidence of their race. On blog harrypotterconfessions, an anonymous user criticizes the growing trend of racebending in the fandom, stating, "In Europe we don't have such a great diversity like in America, especially back in Harry's time" (Anonymous 2016); however, Tumblr user thatonewritergirl rebuts, "I'm literally living in London and it's one of the most diverse places in the world. That was still the case 'back in Harry's time' which was literally just the nineties. Yes, African children would probably go to a school in Africa. But black British children would absolutely go to Hogwarts" (quoted in prongsyouignoramus 2016). Tumblr user drakonarin, in their resistance to racebent depictions of Harry and Hermione, went so far as to produce a piece of fanart depicting a white Hermione and Harry in which Hermione angrily pronounces, "I'm ENGLISH!!! I have fair skin! See?!" and, dragging Harry into the frame, points to him and insists, "And he's not Indian!!!" (2015). In response, fanartist neffle altered drakonarin's fanart to include a black Hermione and desi Harry, changing the term *fair skin* to *dark skin* and removing the word *not*, followed up with the caption, "hey drakonarin i fixed ur shitty comic" (2018). Similarly, an anonymous user writing to Tumblr blogger prongsmydeer states, "Harry Potter is a BRITISH story. Everyone is one [a white person]. Maybe except Lee Jordan, but he's played by a black actor as well" (2014). The user here clearly conflates Englishness with whiteness, even dismissing the notion that Lee Jordan, a black character from the series, is British, in spite of his clearly black British identity in the original text. As these examples show, racebending fans actively work to combat the assumption of other fans that Britishness equates to whiteness. Such fan discussion and fan work continues the project of postcolonial interventions in fandom described in andré carrington's case study of Harry Potter fans who create fan work for minor characters of color from the series, whose "portrayals of Black British-diasporic women...dislodge tropes of fantasy from a British cultural frame of reference that is presumptively identical to Whiteness" (2016, 197).

[4.5] These clashes between fans reinforce Anatol's (2003) fears about Rowling's attempt at depicting a multiethnic Britain: "While she perhaps attempts to display a 'colorblind' society where everyone is distinguished solely by magical ability, she makes it supremely easy for the reader to forget (or ignore) the multiethnic surrounding that she initially seeks to establish" (173). Anatol argues that this danger stems in part from "a world where white people are the dominant social group," in which "whiteness becomes the 'default' for unmentioned race; it is interpreted as the norm and assumed when unstated" (173). Many fans who support or create racebent Harry Potter fan works make similar critiques of the series. For example, user claudiaboleyn explicitly explains, "The default is white. The default is straight. Therefore many children's authors who have no desire to actively discriminate (because I do not for one moment think J K Rowling intentionally snubbed these groups) do end up alienating rather a lot of their young readers" (2014). claudiaboleyn's (2014) comment demonstrates awareness of the white-as-default mentality prevalent not only in fandom but in children's literature and the Western publishing industry as a whole, as well as the ways

these fans frame their fan work as resistant to such defaults. In addition, claudiaboleyn's (2014) comment reveals racebending Harry Potter fan work as an intervention not only in fandom but in British children's literature as a whole, given that "in British children's literature, ethnic and cultural diversity remain relatively underrepresented...[as] there are still relatively few writers of colour relative to the population of modern Britain" (Sands-O'Connor 2017, 175). In spite of the prevalence of British children's literature on a global scale, racebent Harry Potter fan work gives voice to those who are relatively absent from these commercially published children's books.

[4.6] Tumblr user itsvondell recognizes their racebending fan work as actively challenging the whitecentric mentality of mainstream media. In a post explaining their reasons for depicting Harry as a black, mixed-race child, itsvondell explains, "Personally I'm mentally acting against the white-as-default-unless-otherwise-specified that's pervasive in imagining media especially in predominantly white fandom culture" (quoted in rowanthesloth 2014). By reimagining a character who has become central to the global cultural conception of British identity, fans who racebend Harry not only challenge misconceptions of British identity by other fans but also participate in the radical political formation of black British identity, which, as Stuart Hall notes, has pronounced "Englishness is black" (1997, 59). Through their fan work and online conversations with resistant fans on Tumblr, Harry Potter fans producing racebent fan work challenge the dominance of white characters in mainstream media and the assumption that British identity is white by default.

5. Rewriting the all-American boy with racebent Ronan Lynch

[5.1] Unlike the Harry Potter series, which, as discussed above, elides explicit mention of characters' queer desires, the Raven Cycle series offers an explicit queer subversion of the subtextual homoeroticism of the school story genre by realizing a queer romantic relationship between two male protagonists, Ronan and Adam. However, the series' author Stiefvater upholds the white exclusivity of this homoeroticism (and of the boarding school at large, with few exceptions) and reifies the imperialistic lineage of the school story genre. Pynch (Adam Parrish/Ronan Lynch) fan work which depicts a black Ronan disrupts the imperialist tradition of the school story genre, instead incorporating African American experience into the boarding school genre.

[5.2] This disruption serves as a site of much controversy within the Raven Cycle fandom. In fact, numerous fans who oppose racebending Ronan cite his privilege as counter to representing him as black. For example, Tumblr user lazyleezard argues, "The most ridiculous thing about people making Ronan black is how none of them consider what would happen to the aggressive looking alcoholic trouble maker Ronan Lynch without his white privilege" (2015). Similarly, a post on trefanswhy rebuts those who oppose racebending Gansey, another character from the series, by arguing, "White

privilege is a fundamental part of Gansey's character' uh—no more than anyone else's! If Ronan were a person of color he'd be dead or in jail" (quoted in whimsicalunitato 2016). This critique of depicting the boys as black is twofold, stemming in part from the notion that their privilege could only be white in nature and in part from a fear that Ronan's attitude in the series, in particular when reinscribed onto blackness, reads like the stereotype of the angry black man. Stiefvater herself has expressed this anxiety in a post on Tumblr, aimed at fans who racebend Ronan (2015).

[5.3] While some of these critiques do hold validity, they also flatten both the complexity of Ronan as a character and the additional layers that fans add to his character through racebending. Part of the power of depicting Ronan as black stems specifically from the privilege of his character, as recasting this privilege as black subverts the typical all-white space of the school story genre by depicting a wealthy young black man attending an elite preparatory school. As such, racebent Ronan challenges the typical conflation of black masculinity and the lower classes in American fiction. Reinscribing Ronan's privilege with blackness thus functions similarly to mainstream representations of middle- and upper-class black male characters who "challenge dominant conceptions of black manhood" (Gray 1995, 403).

[5.4] Blogger queeraang (2016) argues that racebent Ronan deviates from negative stereotypical depictions of blackness in numerous ways:

[5.5] nothing about ronan is even a black stereotype other than he's "a thug" (and what ppl mean when they call ronan a thug is *not* what they mean when they call a black boy a thug) like to review

bratty rich kid

loves jesus

loves his family/friends

comfortably queer

takes no shit

also who does ronan rly even fight with besides declan? like he just looks mean ain't nobody tryna fuck with him

[5.6] As queeraang (2016) outlines, many components of Ronan's character subvert the typical depiction of blackness in mainstream media. The blogger also complicates the notion that Ronan is depicted as thuggish in the text. This characterization largely stems from the representation of "black heroes...as one-dimensional fierce strong warriors favoring brawn over intellect" (Fu 2015, 12–14). By contrast, as queerang (2016) notes, while Ronan is difficult and sarcastic, his fights largely consist of arguments with his older brother and one encounter where he defends Adam from his abusive father ([note 4](#)). In addition, Stiefvater depicts Ronan as innately intelligent—for

example, his mastery of both spoken and written Latin is unmatched. For a racebent Ronan, this attribute subverts the devastating history and continued espousal of associating blackness with inferior intellect, such as when online users opposed to casting a black actor as Spider-Man demonstrated "the[ir] belief that a black teenager can't speak in full sentences, be emo, or be a nerd" (Fu 2015, 12). The multiplicity of Ronan's character—as angsty, nerdy, protective, always more than just angry—allows fans to racebend his character without reducing him to a black stereotype.

[5.7] Tumblr user sonjarostova (n.d.) uses Ronan's three-dimensional representation in the series to justify racebending Ronan:

[5.8] I also don't think it is fair to consider Ronan a thuggish character either. Think back to Adam's observation that Ronan "manifested beautiful cars and beautiful birds and tenderhearted brothers" while he in comparison was a monster. Ronan is a subversion of a trope...he's tough on the outside, but inside he's a big teddy bear. I think for the very reason that we see all these sides to Ronan is why it is okay to cast him as a black man. He is not a negative stereotype because we have seen the motivation for his more rough-and-tumble ways. The problems with media representation of POC is when the characters are nothing more than cardboard cut outs of criminals, drug dealers, and bad parents...not when they happen to do these things but also are seen as people with a broad spectrum of emotions and motivations.

[5.9] As sonjarostova (n.d.) writes, although Ronan has a prickly surface at the beginning of the series, the series ultimately subverts this facade as mostly bluster, gradually exposing Ronan as a kind, gentle creator of beauty over the course of his character arc. Racebent fan work taps into this component of Ronan's character, presenting a much more multifaceted black character than the thuggish black representation that Stiefvater fears racebending could engender. Arguments that fans who racebend Ronan simply participate in the depiction of blackness as aggressive and angry ignore the true nature of most black Ronan fan work. Rather than reducing Ronan to a stereotype of black aggression and anger, most black Ronan fan work emphasizes Ronan's gentleness and his queer romance with Adam.

[5.10] Many black Ronan aesthetic posts characterize Ronan with a sense of soft masculinity. While originally referring to the pan-Asian phenomenon of "transcultural, metrosexual soft masculinity" (Szeto qtd. in Min Yuen 2014, 225), the term *soft masculinity* has come to encompass a global range of expressions of masculinity that deliberately disavow toxic masculinity, or "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (Kupers 2005, 714). These expressions take a variety of forms, such as men "express[ing] themselves emotionally," freely demonstrating physical affection and intimacy, or utilizing "feminine" symbols like flowers (Coles 2008, 241). Many fans who racebend Ronan pick up on this iconography in their posts. For example, in one photo set, Tumblr user prairienina (2017) has superimposed a quote from *The Raven King* (2016), the final book of the Raven Cycle, over a black faceclaim (that is,

models or actors that fans use to represent characters in their fan works) for Ronan. In this quote, Gansey, one of the other male leads from the series, warns Adam to be sensitive in his romantic relationship with Ronan: "Don't break him, Adam," prairienina has placed over an image of Ronan hiding his face in his hands, "he's not as tough as he seems" (2017). This photo set emphasizes the vulnerability Ronan demonstrates in the series, both as a character and in his relationship with Adam, in the representation of black Ronan.

[5.11] Fans also evoke Ronan's gentleness in a trend that appears in numerous black Ronan fan edits: the incorporation of flowers. For example, gahfa's Ronan-centric photo edit "ronan lynch, the dreamer" incorporates an image of a young black man pressing his face into a bouquet of flowers as well as another where a dark-skinned black model has a string of flowers arranged over his left eyebrow, sweeping down to cover his left cheekbone (n.d.). Similarly, blogger prcy has posted photo-edited tarot cards for both Adam and Ronan with flowers bursting from their faces (quoted in druskeles n.d.). Such images counter "[t]he social construction of Black manhood in mainstream American culture [a]s rooted in the idea of 'Blacks as beast'" (Hunter and Davis 1992, 466). Contrary to the long legacy in America of documenting black bodies primarily as either threatening or disempowered, dehumanized, and brutalized, the images these fans use entwine Ronan's blackness with a soft masculinity, demonstrating the "power [of] the photograph...to refute...challenge and, possibly, erase stereotypes and caricatures of blackness" (Young 2010, 57).

[5.12] Much racebent Ronan fan work focuses on his romantic relationship with Adam. As demonstrated above, many fans juxtapose images of their faceclaims of Ronan with quotes from the series about his feelings for Adam. For example, Tumblr user solkoroleva's aesthetic post superimposes the first half of a quote, "Ronan was looking at him," on an image of a black model smiling broadly at another model (n.d.). The next image shows a pair of clasped hands—one black, one white—with the remainder of the quote, "as he had been looking at him for months" (quoted in sparrkelzandrainsbows n.d.) The choice of images—Ronan's smile, the pair's clasped hands—demonstrates the way the post incorporates Ronan and Adam's relationship in the series, filled with longing and desire, and juxtaposes it with a depiction of easy intimacy between the couple. Many pieces of racebent Pynch fanart mirror solkoroleva's (n.d.) post, representing Ronan and Adam's romance as casually intimate and filled with a sweet, often innocent affection. For example, fan artist clemish has a series of drawings where Adam coyly steals a kiss from Ronan by telling him "[Y]ou've got something on your face" (2016). The piece depicts Ronan as innocent, blushing, and wide-eyed as Adam leans up to kiss him. The caption for the drawing reads, "i love soft blushy pynch" (clemish 2016). The user clearly evokes an awareness of the tender nature of the fan art in her caption, and, notably, chooses to depict Ronan as the softer, more innocent partner through his blushing surprise; this is typical of depictions of soft masculinity, which "encode...the message of the innocent 'purity' of a teenage boy's first kiss" and "signif[y] a first love that is pure" (Jung 2011, 49). Again, fans choose to represent black Ronan in ways that emphasize his queerness and the soft masculinity at the core of his character, subverting the depiction of black men as angry and aggressive

rather than reinforcing it.

[5.13] The representation of Ronan in these examples counters not only fans opposed to racebending's concerns that black Ronan fan work reduces his character to a negative stereotype of blackness but also, much like the Harry Potter fan work described above, offers a subversion of the typical utilization of homoeroticism in American school stories. As do their British counterparts, American school stories emphasize the maturation of the child into an ideal American citizen. As Tribunella (2002) writes in relation to notable American school story *A Separate Peace* (1959), the protagonist's "'maturation' throughout the novel represents his movement away from an effete intellectualism and 'adolescent' homoerotic relationship...abandoning the queer possibility and accepting a hegemonic and necessarily heterosexual masculinity" (82–83). This disavowal of queer futurity is carried out in the name of adhering to "American cultural values, including, quite significantly, heterosexuality and masculinity in men" (83). Another key component of this construction of American masculinity that Tribunella omits is whiteness. While Stiefvater's novels already subvert the American school story tradition to some extent through the depiction of Ronan and Adam's requited, actualized queer relationship, fans who racebend Ronan's character extend her subversion of the genre to incorporate an explicitly nonwhite protagonist. Unlike the protagonists of school story fiction who came before him, black Ronan disavows the hegemonic portrait of American masculinity—as well as troubling stereotypes of black American masculinity—as a gay upper-middle-class black man in a happy, healthy, requited queer relationship.

6. Deconstructing Irishness as whiteness

[6.1] In much the same way as racebending Harry Potter fans, fans who racebend Ronan from the Raven Cycle face a considerable amount of backlash as they contest other fans' white-as-default mentality in regard to another European identity: Irishness. The Raven Cycle centers on a band of prep school boys seeking the tomb of a Welsh king in the fictional town of Henrietta, Virginia. Given the subject matter of the central narrative, the series frequently draws upon Celtic mythology, and much is made of Ronan's own Irish heritage. Similar to Harry Potter fans who object to racebending characters, many fans who protest racebending Ronan's character cite the frequent allusions to Ronan's Irishness as undeniable proof of his whiteness. For example, user mildlunacy (2016) argues that racebending Ronan betrays the character's identity in a way that racebending characters like Hermione Granger does not:

[6.2] Ronan is defined by his Irishness, in a way the core of Hermione's story really isn't about being born English...The character is constantly referencing his super-Irish musician and dreamer father, and the penchant for Celtic music, alcohol and violence he'd left behind. He's traditionally Catholic, he's culturally Irish, and he also looks "black Irish" (that is, black hair and blue eyes)...To change that is to change much more than Ronan's skin color, and I don't think representation has to mean obliteration, a

replacement of canon.

[6.3] Here, mildlunacy conflates Englishness with whiteness, even as they argue Hermione can be racebent because her English identity is not "the core of [her] story," and thus making her nonwhite will not impede upon her Englishness. This conflation then extends to Ronan's Irish identity, with the blogger claiming that to recast Ronan as a black man negates the possibility of his being Irish and obliterates the core of his identity, never even considering Ronan could be both Irish and black. This resistance to depicting Ronan as black because of his Irish identity seems particularly odd, given the choice to racebend Irish Ronan in fandom seems to, at least subconsciously, tap into the historic and still well-known association between Irishness and blackness (Ignatiev 1995; O'Neill and Lloyd 2009; Onkey 2009).

[6.4] Many fans of racebent Ronan face similar critiques, such as blogger bropunzeling (2015), who received this ask from ducttapetuesday: "I'm just confused as to why everyone believes Ronan is POC?...Ronan is very irish and even said he doesn't like being in the sun because of his pale skin." bropunzeling responded, "irish people can be and are poc. so there's that. edit: @hasseroles added: also you can have pale skin and not be white." Tumblr blogger mythaelogy (n.d.) linked this post, reiterating bropunzeling in a nearly identical interaction, where an anonymous user asked, "What do you think about Ronan Lynch being depicted as a POC in a lot of photosets? He's supposed to look like his full-on Irish dad, so shouldn't he be a white boy?" Many of the arguments against black Ronan take on a similar tenor of purity, an insistence that Ronan must be Irish exclusively and that this Irishness is by default white. This argument falls somewhat flat in the context of the series, given Ronan is in fact born from a union between his Irish father and the woman his father dreamed into existence as a result of powers the Lynch men share, so any claim of Ronan's having a pure racial or ethnic identity rings false. These claims do, however, emphasize that the interconnectedness of notions of whiteness and British/Irish identity are tinged by false conceptions of racial purity.

[6.5] Tumblr user rp-side-blog conflates whiteness not only with Irish identity but with the broader notion of European identity in a response to a post by adamparrishtash (quoted in adamparrishtash 2018) praising black Ronan fan work: "I have a question are you choosing to make Ronan black even though he's described as Irish and his dad is from somewhere in Europe (I think)." adamparrishtash (2018) dismantles this notion by simply stating, "There are black people in Ireland. So..." ([note 5](#)). The prevalence of the same argument against racebending Ronan over and over demonstrates the troubling pervasiveness of the false notion of Ireland and Europe at large as exclusively white landscapes. Furthermore, in this particular instance, the dogged insistence on equating Irish (and European) identity with whiteness seems particularly odd, as Ronan is an Irish-American living in Virginia, making arguments about whiteness in Ireland and Europe, however misinformed, ultimately irrelevant to his character. Again, these posts seem to reinforce the reliance on a notion of purity, with Ronan's Irishness being characterized as an untouched Irish identity imported directly from Europe with no consideration of the falseness of this construction in not only Ireland but in the history

of American identity.

[6.6] While fans' staunch opposition to depicting Ronan as black and Irish bespeaks Ignatiev's titular claim—the Irish, at least for these fans, have truly become white—this opposition shows a complete ignorance of American history and a strange erasure of the black presence in the United States. There is a long and well-recorded history of miscegenation between Irish and black Americans, as well as between the Irish and black populations in the Caribbean (Ignatiev 1995, 41; Rodgers 2009, 33–46; Robinson 2009, 49–63; Malouf 2009, 149–64). While those opposed to racebending Ronan participate in a continued erasure of this legacy and bizarre denial of the existence of mixed-race Americans, visual racebent Ronan fan work, particularly aesthetic posts—that is, edited photo collages meant to represent a book series or particular character—which use real models to represent Ronan's character, implicitly and explicitly recuperate this history.

[6.7] The two most predominant faceclaims for black Ronan, Dudley O'Shaughnessy and Reece King, are Afro-Caribbean and Irish and Afro-Caribbean, Irish, and Portuguese respectively, further solidifying fans' claim that Irishness does not equate to whiteness. Ironically, given cries of canon-incompliance by fans opposed to racebending, O'Shaughnessy and King are both more accurate representations of Ronan's identity than many white faceclaims. The mere presentation of these two models offers proof that negates anti-racebending fans' claims that Irishness is exclusively white. Furthermore, fans' casting of O'Shaughnessy and King demonstrates that racebending is not an act of erasure or a denial of Ronan's Irish identity; their fan work attends to this component of Ronan's identity, simply adding an extra dimension. Aesthetic posts like that of user softgods (2015), who couples a photograph of Dudley O'Shaughnessy with text explaining the Irish meaning of Ronan's name, demonstrate that fans who racebend Ronan are not interested in obliterating his Irish heritage but in celebrating it by representing an Irish experience not only rarely depicted but also outright erased in cultural, fictional, and fan spaces. Black Ronan aesthetic posts disrupt the false construction of Irishness as exclusively white by having Ronan be visually embodied by actual black Irish men.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] Fans racebending Harry Potter and Ronan Lynch deconstruct the false equivalency of Britishness and Irishness with whiteness and subvert the imperialistic underpinnings of unrequited homoeroticism in the school story genre, opening up potentiality for resistance within the genre. In so doing, fans use racebending fan works to bring voice to the queer-of-color experiences that remain largely unattended to in popular young adult fiction. Racebent Harry fan work which depicts Harry and Draco in a romantic relationship ruptures the hegemonic, heteronormative ending of the book series, instead imagining possibilities for systemic change to the wizarding world through the healing nature of Harry and Draco's queer romance. Contrary to the fears of those opposed to racebending Ronan, black Ronan fan work honors Ronan's Irish

heritage and undoes the association of blackness with aggression by representing a gentle, soft Ronan in a loving queer relationship. These two case studies demonstrate racebending as a productive site for critique, both of the series that these fan works represent and of larger generic conventions, like those of the school story.

8. Notes

1. As in same-sex romantic relationships, with the word *queer* in this piece functioning both as an umbrella term for LGBTQIAP+ identities and relationships and also as a critical theoretical framework, such as queer-of-color critique.
2. The boarding school serves as the primary setting for the traditional school story, and Rowling's work has been credited with the revival of the more traditional form of this genre.
3. Despite her assertion in interviews that Dumbledore is gay, his queerness is not directly addressed in the texts.
4. The fact that Ronan does not go to jail after this fight lends credence to his white privilege; however, it subverts the notion of Ronan as simply an angry black man, as his violence here is first and foremost protective.
5. According to the Central Statistics Office's online 2016 census report, 1.4 percent of the Irish population identifies as black Irish.

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THEORY

Enclaving and cultural resonance in Black *Game of Thrones* fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—Because of the ways fandom is constructed as white, Black fans are often overlooked or marginalized. Black *Game of Thrones* (2011–) fans create a parallel culturally resonant fandom organized around an African American Vernacular English–inflected iteration of the show's title, Dem Thrones. Through podcast recaps and the use of nonstandard hashtags for live tweeting, these fans draw on the affordances of digital media to create enclaved fan spaces. In addition to creating parallel and sequestered fandoms, Dem Thrones fans also engage in culturally resonant fan practices that use Black cultural commonplaces and center Black experiences. Dem Thrones fans draw on vernaculars and Black cult media to interpret the show through Black cultural lenses. They also use strategies for reading otherwise absent Black cultural specificity into the text. Seizing on resemblances to Black linguistic, aesthetic, or social practices, Dem Thrones fans map Black culture onto a text, creating opportunities for identification despite a dearth of Black representation.

[0.2] Keywords—African American; African American Vernacular English; Black cult media; Dem Thrones; Live tweeting; Podcasting; Twitter

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I. Introduction

[1.1] In March 2014, HBO released a mixtape inspired by *Game of Thrones* (2011–) entitled *Catch the Throne*, featuring well-known hip-hop performers like Big Boi, Common, and Wale. Lucinda Martinez, HBO's senior vice president for multicultural marketing, described the effort to the *Wall Street Journal*, saying, "Our multicultural audiences are a very important part of our subscribers, and we don't want to take them for granted" (Long 2014). While HBO was reaching out to fans of color, it seemed largely unaware of the thriving Black *Game of Thrones* fandom active online. These fans, many of whom found HBO's mixtape efforts anywhere from laughable to insulting, had been live tweeting the show for years using the hashtag #DemThrones. The use of this nonstandard hashtag effectively created a parallel fandom that was obscured even to the data-gathering mechanisms of HBO itself.

[1.2] HBO's clumsy attempt to reach Black audiences, resorting to mixtapes rather than engaging with existing fan communities as they had in other marketing campaigns, illustrates two issues. First, Black fandom largely goes unnoticed, particularly in genres, like fantasy, that are heavily associated with whiteness. Second, it illustrates the enclaved nature of much Black fandom. Because Black fans are often ignored, marginalized, or even harassed, many have built their own enclaved spaces by exploiting the affordances of digital media.

[1.3] This essay explores one such fan practice: Black *Game of Thrones* fans organized around an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) iteration of the show's title, Dem Thrones. Though this fandom is transplatform, making use of a range of digital and social media, I focus on two of its core elements—live tweeting and podcast recaps. These fans use Twitter to live tweet the show using the hashtag #DemThrones. Black podcasts are also a robust component of this fandom, as many Black podcasters both live tweet and do weekly episode recaps on their shows. "Dem Thrones" was created by the hosts of the *FiyaStarter* podcast, who began recapping *Game of Thrones* in season 2. The first use of the #DemThrones hashtag occurred in May 2012 (@TheREALHeemDee 2012). The hashtag was popularized by *The Black Guy Who Tips (TBGWT)* podcast and subsequently picked up and further popularized by other podcasts, in particular *Black Girl Nerds*. By the beginning of *Game of Thrones* season 3, in the summer of 2013, *TBGWT* inaugurated its regular weekly *Game of Thrones* recap segment. What began as a relatively short segment, clocking in at about half an hour for the first recap, has since grown into a regular in-depth discussion, lasting up to two hours. By season 5, the #DemThrones hashtag was making regular appearances in Twitter's US trending topics and was being used by high-profile Twitter users like director Ava DuVernay and Ferguson protester Netta Elzie.

[1.4] The AAVE hashtag and the affordances of podcasting allow Black fans to create enclaved networked spaces where they can engage in fandom, free from the discomforts and hostilities that come from operating in normatively white fan spaces. By using a nonstandard hashtag while live tweeting, Dem Thrones fans are able to shift their

contributions to a parallel timeline, separating themselves from the fans using the official hashtags while still allowing them to utilize Twitter for synchronous coviewing. Podcasts, an audio format that is neither searchable nor easily scanned, create a deterrent for potential harassers by requiring a temporal commitment to listening (Florini 2015). Beyond merely protectively sequestering them, these enclaves allow Black fans to engage in a culturally inflected fandom that uses Black culture to interpret and celebrate their beloved media text, often reading Black cultural specificity into a text with a notable absence of Black bodies.

[1.5] I begin with a discussion of how Black fans have been erased from industry, academic, and popular understandings of fandom, and the ways this erasure has necessitated the creation of Black fan spaces. I then examine how Dem Thrones fans exploit or subvert digital media affordances to create an enclaved parallel fandom. Next, I analyze the ways Dem Thrones fans engage in a culturally inflected fandom, deploying Black cultural commonplaces and intertextualities with Black popular culture as the language and interpretive lens of their fandom. Finally, I demonstrate how, despite the dearth of Black bodies, Dem Thrones fans read Black cultural specificity into the show by seizing on stylistic, linguistic, or aesthetic elements of the text that resemble Black cultural practices and reimagining them as such.

2. Black fandom

[2.1] The very phenomenon of fandom is itself constructed as white (Stanfill 2011; Wanzo 2015). Consequently, Black fans are often overlooked by fan communities, media industries, and academics alike. Though understudied, like many fans in the digital age, Black fans have availed themselves of digital media technologies to engage in fan practices. Furthermore, faced with the normative whiteness of fan culture, many Black fans create parallel culturally resonant fan practices that mitigate their erasure not only from fandom but also from many of their beloved media texts.

[2.2] Fandom has long played an important role in Black communities. Wanzo (2015) argues that fandom of athletes, celebrities, film, and television has historically been "a mechanism to make claims about black equality and black pride and to bond over black success" (§ 1.5), leading to fandom often being "treated as an act of resistance necessary for the progress of the race" (§ 2.16). She further notes that part of the pleasure of Black fandom can be in "resisting the normativity of whiteness even as they claim their own normativity" (§ 2.16). Kristen Warner (2015a, 34) argues, "Producing content is a necessary act of agency for women of color, who strive for visibility in a landscape that favors a more normative (read: White) fan identity and that often dismisses and diminishes the desires of its diverse body to see themselves equally represented not only on screen but in the fan community at large."

[2.3] This is particularly true for Black fans of nerd culture, such as video games, comic books, and science fiction and fantasy movies and TV shows. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of content created by and for Black nerds, some of whom

refer to themselves as blerds. There are many podcasts and websites devoted to Black nerds—*Nerdgasm Noire Network*, *Black Girl Nerds*, *Black Tribbles*, *We Nerd Hard*, and *The Fan Bros Show*, to name a few. In the dominant culture, such nerd identity is often constructed in opposition to coolness, making participation in nerd culture complex for Black fans whose racial identity has long been coded as cool. This sense of alienation is intensified for Black women engaging with nerd culture, as nerdiness is not only coded as white but also as masculine (Bucholtz 2001; Eglash 2002; Kendall 2011). Beyond this, many nerd culture fandoms are deeply invested in remaining normatively white spaces. Wanzo (2015, ¶ 1.4) argues, "High-profile racist and misogynist speech and bullying demonstrate that some fans of speculative works depend on the centrality of whiteness or masculinity to take pleasure in the text. Sexism, racism, and xenophobia are routinely visible in fan communities."

[2.4] If, as Hampton (2010, 32) argues, "fannish consumption[s are] a process through which individual fans use media texts as mirrors to reflect their own concerns, values, and ideological subject positions back to themselves," Black fans are faced with challenges because of the relative lack of Black representation, the high percentage of problematic representations, and the normative whiteness of fan spaces where they could engage in such reflection. In response, many Black fans have developed strategies for circumventing this erasure.

[2.5] In her study of Black women fans of the television show *Scandal* (2012–), Warner (2015a) describes Black women's make-do fan practices, explaining how, given a dearth of representations, they reinscribe themselves into media texts. One strategy for this is "pulling a Black supporting character from the margins" of the text and transforming them from a supporting to central character (40). Warner also discusses how Black women's fan practices serve to reinscribe themselves in the text by reracializing Olivia Pope, despite *Scandal*'s color-blind approach. She notes how the character of Olivia Pope, though a Black woman, is crafted in a color-blind way designed not to alienate mainstream (i.e., white) viewers. Beyond a few key moments, Pope's race is treated as incidental, existing only at the level of phenotype and devoid of cultural specificity or racialized perspectives. Black woman fans fill in "racially specific gaps to make Olivia Pope a more culturally specific Black woman." This strategy includes the use of AAVE and "reinterpretations of her dialogue to 'Black lady'–speak" (35).

[2.6] Because of the complex relationship Black fans have with fandom, many Black fans have created digitally enabled enclaves. These spaces do much more than create a place to engage in fan practices without the disciplining gaze of whiteness. They serve as an arena in which fandom becomes part of the social and communal processes of Black enclaved spaces. Vorris L. Nunely (2011, 9) asserts that in Black social spaces, "beneath the vernacular banter is a biopolitics that does not merely resist...but, more importantly, produces distinctive subjectivities." He argues that Black cultural commonplaces can exude "massive concentrations of Black symbolic energy. This symbolic energy moves African American audiences because it taps deeply into African American terministic screens, experiences, memories, and meaning" (47). When Black

fans engage in fannish practices in such enclaved Black spaces, deploying Black cultural commonplaces and AAVE not only generates opportunities for Black fans to identify with the text, as Warner (2015a) demonstrates. It also allows fans to invoke Black epistemologies and interpretive frameworks, transforming what would be an alienating experience created from lack of representation and erasure into one that instead produces and maintains Black subjectivities.

[2.7] In many ways, Dem Thrones fandom functions similarly to *Scandal* fandom. Fans focus heavily on the handful of Black supporting characters, particularly Gray Worm and Missandei. They also frequently discuss Missandei's hair in culturally specific ways, a strategy used by Warner's (2015a) *Scandal* fans to racialize Olivia Pope. However, while Warner points to the ways that fans maximize Black characters and racial elements in media texts, Dem Thrones fandom goes one step further. Rather than filling cognitive gaps to undermine color blindness, Dem Thrones fans culturally inflect the show as a whole. While *Scandal* features a Black woman lead around which fans' strategies center, Dem Thrones fans take a show coded as white, featuring all white leads, and recode it in culturally specific ways. Dem Thrones fans actively graft Black culture onto *Game of Thrones*, discussing characters and scenarios to write Blackness into the show.

3. Digitally networked Black fandom

[3.1] Like other fans, Dem Thrones fans make ample use of digital media technologies, in particular Twitter and podcasting. I explore how these are used in conjunction by participants who exploit the affordances of each. Much scholarship on digital media bounds studies by platform or medium, focusing on practices or uses associated with that specific platform or medium. This makes sense both pragmatically and intellectually; it draws the parameters of studies in a logical way and allows for deep engagement with the specific affordances of a platform or medium. However, despite what this approach reveals, it leaves us with an unexamined blind spot because these technologies are not used in isolation but in conjunction.

[3.2] Twitter and podcasting constitute two core elements of the Dem Thrones fandom, and these technologies are deployed in a manner that allows the fan practice to be both enclaved and culturally specific. Each offers a specific benefit to the users. Twitter allows for synchronous engagement, yet potentially makes Black fan practice highly visible to outside gaze. Podcasts are ideal for enclaving and have no length limitations, allowing podcasters to review or fully recap episodes in as much depth as they desire.

[3.3] Live tweeting makes up a core element of the Dem Thrones fandom. Twitter allows for networked coviewing, creating a synchronous but not physically copresent viewing experience (Pittman and Tefertiller 2015). Allowing users to connect with one another in real time, Twitter creates what Harrington (2014) terms a virtual lounge room where they can engage in communal discussion as they watch. However, Twitter is

easily searchable and public unless a user sets their account to private, which few do because it limits interaction and makes it difficult to participate in live tweeting effectively. Further, the use of hashtags aggregates tweets, allowing those who look at the search results of a hashtag to see tweets from users that they do not follow and might not even be aware of. Partly for these reasons, harassment has become a central issue on Twitter, particularly for users from marginalized social groups (Gandy 2014b). Thus, Black *Game of Thrones* fans using the official hashtag would be made visible to the broader fandom that asserts white normativity on a platform known for harassment.

[3.4] Black Twitter users have developed a range of alternative hashtags that allow them to avail themselves of Twitter's synchronicity while mitigating the vulnerability to the mainstream gaze created by the platform. They create hashtags that are AAVE-inflected versions of shows' titles and that essentially shift their live tweeting to a parallel timeline, separate from the broader stream of tweets using the official hashtag. Such hashtags have become popular since 2012. There are many variations, often using AAVE iterations of "them," "that," and "they" — "dem," "dat," and "dey," respectively. For example, *The Walking Dead* (2010–) has two AAVE-inflected versions: #DeyWalking and #DemDeadz. FX's vampire horror show *The Strain* (2014–17) is #DatStrain while the CW's superhero show *Arrow* (2012–) is #DatArrow. During the 2016 miniseries *The People v. O.J. Simpson*, participants used the hashtag #DatJuice.

[3.5] Through the use of AAVE-inflected hashtags, Black Twitter users translate one of the long-standing functions of AAVE to the digital environment: the ability to obscure Black communicative practices to outsiders. However, the use of these hashtags does more than deter outsiders from participating; it also marks the fan space as explicitly Black, in which Blackness, not whiteness, is taken as normative. In online contexts, in the absence of corporeal signifiers of race, language can be a potent means of performing racial identity online (Brock 2012; Florini 2014). It allows Black participants (and other users comfortable participating in Black milieus) to engage in fan practice in ways that call upon the symbolic energy Nunely (2011) identifies.

[3.6] This strategy is imperfect, however. Digital media that are easily searchable and have algorithms, such as Twitter's trending topics, make Black discourses more visible to the mainstream gaze (Brock 2009). In fact, as of season 5 of *Game of Thrones*, the #DemThrones hashtag has garnered enough popularity to appear regularly in the US trending topics, increasing the likelihood that those outside the fandom will take note. This in fact did happen in 2016, as evidenced by *Business Insider*'s article, "If You're Using the *Game of Thrones* Hashtag, You're Missing Out on the Show's Best Commentary," which quoted a number of tweets using the #DemThrones hashtag, including one by Black Girl Nerds, and noted the existence of many other "Black Twitter offshoots of mainstream tags" (Fussell 2016). The visibility of the #DemThrones hashtag has led to some low-level harassment as users deploy the hashtag as a convenient means of targeting Black users. For example, just a week prior to the *Business Insider* article, Twitter user @Wes_St_Clair, who has the Gadsden flag for an avatar, in a now-deleted tweet from May 8, 2016, posted an image of a Black Lives Matter march overlaid with the text, "Has it occurred to anyone that if you're able

to organize this many people for a protest you can organize this many people to clean up your community and get rid of the criminal element causing the problem?" ([note 1](#)). He tagged the image with #DemThrones, the account's only use of the hashtag, obviously intended to insert the tweet into a timeline dominated by Black users. However, nonstandard AAVE-inflected hashtags continue to be popular with Black Twitter users, and most such hashtags do not have enough traffic to appear in the trending topics, allowing them to mitigate visibility.

[3.7] This visibility is less likely with podcasts. The podcast recaps, such as the popular #DemThrones recap segment on *TBGWT*, are less accessible to those outside the networks in which the podcasters and their listeners participate. Podcasts also form a useful sequestered space for Black fandom. There exists a large network of independent Black podcasters, some of whom once referred to themselves as the podcast *Chitlin' Circuit*, a term for the venues that allowed Black musicians, comedians, and actors to perform during the era of segregation and that has continued to be used by some comedy clubs and theaters that target Black audiences (Florini 2015). These podcasters and their fans devote a large percentage of their time to engaging with popular culture and fan practices. Many of the shows discuss movies, television, comic books, and gaming, often offering movie reviews and television show recaps. For example, the podcast *Whiskey, Wine, and Moonshine* regularly recaps *Being Mary Jane* (2014–). *Where's My 40 Acres?* has a show called "TheBoobeTube" where they recap and discuss television shows, including *Love and Hip Hop*, *Catfish* (2012–), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–), and *Girls* (2011–17). *TBGWT* has popular recap segments for *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*.

[3.8] Podcasts offer fans a long-form space for their fan practice, where they can discuss at length and engage in full recaps of each episode. Unlike Twitter, the affordances of podcasts make them resistant to easy intrusion from those outside the group. Podcasts require a temporal commitment that far exceeds Twitter or other text-based digital media. One must seek out content and commit time to listening. There is no easy way to scan or search audio. Additionally, much like the AAVE-inflected hashtags, the podcasts construct the space of fandom as one in which Blackness is normative. Elsewhere I have argued that the talk radio–style audio of many independent Black podcasts allows for performative elements that invoke Black social spaces like barbershops and beauty shops, churches, and family gatherings (2015). Thus, these podcasts are able to recreate the sonic milieu of enclaved Black sociality.

4. Culturally resonant fan practices

[4.1] Dem Thrones fans use the affordances of digital technologies—in particular Twitter and podcasting—to create sequestered spaces. Here they engage in fandom in culturally resonant ways that eschew processes that make whiteness normative and instead tap into the symbolic energy of Black cultural commonplaces that resonate with Black audiences, invoking Black epistemologies and interpretive frames. Dem Thrones fans do this through the use of AAVE and through references to what Warner (2012a,

2012b, 2012c) calls Black cult media, both of which require significant cultural competencies to interpret. This occurs simultaneously on multiple levels, including grammar, terminology, cultural commonplaces, and intertextualities.

[4.2] The use of AAVE includes both grammatical constructions and word choice, particularly the use of slang, governed by rules that may be unknown to those without sufficient cultural knowledge. One such example is the frequent use of a grammatical construction referred to by linguists as the "invariant be" (Labov 1998, 120–24). This form of the verb "to be" is deployed to indicate ongoing or persistent action and is a semantic construction that does not exist in Standard English. To those unfamiliar with this element of AAVE, this layer of meaning will be opaque. An example of the use of invariant be can be seen in the *TBGWT* episode "967: The Roast of Shireen," where husband-and-wife cohosts Rod and Karen Morrow (2015b), along with guests Justin and Rae Sanni, cohost of the podcast *Misandry with Marcia and Rae*, discuss a scene in which the character Jon Snow returns to the castle where he and other members of the Night's Watch guard the Wall, a massive wall that forms the northernmost border of the land of Westeros. Describing a character named Olly, a young boy who dislikes and feels betrayed by Jon Snow, they say,

[4.3] **Rod:** Yo, Olly be making the best faces. He just show up and ice grill the shit outta Jon...It's like every episode, once an episode he just show up and be like "I don' like this shit."

Rae Sanni: He really do be lookin' like Cookie in *Empire* when she's talkin' to Boo Boo Kitty.

[4.4] Both Rod and Rae Sanni use the invariant "be" to describe Olly's recurrent and ongoing faces of disdain for Snow, pointing to it as a persistent feature of that character.

[4.5] Additionally, tweets containing the #DemThrones hashtag make heavy use of Black vernacular constructions and commonplaces. This often involves summarizing the actions or sentiments of a character using AAVE, similar to *Scandal* fans' rephrasing of Olivia Pope's dialogue in Black lady speak. For example, referring to the biting dialogue delivered by the character Tyrion Lannister in a situation where his life was threatened, #DemThrones Twitter user @inomallday noted in a now-deleted tweet from May 11, 2014, "Tyrion: If I'm gonna get murked I'm gonna at least get these bars off." The tweet combines the term "murked" to refer to defeat in a way that implies violence or even death, and the phrase "get these bars off," which draws on hip-hop culture, referring to musical bars, plays on hip-hop's emphasis on verbal dexterity and heavy use of braggadocio. Thus, the tweet restates Tyrion's motivations and attitudes deploying culturally specific lenses and language.

[4.6] At times, Dem Thrones fandom will reference not only Black culture but also the cultural commonplaces of the Black digital networks they are a part of. One such example is the use of the phrase "clap back." The phrase is a vernacular construction that refers to seeking vengeance or justice via a counterattack and is often used by Dem

Thrones fans in their discussion of the show. Retaliation from a character, whether verbal or through physical force, is often referred to using the term "clap back." For example, when character Arya Stark created a list of other characters she intended to kill out of vengeance, @ProfessLCH (2014) tweeted referring to it as "Arya's ClapBack List." The term "clap back" has taken on additional layers of meaning in relation to the character Arya Stark after the circulation of a viral video from YouTube video blogger Krissychula (2013), who recorded her reaction after a particularly violent episode of *Game of Thrones* entitled "The Red Wedding." In her video, she exclaims, "Arya, CLAP BACK, BITCH. CLAP BACK. I hope she fuck up eeee'ybody. I hope she burns down the muthafuckin' earth." The video went viral on the network of primarily Black Twitter users who have come to be called "Black Twitter." Thus, participation in Dem Thrones fandom requires layers of cultural competencies, not simply in broader Black culture but also in the norms of the specific Black digital networks.

[4.7] References to such memetic content is part of how vernaculars are used as a component of culturally specific fandom. Limor Shifman (2014) has argued that memes function as a digital vernacular and play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries. Much in the same way that AAVE has served a crucial sociocultural function in Black American communities, Black memetic content operates as a Black digital vernacular. Dem Thrones fans make heavy use of Black memetic content, referencing viral media that circulated through Black Twitter and other Black digital networks and using images and reaction GIFs drawn from Black popular culture featuring Black bodies. An example of memes as Black digital vernacular in Dem Thrones fandom is the recurrent use of the phrase "caps, caps, caps." The phrase comes from a now-deleted Vine video posted by Nathaniel Tenenbaum on November 2, 2013. The Vine was captioned with the hashtag #RnBFacebookfights. In the six-second Vine video, Tenenbaum sings in the style of R&B, "Who you finna try? I bet it ain't me. Ooh, bitch, it ain't me. Caps. Caps. Caps," over the sound of furious typing on a keyboard. The words include Black vernacular constructions like "finna," an iteration of the phrase "fixin' to," which means preparing or intending to engage in a given action, along with the verb "try," which indicates an attempt to transgress acceptable boundaries. Thus, Tenenbaum asks the equivalent of, "Who do you think you're messing with?" and then answers the question with disbelief that it would be him. The song concludes with the sound of heavy keystrokes as Tenenbaum sings, "Caps, caps, caps," implying that he is typing in all caps—that is, capital letters, generally understood as shouting on social media platforms. Tenenbaum's Vine circulated widely in Black digital networks, and the phrase "caps, caps, caps," often in the form of the hashtag #capscapscaps, has become a shorthand for the expression of anger. Tenenbaum's Vine is often referenced during the #DemThrones live tweet. For example, in response to the season 4 premiere, Imani Gandy (2014a) paraphrased the attitude of the character Arya Stark as "'Who you finna try?'—Arya Stark," translating the character's motivations into Black digital vernacular. Later in the same season, @Nicju (2014), cohost of the *What's the Tea?* podcast, tweeted, "If Jon Snow dies I'm writing a strongly worded letter to @HBO The Double D's George RR Obama Jesus, everybody. #CAPSCAPSCAPS."

[4.8] In addition to AAVE and memetic content, Dem Thrones fans make heavy use of intertextual references to Black popular culture, particularly the kind of iconic media texts Warner (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) has referred to as Black cult objects. This can be seen in the example above in which Rae Sanni references the television show *Empire* (2015–). In this case, the reference is to the character Cookie, ex-wife of record mogul Lucious Lyon. Cookie spent seventeen years in prison for crimes she and Lyon committed together. After returning from her incarceration, she finds Lyon engaged to another woman, whom Cookie begins derisively referring to as "Boo Boo Kitty." Such intertextualities with Black popular culture are common throughout Dem Thrones fandom.

[4.9] Warner termed iconic Black media texts that possess particularly intense cultural resonances as Black cult objects. They can include a range of media but are heavily film and television. The objects function similarly to other forms of cult media, but in ways that reflect the specificity of Black experience. While definitions of cult media vary, such media are often understood through their relationship to mainstream media. Jancovich and Hunt (2004, 27) argue that cult media texts are defined through processes by which they are "positioned in opposition to the mainstream," while Sconce (1995) asserts that cult media function to validate a counteraesthetic that challenges mainstream media. However, Wanzo (2015, ¶ 2.16) points out that Black audience members and fans are already "improper subjects" who occupy a position outside of mainstream white hegemony. Black media, like Black people, are marginalized, existing outside of the mainstream and being relegated to niche audiences. Warner (2014a, 2015b) argues that because the media industry has developed in an uneven manner, marginalizing Black media producers and consumers, almost all Black-cast film and television are, by default, cult media, because of their subordinate position to the mainstream. She places television shows like *The Game* (2006–15) or *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta* (2012–) in the category of Black cult media, along with films like *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Coming to America* (1998) (Warner 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014b). In addition to emerging from unequal development, she defines Black cult as media that "share cultural resonance within community," make use of mimicry and quotability, and "position the black subject in some measure of dominant position" (Warner, pers. comm.).

[4.10] Scholarship on cult media has focused heavily on the relationship of the text to identity. Thompson (1995, 224) asserts that fandom in general is inherently a symbolic project of the self, in which "the deep personal and emotional involvement of individuals in the fan community is also a testimony to the fact that being a fan is an integral part of a project of self-formation." Building on Thompson, Hills (2008, 134) argues that fan engagement with cult media is similarly a "project of the self" in which "cult fans create cultural identities out of the *significance* which certain texts assume for them." For Black fans, who are so rarely offered the opportunity for identification, the identity work of Black cult is deeply tied to the construction of racial identity. Thus, it is Black cultural identity that causes Black cult texts to take on significance for Black audiences and, as cult, in turn functions as a mechanism for constructing Black cultural identity.

[4.11] Facility with Black cult objects can function as an important cultural competency in Black communities. For example, Black cult objects played a central role in the articulation of Black identity during the #AskRachel hashtag. The hashtag is a reference to Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who was living as a Black woman and serving as the president of the NAACP chapter of Spokane, Washington. The hashtag contained questions designed to test Dolezal's cultural competencies, and thereby the authenticity of her claim to Blackness. Questions included references to television shows such as *Good Times* (1974–79) and *A Different World* (1987–93) and movies like *House Party* (1990) and *The Color Purple*. For example, one #AskRachel tweet featured a picture of Oprah Winfrey's character Sofia from *The Color Purple*, with the question, "How long has this woman had to fight?"

[4.12] Dem Thrones fandom makes heavy use of Black cult objects. Not only does this give the fan practice deep cultural resonance but it also draws on the identity work associated with Black cult. If Black cult media serve as resources for constructing and performing Black cultural identity, invoking them in the fandom of non-Black media texts deploys those identity construction mechanisms in the fan space.

[4.13] For example, in seasons 3 and 4 of *Game of Thrones*, interactions between two characters, Theon Greyjoy and Ramsay Snow, were characterized using references to Black cult media texts like *Roots* (1977) and *The Color Purple*. In season 3, Snow kidnaps, tortures, and enslaves Greyjoy, breaking him psychologically and forcing him to take on the name Reek. In the final episode of the season, Snow repeatedly asks Greyjoy his name until finally the latter breaks and proclaims himself to be Reek. The scene was reminiscent of the iconic scene from the miniseries *Roots* in which enslaved African Kunta Kinte is mercilessly whipped and repeatedly commanded to take the name Toby. The similarity was not lost on those live tweeting using the #DemThones hashtag, who offered commentary highlighting the parallel. Rod, cohost of *TBGWT* podcast, posted a now-deleted tweet on June 9, 2013, as @rodimusprime: "He making Theon change his name!?!?! OMG! Roots Westeros!" Leonard Brothers, host of the *Look and Listen* podcast, tweeted, "Theon Kinte aka Kunta Theon aka Toby Reek," mixing together the names of the characters from both television programs (@LBrothersMedia 2013).

[4.14] The following season, Greyjoy and Snow were featured in a scene that was similarly interpreted by invoking the intertextual connections to another Black cult text, *The Color Purple*. In the second episode of season 4, Theon, aka Reek, shaves his captor and abuser Snow, and tension builds as the audience is unsure if Greyjoy will slit Snow's throat. The scene is reminiscent of a scene in *The Color Purple*, when the character Celie shaves her abusive husband, whom she calls Mister, as tensions mounts and the audience becomes uncertain if she might kill him. The *Game of Thrones* scene prompted comments such as, "Theon bout to shave mister" (@cubicle_bc 2014) and "This Color Purple scene tho. 'He fixin to shaaaave Mista!'" (@BlackGirlNerds 2015).

5. Racializing the text

[5.1] In addition to deploying Black vernacular, both linguistic and digital, and making references to Black culture, particularly Black cult media, Dem Thrones fans have developed strategies for reading Blackness into a text that has a dearth of both Black bodies and Black cultural perspectives. Similar to how *Scandal* fans read Black cultural specificity onto the largely color-blind character of Olivia Pope, Dem Thrones fans read Blackness into *Game of Thrones*. However, they do this not only with the Black bodies on the show but also with a wide variety of white appearing characters. Fans seize on upon character names, linguistic practices, and imagery that bare stylistic similarities to Black American cultural expressions, emphasizing these resemblances and using them to reread elements of the text as culturally Black, thereby inserting Black culture into the predominantly white series.

[5.2] For example, on several of the *TBGWT* recaps, Rod, Karen, and their guests discuss how they believe many of the characters' names sound like Black names. Though none of the characters in question are played by people of color, their names bear stylistic and aesthetic similarities to Black American naming traditions. For example, on one recap, Rod, Karen, cohost Justin, and guest Nina Perez from the *Project Fandom* podcast use this strategy. The exchange begins with Nina commenting that the way Rod pronounces the character Tormund's name makes it seem as if the character is Black. Rod responds, "First of all, Nina, all these names sound Black." He elaborates, "That's the only reason I started fuckin' with this show. 'Cause, first of all, Jon ain't got no H in it, right? They got a nigga named Bronn wit two Ns." At which point, they began listing names they believed to sound like Black names, including Tyrrion, Brienne, Tywin, Cersie, Qyburn, and Shireen. Rod continues,

[5.3] All dese Black names, dog. C'mon. Tormund? I prolly play ball at the Y[MCA] with a nigga named Tormund...All these names sound Black. They be tryin' to pronounce it with that English accent like we don't know... All these names would not pass the résumé test. You put these names on a résumé, they be like, "No, no, no, no. We are *not* gonna be hiring any Aryas. I think we know what that applicant gonna look like." (Morrow and Morrow 2017)

[5.4] Here Rod not only maps cultural naming practices onto *Game of Thrones* characters but also extends it even further to invoke how the resultant real-world stigmatization of such cultural practices blocks Black applicants out of employment opportunities.

[5.5] Additionally, Dem Thrones fans highlight the personality traits and behaviors of certain characters they see as bearing similarities to Black culture. One such character is the Lady Olena, an older white woman who is the matriarch of one of the most powerful noble houses on the show and who is known for her sharp tongue and no-nonsense approach. Across Dem Thrones fandom, Lady Olena is reread as a culturally Black. Ba of FiyaStarter described Lady Olena saying,

[5.6] I think she my favorite character right now. 'Cause she not Black.

But she remind me so much of a typical old black lady sittin' on the porch talkin' shit...She got all that wisdom...She just remind me of so many old ladies I done seen on the porch talkin' shit. (Fiyastarter 2014)

[5.7] Lady Olena is often referred to as Miss Olena or Auntie, honorifics used in many Black communities to refer to older women who possess similar character traits. Because of her communicative style, she is often described by Dem Thrones fans as having "bars," or as "throwing shade," a term referring a technique of delivering a subtle yet biting insult.

[5.8] It is not just Lady Olena who is reimagined as culturally Black; it can be any character displaying traits that resonate with Black cultural experience. For example, in one season 5 recap, *TBGWT* hosts Rod and Karen and their guest host Phenom Blak, from *Where's My 40 Acres?*, interpreted the character Jaqen H'ghar, an assassin who can change his appearances but is most often played by a white man, as a Southern Black grandmother.

[5.9] **Karen:** Ol' faceless dude?...Is his feet made out of cotton? 'Cause he just walk around that bitch and you don't never know when—you be like "Goddamn! Where you come from? I didn't hear you. I didn't feel nothin'."

Rod: I'm tellin' you, he got the same gift that my grandmomma got, man...I bet that nigga make a mean ass salmon and grits in the morning, dog. He got Black grandmomma skills, bruh. He got a switch. He quiet as shit. He can sense when you 'bout to do somethin' fucked up without you even sayin' it. Like when Arya tried to open that door two weeks ago, he just showed up like, "What is a girl doing?" (Morrow and Morrow 2015a)

[5.10] Here the "Black grandmomma" characteristics of strict discipline and an uncanny ability to know what her grandchildren are up to are imputed to H'ghar, providing the base for extrapolating other skills he would then also surely possesses—including culinary and domestic capabilities the podcasters associate with their grandmothers.

[5.11] Finally, fans have read Black cultural specificity into the text by imagining how Black people and culture would translate into the world of the show. One such example is the creation of "House Jackson of Detroitland." Using a name and a region associated with Black Americans, the fans comically imagine how Black people would fit into the world of the Westeros. House Jackson first appeared the *TBGWT* recap of season 6, episode 7 (Morrow and Morrow 2016). Near the beginning of the episode, Rod, Karen, and guest Mel from the *Good and Terrible* podcast imagine House Jackson into being after Rod comments that the only thing the series needs is more Black people. Rob begins, "If we just had one Black house. We just need one Black house, man. The Dorne people cool, but they barely in the show anyway. I need some *niiiiiggaaas*." To which Mel adds, "We need a dead-ass niggerish house. We need a house where your boy, Omar Little is like, like a knight or whatever the fuck." The

reference to Omar Little, the iconic character from *The Wire* (2002–9), begins a list of Black actors from various Black cult media that could play the characters, including Bokeem Woodbine, who appeared in *Juice* (1992), *Crooklyn* (1994), and *Dead Presidents* (1995), and Vanessa Bell Calloway, who is known for her supporting role in *Coming to America*, as well as her roles in *The Inkwell* (1994) and *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (1993). Thus, Black cult media, which positions Black subjects as dominant, serves as the reservoir of symbolic resources through which they imagine the inclusion of Black characters into the *Game of Thrones* world.

[5.12] Later in the recap of the same episode, the hosts highlight the appearance of what would eventually come to be House Jackson's sigil. Rod sets the scene in which some of the main characters, the Starks, meet with House Glover. He then drew attention to the sigil of House Glover, a clenched fist, strongly resembles the iconic Black power fist, saying, "Lowkey, they got the best sigil in d' game." The clenched fist was eventually appropriated to serve as the sigil of House Jackson, adapting existing imagery in the show to bolster the insertion of Blackness into the text.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] Black fans face two persistent challenges: racial hostility in normative (i.e., white) fan spaces and a dearth of representations in their beloved media texts. Creating parallel and sequestered fandoms, Dem Thrones fans engage in culturally resonant fan practices that use Black cultural commonplaces and center Black experiences. This allows them to read the show through Black cultural lenses, deploying vernaculars and Black cult media objects. Beyond this, Dem Thrones fandom allows fans to read Black cultural specificity into the text. Seizing on resemblances to Black linguistic, aesthetic, or social practices, Dem Thrones fans graft Black culture into a text where it is lacking, creating opportunities for identification despite a lack of representation.

[6.2] If fandom is a project of self-formation, then the stigmatization or erasure of their racial identities combined with limited points of identification in media texts foreclose this possibility for Black fans. However, as they historically have, Black people make do. Black *Game of Thrones* fans have negotiated these constraints through the use of alternative hashtags for live tweeting and podcast recaps, removing or mitigating these impediments. This allows the access to the processes of identity formation available to white fans in normative fandoms.

[6.3] By constructing sequestered fan spaces, Black fans can freely participate in culturally resonant fan practices that draw on Black vernaculars, cultural commonplaces, and intertextualities. This is more than a strategy for self-expression or to ameliorate the lack of representation; it is a project of identity construction. Wanzo (2015) illuminates how Black fandom can be a political project and a form of resistance to normative whiteness. Dem Thrones fandom reveals an additional layer of possibility in Black fandoms. They combine the self-formation mechanisms of fandom with the "Black symbolic energy" Nunely (2011, 47) describes as producing distinct Black

subjectivities. This makes Black fandom a potent space for constructing and maintaining Black individual and collective identities.

7. Note

1. The Gadsden flag is the iconic yellow flag depicting a coiled snake inscribed with the phrase "Don't Tread on Me." It gets its name from Christopher Gadsden, who designed it during the American Revolutionary War.

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PRAXIS

Black (anti)fandom's intersectional politicization of *The Walking Dead* as a transmedia franchise

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[0.1] Abstract—Despite axiomatic industry and academic discourses of *The Walking Dead's* (2010–) status as quality TV—linked to its graphic visuals and compelling story lines—strong counterclaims question the text's (mis)representations of race and its propensity for systematically killing off Black male characters. An analysis of African Americans' responses to marginalized Black male characters politicizes the racial milieu of the series against the backdrop of wider racial relationships in the United States. Moreover, *The Walking Dead* is a successful transmedia franchise, and thus racial discourse shifts and changes, depending on which transmedia texts are being consumed. Thus, Black antifan rhetoric aimed at the spin-off series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–) centers on the zombification of Black men, a metaphor for the mistreatment and othering of young Black men by US police. Comparatively, *The Walking Dead* video game (TellTale Games, 2012) offers character development for its Black male lead character that fans praise against wider cultural representations in relation to both the franchise's hyperdiegesis and to video games in general. Therefore, Black audiences may read *The Walking Dead* as both racially reductive and radical. In doing so, aspects of self-identity, such as race, can inform (anti)fan positions through intersectional politics.

[0.2] Keywords—Audiences; Digital; Horror; Race; Social media; Television

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I. Introduction

[1.1] With its graphic cinematic visuals, complex narrative storytelling, killing off of key characters, and expansive hyperdiegesis, TV horror series *The Walking Dead* (2010–; *TWD*) has been framed within the discourse of quality TV (Jowett and Abbott 2013; Hassler-Forest 2016; Teurlings 2017). However, despite garnering cult and mainstream success, the series has been accused of an ongoing reductive mistreatment of persons of color, thus challenging its quality status (Steiger 2011; Johnson 2015; Smith 2017). Concurrently, although fan studies has done a great deal for analyzing active audience engagement around gender and sexuality (Brown 2001; Daniels 2012), it has neglected how race can play a central role in identity construction (Wanzo 2015; Johnson 2015), how race as lived and experienced can guide audiences' readings of a text (Bobo 1995; carrington 2016), and how race can be performed and/or negotiated within online spaces (Steele 2016, 2018). To address these factors, in this essay, I undertake netnography to analyze audiences' "interaction styles, personal narratives, [and] communal exchanges" (Kozinets 2015, 3) on blogs, forums, and Twitter ([note 1](#)), thus permitting me to show how race and self-identity inform discursive prioritization for Black online audiences reading the *Walking Dead* franchise ([note 2](#)) whereby racial discourses/subtexts are elevated as the dominant analytical schema, one symbiotic with (anti)fan identity performance (Hills 2015; Steele 2016).

[1.2] In *TWD*, Black antifans challenge the text's characterization of its heteronormative white male hero, Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), and its servile, passive secondary Black male characters. Going beyond simple readings of "capitulation or resistance" (carrington 2016, 14), audiences negotiate these representations in relation to their own self-identity and lived experience of race in relation to the wider cultural climate in the United States. As such, online posts evidence a "'politics of viewing'...[where] representations are not simply judged on the basis of 'negative' or 'positive' stereotypes, but instead are interrogated in ways that illustrate their simultaneous grappling with the pleasures of media consumption, [and] concerns over potential influences of representations" (Chatman 2017, 300).

[1.3] In addition to highlighting the *Walking Dead* franchise's expansive transmedia matrix (Ecenbarger 2014), I turn to other *Walking Dead* texts where audiences of color engage with and utilize racial discourse in their responses. Significantly, *TWD* spin-off *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–; *FTWD*) has also been criticized by Black audiences. However, although *TWD* antifan discourse oscillates around reductive passivity and the cyclic iterations of Black masculinity, online criticism of *FTWD* is aimed at the text's othering of the Black male body. Viewers read the zombification of Black men as mirroring the mistreatment of young African American men by US police forces and

the state, with wider civic discourse used as part of the antifan vernacular. For many of the audiences analyzed, this oppression of Black masculinity within the text is emblematic of *TWD*, and for many Black antifans, *FTWD* reinforces ideological and racial discourse experienced both intratextually and culturally (Klastrup and Tosca 2016).

[1.4] It is worth highlighting that these differing yet overlapping readings of Black masculinity in *TWD* and *FTWD* resonate with long-standing racial othering in the United States (Nama 2008). Race is socially constructed, and "popular culture plays a role in mediating racial politics" (carrington 2016, 8). This has resulted in Black identity being structurally absent and/or omitted from the making of the modern North American history, with its focus on a white civilization (Weinbaum 2001), including in the horror and science fiction genres (Brooks 2014; Nama 2008). When race is brought to the fore, "much of the popular imagery of black masculinity derives from the experience of slavery in the American South and from the ghetto communities of the American North-east and Mid-west" (Jackson 1994, 54). As hooks writes, "Black males endure the worst imposition of gendered masculine patriarchal identity." Often "seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (2004, xii), the "predominant stereotype of black masculinity is of an unrestrained predatory and rapacious heterosexuality" (Jackson 1994, 54). Constructed by white fantasy and fear (Lott 1992), Black masculinity is positioned in opposition to hegemonic white masculinity (Guerrero 1993; Hopkins and Noble 2009; Brooks 2014), therefore justifying the former's racist oppression, pathologization, and eradication by the latter (Hatt 1992; Gordon 1997). Such considerations provide further depth to antifan discourse, identity construction, and textual interpretation.

[1.5] In contrast, Black audiences' discursive prioritization of TellTale's *The Walking Dead* (2012–; *TTWD*) video game largely champions the video game series' first iteration. By offering progressive representations, the game provides players with agency via the character of Lee, an African American man. Posters at the TellTale community forum indicate not only how Black fans engage with the text, often read against *TWD*'s poor serving of characters of color and wider cultural representations, but also how their intersecting race-fan identities are negotiated within the wider community. Resultantly, discursive prioritizations can instigate communal antagonism as well as solidarity.

[1.6] However, it is not the case that "in order to understand the full story of many transmedia franchises, a consumer must seek out each text that contributes to that overall narrative" (Calbreath-Frasieur 2015, 222). I thus extrapolate the ergodic sequencing of gaming applied to *TTWD* to account for audiences' selective movement through the *Walking Dead* franchise and the shifting readings made by Black audiences (Aarseth 1997). As a result, discursive prioritizations are as much procedural (narrative development) as they are semiotic (representations) (Sicart 2013). This stance permits me to not only pay due attention to fans of color but also to critically explore how African American audiences engage with *TWD* as a transmedia franchise through the intersectional experiences of race, both culturally and in textual representations. Such a

stance therefore challenges existing axioms of quality television content and/or audiences. I begin by analyzing the most popular iteration of this franchise: the television series.

2. Questioning quality: *TWD*'s Black antifans

[2.1] Although detailed textual analysis is outside my scope here, it is useful to establish how others have read *TWD* to contextualize representations of race and gender that Black audiences subsequently engage with. There are two common routes for analysis. First is to analyze the text against a wider sociopolitical backdrop. *TWD*, as part of the twenty-first-century "zombie renaissance" (Bishop 2015, 5), provides the figure of the undead to represent the horror genre's internalization of the trauma inflicted by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack (Briefel and Miller 2011; Wetmore 2012; Simpson 2014), which resulted in the need for human survivors to embrace "violence, atavism, and antisocial behavior," which in turn may "be interpreted as a cultural indictment of...aggressive US foreign and domestic policies" (Bishop 2015, 19). Second is to address existential questions that arise out of the threat of zombiedom and the postapocalyptic landscape, which humans must try to survive. Because *TWD* "is an ongoing serial narrative, it is distinctive in its orientation to the *human survivors* and their struggle to re-constitute something that looks like a viable social order in the post-apocalyptic world" (Keetley 2014, 6). Such a focus asks what it means to be human in such an inhumane diegesis.

[2.2] Bennett's (2015) analysis of *TWD*, which relies on Lotz's (2014) male-centered serial model, focuses on Rick as the text's central white male hero in a combination of both reading frameworks. According to Bennett, *TWD* is situated alongside other "stories told about men in a multiplicity of scripted [TV] series...[that] delve into the psyches and inner lives of their male characters," depicting "male characters' feelings and relationships in stories that probe the trials and complexities of contemporary manhood in a manner previously uncommon...for this storytelling medium" (Lotz 2014, 5). As a result, both perspectives focus on Rick and his faction's ongoing attempts to survive against the threats of monstrous zombie hordes and abject humans. Hassler-Forest (2011) explains that Rick as the central hero, combined with a lack of Black male characters, privileges white, heterosexual, middle-class, patriarchal order. Similarly, Keetley argues that Rick's banishing of "all racial difference (shaping his post-apocalyptic world as 'post-racial') allows it to creep back unrecognized, and killing the zombie can thus easily become...the 'thinnest sublimation' of violence against the racialized colonial object" (2014, 9). Therefore, readings from alternative perspectives—such as that of race—call *TWD*'s representations into question.

[2.3] Significantly, despite *TWD*'s popularity, empirical audience research around *TWD* is lacking—an issue endemic to horror studies in general (Barker et al. 2016). However, Teurlings (2017) focuses on audience schemas addressing *TWD*'s quality status. Teurlings's analysis of online commentary indicates a degree of (proto)professional television criticism through "aesthetic and taste arguments" (6). The

former praises *TWD* for its "character development, originality of plotline, or resistance to romantic or narrative closure" (7), while the latter comprise "arguments that, after all other arguments have failed, ultimately fall back on the comfortable sofa of value pluralism: everybody has the right to their own tastes and opinions" (6). Such data reinforce *TWD*'s accreditation as quality TV.

[2.4] However, audience-based research also indicates that when *TWD*'s quality discourse is challenged by wider racial and gendered critiques, specifically the representation of the character of Michonne (Danai Gurira), online white fans largely refute such readings, often inimically. Johnson (2015) finds "antiblack misogyny" present "in audience readings of Michonne's storyline and characterization," which "insist[ed] on her subjection in order to establish the boundaries of worth and value in *TWD* world order" (265). Johnson argues that fans' "dismissive, and sometimes hostile, responses" to racial and gendered discourse are "in part due to the continued circulation and reiteration of white hegemony" (265), propagating "antiblack sentiment within seemingly neutral contexts" (268). As a result, "the refusal to engage questions of race and gender within this fandom community gestures towards the implicit acceptance of the nonontology of black subjects" (268). This is not to say that Black fans are not welcome to enter this online space and engage in discussions; however, they may do so only at the expense of negating, neutralizing, and nullifying their intersectional analyses of race and gender. Therefore, because whiteness is deracialized and is seen instead as the norm (Dyer 1997; Bucholtz 2001), Black fans must display a degree of passivity and identity repression (Young 2014).

[2.5] As Johnson's research demonstrates, despite *TWD*'s amassing a huge fan following (Jenkins 2013; Hassler-Forest 2014), Black audiences question *TWD*'s racial representations (Nyong'o 2012; Steiger 2011; Johnson 2015) while still engaging with its story world and characters (Jowett and Abbott 2013). Academics may focus on and thus validate certain aspects of *TWD* (Brown 2001; Calbreath-Frasieur 2015), but fans can explore, authenticate, and/or challenge other elements. Hills highlights how "for some fan audiences...elevating 'homosexual subtext,' or 'not-so-subtext,' to the status of narrative focus means selecting out one thread of polysemic textual material for communal and discursive prioritisation" (2015, 153). With *TWD*, many Black audiences find the show problematic because of its recurring centering of white male lead characters at the perceived expense of marginalized Black male secondary characters. These antifan arguments show close engagement with the series, but they are also framed by wider civic issues around the mistreatment of Black and ethnic minorities in North America by patriarchal institutions such as the police and armed forces.

[2.6] The cultural context is that of audiences' own subject in process, whereby their racial/antifan self-identity is performed by means of responses to textual representations (Steele 2018). Online Black audiences' posts, to which I now turn, thus demonstrate heightened ideological and thematic readings of *TWD*'s characters of color, providing the schema by which the series may be critiqued. In what follows, because at the time of writing all sources were public and on open platforms, consent to quote was not deemed necessary (Bore and Hickman 2013). However, I have anonymized all posters'

details in order to minimize "intrusion into the fan community" (Bore and Hickman 2013).

[2.7] On the website Nerds of Color (<https://thenerdsofcolor.org/>), self-described as a "community of fans who love superheroes, sci-fi, fantasy and video games but are not afraid to look at nerd/geek fandom with a culturally critical eye," racial depictions are frequently debated. On this site, one poster argues that *TWD* "isn't just a great comic book, it's a revolutionary comic book; one that fundamentally altered the zombie landscape and helped usher in the zombie Golden Age of today." Yet despite these words of praise, posters also critique the series, particularly *TWD*'s reductive characterization of Black men and the show's "repeated inability to depict more...[than] one ass-kicking Black man at a time." As one fan writes,

[2.8] After three seasons...[a] weird pattern borders on the comedic cliché and show in-joke: a central Black male character can only be introduced if the show's previous Black man is bumped off, a pattern I (and others) have dubbed the "One Black Man at a Time" rule. The Rule has come into effect no less than three times over the course of *TWD*.

[2.9] Discursive prioritization of racial subtexts sees *TWD* bestowing Black male characters with limited agency and representation (Deggans 2012). One fan notes, "In the TV show there is a running joke of how 'There can be only one' black man, after T-Dog gets written out and replaced by the black prisoner." In addition, criticism has also been aimed at the show's shuffling zombie hordes for lacking ethnic minority walkers (Cunningham 2010).

[2.10] One blogger laments, "My relationship with this show is over. I wanted to love it, but it kept telling me by virtue of its depiction of Black men, I wasn't its 'target' audience. I am a Black man who does not see himself represented well, if at all, on this show." Such declarations offer a response where identification is refuted (Brown 2001), but they highlight ongoing relationships where fans attempt to stick it out, watching the series in the hope that Black male characterization develops. This antifan response has developed over the course of the series. Issues of Black masculinity and representation are also crucial for this audience member:

[2.11] The message such shows promote is a toxic one; serve and remain subservient, don't aspire, consume, follow, protect assets that are not your own...I am not confused about the role of Black men in American society for the last four hundred years. We have no role. And I recognize television will reinforce this perspective as long as people of color are not allowed to write on television, to create new media which is more accurately representative of how we think, feel and behave.

[2.12] The audience's response not only addresses "the legacy of black representation in American media, the ideology of the producers, and American social realities" (Aham 2013, 103) but also subverts the "author function" (Jenkins 2013, 375) of

Robert Kirkman, the cocreator (with Dave Erickson) of the comic book version of *TWD* (Image Comics, 2003). Antifans criticize the show's creators as white men who are hegemonic in the industry—and unable to create strong Black male characters. Similarly, noting diegetic racial commentary by T-Dog (Irone Singleton), who discusses his precarious position as a sole Black man in season 2, only for this rhetoric to be blamed on his semiconscious state, a blogger explains, "It is in that moment that, as viewers of color, we are reminded that white dudes are writing this, because despite T-Dog's realization being very much in line with the world we know, on TV such a notion can only be the product of temporary dementia."

[2.13] Another fan remarks, "For all its strengths, the social dynamics on *The Walking Dead* replicate many problems from modern society. These issues of power are not thoughtfully explored and it seems a missed opportunity for an otherwise expertly crafted show." In noting how the postapocalyptic space could subvert the ongoing race relations in the United States that are divided by what Du Bois ([1903] 1994) termed the color line—that is, the line that empowers hegemonic white culture and concurrently exploits people of color—*TWD* is read as mirroring disempowered ethnic minorities in real-world North American culture and its long-standing legacy of systemic oppression (Weinbaum 2001; Karenga 2003; Steele 2016). Furthermore, fans were unhappy with the killing of Tyreese (Chad Coleman), a Black man, in season 5, during Black History Month, using hashtag combinations such as #TheWalkingDead, #racist, and/or #BlackHistoryMonth to engage with the topic on Twitter (Steele 2018). Conversely, the same context of Black History Month was used to champion the text when Rick and Michonne's interracial romantic relationship developed in season 6. These discursive reading strategies are bolstered by wider racial and civic rhetoric embedded within heightened race relations in the United States. As fans note:

[2.14] Rick and Michonne is important for #BlackHistoryMonth.

[2.15] Rick and Michonne are closing out #BlackHistoryMonth properly.

[2.16] Michonne and Rick finally kissed during #BlackHistoryMonth I see you @WalkingDead_AMC.

[2.17] Additionally, when the quota of a single Black man is undermined when both Morgan Jones (Lennie James) and Ezekiel (Khary Payton) are present in series 7, racial discursive prioritization manifests on Twitter that reflects and/or refracts previous criticisms, often framed within wider sociopolitical discourse. Some fans praise Morgan's longevity and strength:

[2.18] My grandma always had a pic of Jesus and MLK on her wall. Imma have Black Panther and Morgan from The Walking Dead.

[2.19] Morgan is like the Obama of the walking dead "the first black guy to make it this long."

[2.20] I'm just glad Morgan is on the way to maintain the maximum black

guy count of 2 on walking dead.

[2.21] However, other Black audience members find Morgan's masculinity and psychological state problematic, reading it as emblematic of wider racial stereotyping:

[2.22] Morgan's portrayal as raging savage/super-violent black man made me uncomfortable cuz that's a dangerous idea ppl have IRL [in real life].

[2.23] Morgan's crazed grief has a lot to do with the ethnicity of black masculinity...Morgan's physical displays of grief over his family lasted longer than any other male character. His self-deprecation is incredibly intense...The self-deprecating nature of the black characters in Walking Dead is fascinating and incredibly relatable...I hate that Morgan was placed in a cage. I hate that symbolism...That it is seemingly required for a black man to be incarcerated in order to be rehabilitated is not...good or inspiring.

[2.24] Comparatively, Black fans see Ezekiel's introduction and character development as potentially challenging *TWD*'s representation of Black masculinity, although by the very nature of his being Black, they are worried that he is going to die:

[2.25] Still can't get over the weak portrayal of Black Men on The Walking Dead season after season. King Ezekiel is the best example of them all.

[2.26] Hoping we finally get a strong black male character with the arrival of King Ezekiel in season 7 of the Walking Dead.

[2.27] Did The Walking Dead just give me some Black History Month from Martin Luther King. King Ezekiel is spitting right now!

[2.28] I wonder which black character the walking dead is gonna kill off next? Probably king Ezekiel.

[2.29] Black audiences bring race to the fore in their reading strategies of *TWD*. Online posts' discursive prioritization evidence a "'politics of viewing'...whereby individuals collectively engage in 'a critical politics'" while simultaneously "grappling with the pleasures of media consumption" and "concerns over potential influences of representations" (Chatman 2017, 300). In doing so, these (anti)fans recenter the text to focus on Black exploitation and Black experiences, "critiquing [wider] oppressive systems" and making "everyday discourse...a political strategy" (Steele 2016, 4). As a result, counterpublics form whereby marginalized individuals and communities respond "to misrepresentation in the mainstream media...utilizing new [media] strategies" (Steele 2018, 114–15). Such representations are culturally contextualized; reading schemas intersect with racial identity and wider cultural contextualization (Scodari 2011).

[2.30] However, it is important to note that *TWD* is part of a transmedia franchise.

Within this expansive transmedia network, "what can be counted as 'text' and 'paratext' is potentially destabilized" (Hills 2012, 38). Audiences negotiate the Walking Dead's story world according to which texts they consume, and in what order. Such instability in patterns of consumption means that each textual iteration subtly alters "the horizons of meaning" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 19) of the wider textual corpus. I turn next to consider the Walking Dead's transmedia "malleability" (19) through other textual iterations—*FTWD* and *TTTWD*—in order to highlight fans' modular and ongoing intratextual race readings.

3. New texts, old monsters: *FTWD*, *TTTWD*, and the Black male body

[3.1] Like *TWD*, *FTWD* offers a multicultural cast of characters, resulting in journalistic pieces and online fans' discursive prioritization that read the spin-off show's depictions of Black masculinity as problematic. The systematic deaths of Black men resonate with the real-world treatment of the Black body as other, thus hinting at strong political subtexts (Kelly 2015; Nededog 2015). One Black antifan argues, in light of the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri, protests, "We—people of color, and black people in particular—are this country's zombies. We are the horrifying shadow suburbia is afraid will slip through the window at night. We are the reason for the US history of stockpiling guns, dating back to fears of slave rebellions." Here the antifan sees the propagation of the United States' white middle-class "civilized" mythology to be extended by controlling and expunging the poor, abject Black community (Wynter 1992; Weinbaum 2001). By focusing on racial fears, Black monstrosity "serve[s] to obscure the position of prestige, power, privilege, opportunity and supremacy associated with the very idea of whiteness" (Ulysse 2017, 147).

[3.2] Thus, whereas the marginality of the Black self in *TWD* elicits criticism from audiences, *FTWD*'s problematic depictions reside in its othering of the Black body. This is not to essentialize racial identity but rather to consider how wider cultural events become common reference points for challenging representations within the series (Steele 2016, 5). A fan notes of *FTWD*,

[3.3] The first character killed off was black. Not just black—but a black drug dealer. And a weak black drug dealer who is fought off by his jonesing white client...From the very start, the show has introduced an ineffectual black thug as the first zombie to die. A thug's black body laid out on the street (As a culture, that's how we like men's black bodies: laid out dead on the street).

[3.4] While acknowledging the series' multicultural cast, antifans argue that this comes at the cost of subordinating Black masculinity, with Black identity read as a cultural problem. These audiences thus reveal their double consciousness, their "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...measuring one's soul by the

tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois [1903] 1994, 2; see Saldanha 2006). In doing so, they acknowledge "the hegemony of Whiteness without privileging it over the agency and spiritual energy found within the Black community" (Brock 2012, 532).

[3.5] By using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in their discussions of *FTWD*, antifans discursively link wider civic issues with problematic depictions of race in television (Kuo 2016). Signs and symbols from political campaigns spill into their textual analysis, with subsequent fan/civic engagement revolving around related issues. Other antifans concur, referring to the stereotypical treatment of Black characters that comes with the horror genre as a reason for quitting the series. Likewise, other fans ask, "With the current sociopolitical climate, do we really need to see police brutality and racial tropes become part of a zombie plotline?" *FTWD* fictionalizes police brutality, but its resonance with real-world events is deemed insensitive by critics rather than a mode of political engagement.

[3.6] Points of contention are largely intratextually informed by affective responses to the racial dynamics of *TWD* (Robinson 2015). Such affective responses indicate that audiences strongly react to textual representations, but they also show how ongoing relationships with fictional representations can intersect with wider cultural expressions (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2009). Critical engagement with racial politics is mapped onto topics such as the treatment of Black men in wider society, traditional depictions of Black masculinity, the marginalization of ethnic minorities, and the thoughtless power of hegemonic media industries, thus resulting in a civic awareness that challenges the *Walking Dead*'s story world (Van Zoonen 2005; Steele 2018). Black audiences' discursive prioritization challenges Black characterization (or lack thereof) in *TWD* and *FTWD*, albeit in different ways. However, other *Walking Dead* texts, and fans' relationships with them, illustrate that the racial discourse attached to the franchise is not monolithic. I turn now to an analysis of the *Walking Dead* franchise's video game, *TTTWD*.

[3.7] *TTTWD* offers brand/franchise consistency by means of episodic structuring, an ensemble cast, complex narratives, and moral ambiguity (Hassler-Forest 2014). Yet by playing as Lee, a Black man, players can reconsider and recast postracial criticisms of *TWD*'s ethnic marginalization since players are given limited agency over Lee's characterization and his reactions to events.

[3.8] On the TellTale community forum, intersectional identity and racial politics are played out in a number of ways. Significantly, racial representations within *TTTWD* are strong narrative loci within discussions, in threads such as, "What if Lee was white?," "Why most of the characters in the game are Caucasian?," and "Was Clem African-American?," as well as wider cultural debates about race and gender featuring in threads such as "Racism in America," "Excuses for racism," "Race and racism," and "Transgender and transrace." Fans frequently post on both diegetic and cultural race relations, with arguments from one often informing the other. Arguments often circle around marginalized characters and players, the need for greater racial/cultural

diversification in media, and postracial debates that reject race as an issue. Many players who identify as Black champion the character of Lee, seeing both his visibility and the ludic dimensions of his character development as markers of quality that are notably absent from the television series:

[3.9] With Lee, the game broke so many unfortunate traditions in gaming. And with the *Walking Dead* in general. After that travesty that was T-Dog's character, I was glad to have Lee.

[3.10] He's black but the whole narrative isn't focused on "the black experience"...There is the urban joke at the farm...the implication is that Lee constantly has to deal with little prejudices that are inevitably frustrating.

[3.11] There's a real surfeit of white, male 20–30 something male protagonist in games, because that's the demographic most developers aim for. The principle behind concepts like "affirmative action" is to be a correcting course against those tendencies...Race *is* an issue.

[3.12] Lee subverts hegemonic identities in video games and television (Brown 2001; Jansz and Martis 2007), yet he is also read as a civic device for affirmative action. His characterization raises wider cultural issues. This shifts Lee from being a marker of quality to a political symbol highlighting the absent Black body in *TWD*. Conversely, for some, Lee's racial representation reinforces racist stereotypes. One fan notes, "Lee starts out in the back of a cop car after murdering his wife's lover, and a lot of the options you have as you play Lee don't cast him in a positive light."

[3.13] Because of his representational complexity, Lee slips between subverting and harboring racist stereotypes. Additionally, as has been similarly noted in previous studies of online fandoms (Scodari 1998), fans of color on the forum are frequently compelled to demarcate, and thus perform, their racial identity—an act that often leads them to further justify their responses to the game. Interestingly, some white fans commend the characterization and emotional depth afforded to Lee, yet by acknowledging their whiteness, they seek to insulate themselves from further debate:

[3.14] Lee is extremely nuanced and that's what's great about his character, but I feel uncomfortable saying more because...I'm white and I don't think it's really my place to say if his representation was negative or not.

[3.15] The one and only time I thought about Lee's skin colour during the game was Kenny's comment about picking the lock. Other than that, it's mostly just people talking about it on forums. Maybe it's because I'm white, I don't really care about Lee being black. I understand why people do though.

[3.16] Guys, skin color/gender/ability might not matter to YOU, when

YOU see people who look like you all the time, but it does matter to lots of other people. I'll admit that I probably can't understand even close to entirely because I'm white what it's like to try to find positive media as a person of color, but I am a minority in at least two other ways that impact my life on a daily basis.

[3.17] Often these debates result in intrafandom conflict. Despite the recognition of Black marginality, the need for greater visibility, and more positive representations, some fans attempt to racially depoliticize Lee:

[3.18] So in order to relate to a character he has to be the same race as you? I am white and could totally relate to Lee.

[3.19] I don't see what race has to do with it. Personally, three of my favorite survival horror...main characters are black—and I'm not. A good character is a good character, doesn't matter what they look like.

[3.20] I think it would be cool to see less white adult males as the main protagonist in Video Games, but I really don't care that much. If it's a good character it doesn't matter the race.

[3.21] For some, the speculative dystopian fictions comprising the Walking Dead franchise are postracial: their texts offer enough of a departure from the real world that *TTTWD* does not or cannot engage with contemporary cultural politics or issues. Resonating with Johnson's (2015) research, criticism is aimed at those who read the game through a civic discourse, with politicized responses being dismissed as overly emotive. Conversely, those who focus on the franchise's racial representations reject depoliticizing interpretations. They read *TTTWD*'s narrative and characterizations as problematizing the transmedial hyperdiegesis—there is a lack of Black survivors in a largely Black and ethnically diverse part of the United States, and a reductive depiction of Black masculinity—and wider cultural representations, given the fact that Lee, as a Black male lead character, does not reflect the large-scale marginalization of such bodies within North American media. For instance, as a university lecturer, he subverts the traditional hypermasculine depictions of Black masculinity that have led to cultural fears and systematic othering (Brown 2001).

[3.22] Posts both politicize and depoliticize Lee, often in relation to posters' own senses of racial identity. However, this is not a simple racial dichotomy of Black players' politicization and white players' race refusal. Some Black fans note that they do not necessarily read race into the game; instead, they value the quality of the storytelling (Brown 2001). Likewise, to only speak of Black and white fans is to neglect other forms of identity that shape players' affective engagements with the text and the gamer/fan community (Brown 2001). One thread asks, "Would you like to see more races, ethnic groups and nationalities?" and included transcultural responses asking for Irish, Latinx, Australasian, and Asian characters, all debated in relation to the diegetic Southern US geography. This evidences how audiences negotiate *TTTWD* at individual,

textual, fan-cultural, and transcultural levels. Discourses of nationality are consequently negotiated here by audience interactions with one another and with the fan object.

[3.23] Evidently, myriad points of affective engagement are informed by individuals' race and culture within fans' performance of self-identity, with the potential for multiple and/or fragmentary moments of character identification. Fans can frame the game through wider cultural politics that resonate with their real-world identity; they can also reject such politicizing stances, drawing on other aspects of personal identity and shaping how they play the game. This is often done by elevating certain reading frameworks, such as race. However, in considering how audiences can traverse *TWD*'s transmedia landscape in heterogeneous ways, I now address how paths of textual consumption can affect discursive prioritization and audience readings.

4. Accounting for heterogeneous discursive prioritization: Ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing

[4.1] The data show that online Black audiences frequently activate discursive prioritization that reads and responds to the *Walking Dead*'s story world within racial contexts. Ryan (2013) defines story worlds as the static component preceding "a dynamic component that captures...unfolding events"; vitally, "some components are optional" (364). The *Walking Dead* has "one-world/many-texts," where transmedia "extends the scope of the original storyworld by adding more existents to it, by having secondary characters turn into heroes of the story, and by prolonging the time covered by the original story through prequels and sequels" (365–66). Significantly, though, optional transmedia narratives running parallel to and/or overlapping with the TV series offer new characters and develop established ones "without damaging the integrity of the show" (379) or punishing audience members who do not wish to engage in these avenues of story world expansion (Ecenbarger 2014).

[4.2] Therefore, "the meaning of...[the *Walking Dead*] is constantly being constructed" on the basis of "previous understanding of other texts" (Ecenbarger 2014, 3). Indeed, "each incarnation can develop its own audience without having to rely on any previous familiarity with other versions" (Hassler-Forest 2016, 162). Moreover, it cannot be assumed there is a universal *Walking Dead* parent text, with every other iteration being simply paratextual. Because each iteration is a "textual shifter" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 234), differences among transmedia texts can reinforce and/or subvert readings (Fischer 2011). Consequently, although the data indicate that racial identity informs discursive reading schemas that may be mapped against wider cultural contexts that intersect with Black US audiences' lived experiences (Steele 2016), the data also present heterogeneous responses to the *Walking Dead* franchise, depending on which text is the focus. The remainder of this essay conceptualizes this to better serve myriad Black audiences and their readings. To do so, I return to *TTTWD*, but not its

textual representations. Rather, I address its structural qualities.

[4.3] In stressing the choices that players must make, *TTTWD* presents a "multicursal narrative structure," with cursality defined as "the realisation...that there are multiple paths through the narrative in addition to the one...[players] are currently following" (Goodbrey 2015, 65). Semiotic sequencing by "selective movement" provides an "ergodic" structuring, with "each decision...mak[ing] some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed" (Aarseth 1997, 1, 3). The game itself trades on such relationships by presenting different choices and trajectories through the narrative. Affect is thereby founded on "the dual domain of the semiotic and the procedural" (Sicart 2013, 47). How the text is coded and the process by which a narrative develops together provide the affective grid from which readers will make meaning.

[4.4] Ergodic dynamics, although fundamental to the medium specificity of *TTTWD*, can be applied to the wider Walking Dead transmedia matrix (Franco 2015). This is because "the different ways in which the reader is invited to 'complete' a text" allow for multiple "plausible interpretation[s]" (Aarseth 1997, 20, 51). Klasturp and Tosca note of fans' networked transmedia consumption: "Experience is always informed by experiences in the past: in this case...prior engagements with the cultural product and interactions with others around this product. In sum...the cultural and aesthetic experience of transmedia objects is not fixed but in flux," with the result that "user engagement with transmedia worlds...[can recapture] particular experiences over and over again" (2016, 108–9). Thus, certain ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing can strengthen an individual's discursive prioritization. This is evident with those fans who see *FTWD* as reinforcing *TWD*'s mistreatment of Black male characters.

[4.5] Conversely, as evidenced by *TTTWD*, texts both on their own and as part of an intratextual matrix can offer new experiences that challenge existing readings of the franchise's story world. The data from the TellTale forum indicate that many players had not consumed any other *TWD* texts (Ecenbarger 2014). Yet the data also show a Black fan may move from finding the representational/ideological framework of Black masculinity in *TWD*'s T-Dog problematic to celebrating the nuanced and developed characterization of Lee in *TTTWD*. Therefore, alternative ergodic pathways, although still stressing a racial prioritization in the individual's reading of the Walking Dead franchise, permit the fan to present a more negotiated consideration of the various representations of Black masculinity within the realm of textual experience.

[4.6] Likewise, affect forms through the symbiotic relationship between the semiotic and the procedural. This may be extrapolated to the phenomenological procedure of wider experiences that shape audiences' readings. This accounts for the processes of consuming intratextual objects. As narratives proceed, whether by single episode, level, chapter, film, or serialized (trans)media narrative, the procedural component feeds into semiotic frameworks of the text. It also allows these to intersect with the procedural nature of ongoing lived cultural experiences (Schlesinger et al. 1992)—in this instance, race relations. Consuming new texts and gaining new lived experiences operates

alongside the movement of culture. This may be seen in how audiences assess Black masculinity in *TWD* as problematic through its passive role in relation to hegemonic white male heroes. Racial discourse shifts when audiences read the zombification of Black men in *FTWD* as reflective of wider cultural othering. The relationship between textual and cultural experiences accounts for individual and collective responses. Yet we can also note that there has been little criticism aimed at *TWD* over other racial or cultural depictions such as Korean, Latinx, or Maori. Such politicized and depoliticized bodies attest that what "one community sees as political, another may declare to be apolitical" (Jenkins and Shresthova 2016, 283). Thus, although serial television might reward consumers for transmedia and/or repeat consumption, audience identity also informs the (repeat) motifs read in the mediated texts.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Across all three Walking Dead texts, race is a discursive prioritization for many Black audience members, bringing characters of color to the fore in reading TV and transmedia narratives by evaluating the story world and those who dwell within it against their own experiences. For these audiences, the Black male body is "a moving point of reference" (Bennett and Woollacott 1987, 44) that, as the locus of discursive prioritization, refracts or reflects *TWD*'s quality status. As an online and cultural nexus, audience voices can overlap, harmonize, or diverge from each other to varying degrees. Nevertheless, individuals write and perform their own racial identity online through their relationship with the Walking Dead and its representations, providing a strong oppositional counterpoint to the dominant culture (Steele 2016; 2018). While the data indicate how *TWD* and *FTWD* are read as texts representative of the legitimization of "racial hierarchies existent in US society" (Yuen 2017, 7), *TTTWD* is championed for subverting these hierarchies. Evidently it is not only trained academics who can undertake ideological readings of texts. Audiences too can focus on thematic deconstruction of texts, especially when lived identity has also been politicized. As I have indicated, "posts on non-political...websites" and social media platforms "may serve as political forums" (Steele 2018, 113). During times of wider political unrest, Black audiences favor ideological responses because such responses seem to be appropriate (Schlesinger et al. 1992). In-process phenomenological, cultural, and transmedia contexts play salient roles in shaping the intersectional politicization of (anti)fans and their readings.

[5.2] By extrapolating ergodic and semiotic sequencing, I am able to account for distinct readings of different *TWD* texts in relation to race; further, by tracing the paths of consumption, readings can transmogrify, reinforce, and/or refract, depending on which texts are experienced. We could also explore other audiences' ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing; they may exhibit other discursive prioritization. For example, fans might wish to analyze the role of women in the Walking Dead franchise, such as Clementine, Michonne, and Lily (Abbott 2016). In considering a wider application of ergodic pathways and semiotic sequencing, the research has sought to better serve audiences of color. As a field, fan studies seems to have taken a particular ergodic path,

selecting and examining particular sites, practices, and identities (Aarseth 1997), while other aspects, such as race, have been left more in the dark (Wanzo 2015; Booth 2016).

[5.3] Although I have stressed the need to address the relationships of audiences of color with popular culture, it is also salient to note that I have solely focused on the written texts of Black audiences' engagement with the Walking Dead franchise on blogs, forums, and Twitter. However, these are not the only sites or media texts that fans use to respond to the texts comprising the franchise. Engagement with the Walking Dead's representations of race is also manifest in YouTube vlogs as well as a plethora of memes. Although the scope of this essay does not permit me to explore these texts, they highlight the volume of racially inflected readings by audiences of color speaking out against texts they find representationally problematic, and they thus serve to illustrate a salient area of audience research that scholars in the fields of both fan studies and horror studies ought to pay further attention to.

6. Notes

1. Like ethnography, netnography as a method "studies complex cultural practices in action, drawing attention to a multitude of grounded and abstract ideas, meanings, social practices, relationships, languages, and symbol systems" (Kozinets 2010, 25). It does so by analyzing "the human element of online human and technological interaction, social interaction and experience" (243).

2. I use the Walking Dead to denote the transmedia franchise and *TWD* to denote the TV series *The Walking Dead*.

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PRAXIS

Affective racial politics in *How to Get Away with Murder* fan fiction

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[0.1] Abstract—This article analyzes fan fiction about Oliver Hampton and Connor Walsh (Coliver), an interracial queer couple in the TV series *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–). An analysis of the two most popular fics in this pairing on Archive of Our Own, "It's Called Dating" by grimcognito (2015) and "deCode" by tuanpark (2014), indicate that there is a shift away from gift or sharing economies of fandom to a market-like economy of prompt revision in order to produce and circulate texts meant to provide happiness to fans.

[0.2] Keywords—Affect; Fan economies; Gift culture; Happiness; Interracial; Queer

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I. Introduction

[1.1] In 2014, the premiere of *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM) introduced a white man with scruff, Connor Walsh, portrayed by Jack Falahee, and a well-groomed Asian American man with glasses, Oliver Hampton, portrayed by Conrad Ricamora, in a dimly lit bar in Manhattan. Audiences and fans took to various social media sites to express their joy about seeing a budding interracial gay relationship on network

PRAXIS

How the Green Hornet became Chinese: Cross-racial mimicry and superhero localization in Hong Kong

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[0.1] *Abstract*— The *Green Hornet* television series (1966–67), with Bruce Lee in the role of Kato, the Green Hornet's sidekick, was broadcast in Hong Kong in 1968. In subsequent decades, characters referencing the Green Hornet emerged repeatedly in Hong Kong popular culture, and instead of being Anglo-American like the original Hornet, they have all been ethnically Chinese. Scholarship suggests that fans of color are excluded from identifying with or performing white characters based on their racialization; however, this does not appear to be the case for Hong Kong fans. I apply the concept of colonial mimicry to argue that Hong Kong fans arrived at ethnically Chinese inhabiting the Green Hornet by exploiting Kato's partial inclusion as an Asian American and as a sidekick. In addition, as a colonial audience, Hong Kong fans were well positioned to poach from a transcultural text such as *The Green Hornet* and make this cross-racial move.

[0.2] *Keywords*— Asian American; Postcolonial; Superheroes; Transcultural fandom

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I. Introduction

[1.1] An early case of transcultural and cross-ethnic media fandom was the fandom around Bruce Lee. His films and their interpretation by international audiences have been well established by decades of Bruce Lee fandom and scholarship (Teo 1997; Prashad 2002). But Lee was not only a Hong Kong movie star; he was also an American television actor whose shows were seen in Hong Kong and beyond. Lee's appearance as the sidekick, Kato, in the *Green Hornet* television series (1966–67) was his first and the most popular in Hong Kong; Lee's widow, Linda Lee Caldwell, claims that it helped to launch his career there. Despite the popularity of Lee's films, a longer view of the decades after his death shows that Hong Kong did not forget his portrayal of Kato, as references to *The Green Hornet* cropped up repeatedly in Hong Kong film and popular culture, including an unauthorized Hong Kong adaptation of *The Green Hornet* (1994). Interestingly, in Hong Kong versions of the Green Hornet, the hero is always ethnically Chinese.

[1.2] This phenomenon can be read as fan racebending, where fans respond to the exclusion of nonwhite characters in popular media by changing the ethnicities of originally white characters (Jenkins 2015). However, while a race bent Green Hornet is the visible result, racebending cannot precisely enough describe the conditions or processes through which the Green Hornet has been remade. The racial hierarchies of the United States and Hong Kong, and the superhero genre tropes of *The Green Hornet*, meant that Asians were not excluded based on their ethnicity but rather partially included. As colonial subjects in Hong Kong or immigrants to the United States, Asians were incorporated as figures of support for the Anglo or Anglo-American elite—specifically, as Hong Kong commercial middlemen or laborers and domestic servants in the United States. This status is also what allowed the Green Hornet himself to be Anglo-American but take on Kato to be his sidekick—a role of support particular to the superhero genre. However, Kato's partial inclusion along both ethnic and generic axes also provided Hong Kong fans with an opportunity to transform his status. According to Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry, European colonial systems produce partial inclusion by making racialized others similar enough to the colonizers to fulfill a supportive role but not so similar that they could threaten the colonizer's mastery. This balance is rarely stable, however, and there is always a threat that the colonized might become too similar.

[1.3] I argue that Hong Kong fans of *The Green Hornet* implicitly recognized the potential menace in the figure of Kato and acted upon this observation to graduate Kato from sidekick to hero and take the Green Hornet's place. In turn, this strikes down whiteness as a prerequisite to be a superhero and opens the Green Hornet's heroic persona to embodiment by ethnic Chinese. This strategy is not simply crossracial but also transcultural, as Hong Kong fans take advantage of gaps in the series' American racial and generic structures to facilitate local storytelling. I will first discuss the superhero trope of the sidekick, then establish the partial inclusion of Asian Americans by examining the representation of Kato as an Asian sidekick and outlining the

challenges that Bruce Lee faced when performing this role. After this, I will outline the media scene in Hong Kong and the reception of *The Green Hornet* there. The bulk of this paper will focus on three Hong Kong films: *The Green Hornet* (1994), *Black Mask* (1996), and *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* (2010). I will bring in Bhabha's theory of hybridity to discuss these films, then consider his theory of colonial mimicry in relation to scholarship on cosplay (the fan practice of dressing in costume to represent a character) to discuss how the films exploit the likeness between Kato and the Green Hornet to imagine the Green Hornet as Chinese. I will end on a discussion of the significance that Hong Kong recreations of the Green Hornet hold for thinking about race in transcultural fandoms.

2.The Green Hornet, sidekicks, and Asian American masculinity

[2.1] The Green Hornet is not strictly a superhero franchise, because the characters lack superpowers, and the series' conception as a radio series in 1935 predated the generally accepted beginning of comic book superheroes in 1938, with the first appearance of Superman (Coogan 2006). However, it contains the core criteria for the superhero genre: figures who possess exceptional abilities, seek to do good for society, and represent themselves with a symbol that is closely tied to their identity (Coogan 2006). As such, the Green Hornet can be considered a transitional text between urban detective pulp stories and superhero comics. George W. Trendle and Fran Striker of Detroit's WXYZ station had previously achieved a high level of success with the radio series *The Lone Ranger* (1933–54) for children and created *The Green Hornet* as a spinoff series for a slightly older audience. The Green Hornet is Britt Reid in disguise; Reid is the wealthy owner of a newspaper, the *Daily Sentinel*, and uses the press to expose corruption and organized crime to the public. Kato works as Reid's valet, chauffeur, and mechanic. In addition to his reliance on superior technology (like Batman, he has a high-tech car, the Black Beauty), the Green Hornet also relies on Kato's martial arts. The Green Hornet and Kato do not have elaborate costumes and, other than domino masks, wear everyday clothes during crime-fighting operations. In the 1966 television series, Reid wears a suit, green overcoat, and green fedora, while Kato wears his black chauffeur's uniform and cap, since going out to fight crime requires him to drive. Reid's identity and true purpose is only known to himself and Kato, as well as, in some productions, Reid's secretary and love interest, Lenore Case, and the district attorney. These character dynamics and plot points generally stayed constant from the radio series' inception to the end of the television series in 1967.

[2.2] Kato's status in *The Green Hornet* reflects racial logic of pulp adventure stories in the early 1900s, expressed through the hero-sidekick dynamics of the superhero genre. The Green Hornet and the Lone Ranger both have sidekicks who are men of color, with the Native American Tonto and the Asian or Asian American Kato (though which specific Native or Asian community has changed with different versions of the stories) ([note 1](#)). As Julian Chambliss and William Svitavsky (2005) write, pulp stories

in the late 1800s and early 1900s often embodied American anxieties regarding urbanization and changing ethnic patterns. As the American West was closed and new immigrants integrated into the United States, pulps transitioned from Westerns to stories suggesting the nobility of white lineages in the face of the world's savagery, with a prime example being Tarzan. The Lone Ranger and the Green Hornet are similar in this regard, and the earlier stories in the Green Hornet franchise especially portrayed Britt Reid as a pulp hero who went on adventures around the world, bringing heroism and enlightenment to exotic places. The two 1940s Universal Pictures Green Hornet film serials (*The Green Hornet* [1940] and *The Green Hornet Strikes Again!* [1941]) gave a backstory that Reid had saved a Korean Kato from "native Singaporeans" who tried to kill him because of his ethnicity. The initial description of Kato's relationship with Britt Reid barely presents him as a sidekick, more as an accessory; the first episode of *The Green Hornet* radio show describes Britt Reid as a wealthy clubman who is surrounded in his apartment by mounted heads of game that he has hunted and who says, "Kato himself was something of a trophy, brought back from a trip to the Orient" (Grams and Salomonson 2010, 72).

[2.3] Superhero comics also borrowed the trope of sidekicks in the 1940s (Fingerroth 2004), but sidekicks were often youths, so as to facilitate identification from younger male readers (Shyminsky 2011). This was not necessary as a marketing ploy, as young readers tended to identify with the titular adult hero (Shyminsky 2011), but sidekicks nevertheless became a superhero staple and also introduced a hierarchy of power that later reincorporated ethnicity. Neil Shyminsky (2011) notes that sidekicks and other supporting characters often display imperfections, weaknesses, and deviations from hegemonic masculinity that the hero never could, thereby serving as the hero's foil. Shyminsky highlights Foggy Nelson, supporting character for Daredevil/Matt Murdoch, who commits adultery and murder under the influence of a supervillain, leaving it to Murdoch to get him an acquittal in court. In this manner, superheroes can be "spot cleaners" for society, as long as their sidekicks bear the markers of imperfections and deviation (297).

[2.4] The fact that most sidekicks were teenage boys accompanying an adult male superhero implied that sidekicks were not as powerful as the hero because they were not yet men. As teenagers became a distinct identity and consumer category in the postwar period, teen sidekicks declined and teen heroes with their own titles, such as Spider-Man, became popular (Fingerroth 2004). However, the increase in teenage male heroes coincided with the role of the sidekick increasingly being filled by women (e.g., Batgirl, introduced in 1961) or nonwhite men (e.g., the Falcon, introduced in 1969). Apparently, as age was no longer the explanatory factor behind the sidekick's secondary status, ethnicity, and gender became markers of the sidekick's difference, as well as particular weaknesses. It is true that sidekicks of color in postwar comics were represented with greater respect and complexity than pulp characters would have been; the Falcon/Sam Wilson, for example, expresses reservations with his position as Captain America's sidekick (Nama 2011), and the series also changed its title to *Captain America and the Falcon* (1971–78). Nevertheless, as a black supporting character, the Falcon was open to manipulation in a way that Captain America himself was not. Adilifu Nama (2011),

in his analysis of black superheroes, discusses a narrative arc where writers changed the Falcon's backstory to reveal that he was actually a gang member whose identity the villain the Red Skull reprogrammed to plant with Captain America. Nama's sociohistorical analysis is that this represents fears of black criminality in the 1970s; however, an approach comparing hero and sidekick would highlight how Sam Wilson's backstory was retconned to incorporate criminality according to racial anxieties, whereas Captain America, as a crime fighter, would have to keep his origin story clean.

[2.5] The continued subordination of sidekicks based on race is arguably a factor in why the Green Hornet and Kato continued to be viable as a superhero and sidekick duo in the 1960s, even though they were created decades before. Kato's characteristics also reflected mainstream stereotypes of Asians, which enabled him to be the Green Hornet's foil in racially specific ways. While the stereotype that all Asians know martial arts was not necessarily in place in the 1930s or even the 1960s, martial arts also marks Kato as ethnically different from the Green Hornet. In his analysis of Bruce Lee's films, Vijay Prashad (2002) points to an important difference between spy thrillers and kung fu narratives, which is that the main characters in kung fu narratives are not members of the elite, and instead of having access to gadgets (and, more broadly, Western technology), they can only rely on their fists. While this is an empowering reading, Kato and the Green Hornet's differential access to technology paints Kato as more primitive than the Green Hornet, since he has to rely on his own body as a weapon.

[2.6] In addition, it is curious that while Kato does have access to technology and technical knowledge—from working as Reid's mechanic and chauffeur—he does not use them to fight crime. This partial technologization of Kato stems partly from his initial conception as Japanese, which the showrunners for the radio series were very careful to craft—in the introductions to the early episodes, Kato is described as "Britt Reid's Japanese valet" (Grams and Salomonson 2010, 77). The promotion department for the radio series was also careful when photographing Kato's first voice actor, Raymond Hayashi, explaining that "unless you get the angle right, there is danger of making him look like a Chinese, which of course to a Jap is next to hari-kari" (78)—implying that being mistaken for Chinese would drive Japanese to suicide. The emphasis on Kato's Japaneseness came from very different perceptions of Japanese and Chinese in the early 1900s. The Chinese came to the United States primarily as laborers, and China had been falling to foreign encroachment and domestic strife. The Japanese, however, had astounded the world by their military capability and rapid industrialization, and were associated with enhanced technology (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2015). Despite this respect for Japanese modernization, Kato is not placed on par with the Green Hornet when it comes to modernity—he knows enough to provide labor so that the Green Hornet can use technology but does not use it himself.

[2.7] In addition, Kato's position as Reid's valet mixes in stereotypes of early Chinese Americans. A large influx of Chinese men came to the United States for the California Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in the mid-1800s, but they faced a double bind when these projects ended. Most men had not earned enough to return to China, but Chinese Exclusion Acts were already in place to prevent them

from entering the American work force. As a result, Chinese men picked up informal work such as laundry work and domestic labor. This is reflected in the choice to make Kato Reid's valet, which is a domestic position and quite different from Tonto's relationship to the Lone Ranger, despite both sidekicks being men of color. While these Asian workers provided domestic support, their status as single men in a household not their own also potentially threatened the existing structure of the family. As a result, popular culture portrayed Chinese male domestics as a desexualized "third sex" (Lee 1999, 101)—stabilizing the Victorian home by doing feminized labor—and by extension not really men. Over time, this supposed deficiency in masculinity and Asian men's subordinate status has become welded to their ethnicity, such that even today Asian men are seen as less masculine and heroic than men of other ethnicities.

[2.8] It is clear that Kato's character was written with this stereotype in mind. As a result of tensions with Japan on the eve of World War II, the radio series changed "Britt Reid's Japanese valet" to "Britt Reid's faithful valet" (Grams and Salomonson 2010, 77)—swapping out his specific Asian ethnicity for a personality trait that oriented him toward serving the Green Hornet. In addition, George W. Trendle seemed to have conceived of Kato as a limited character for the television series. While Reid can be seen in public and social engagements, *The Green Hornet* shows Kato either in his crime-fighting role or as a valet in Britt Reid's home, dressed in a white uniform. This is not simply a disguise. Frank Scanlon, the district attorney, frequently goes to the Reid residence to consult about crime; however, he reserves strategic conversations for Reid and rarely engages Kato beyond an initial greeting. In the first episode of the two-parter "Beautiful Dreamer" (1.07), for example, the camera frames Reid and Scanlon discussing threats against a man's life in the foreground for almost two minutes, while Kato can be seen between them in the background, musing at what they are saying, but not asked to contribute. During the filming of the *Green Hornet* television series, Bruce Lee wrote a letter to William Dozier, the producer, complaining that "it's true that Kato is a house boy of Britt, but as the crime fighter, Kato is an 'active partner' of the Green Hornet and not a mute follower." Dozier's response reiterated that Trendle envisioned Kato as an ally in the background, though personally he agreed with Lee (Grams and Salomonson 2010, 320).

[2.9] Kato's particular blend of some technological know-how combined with domestic work makes him a supportive character even if he isn't a hero's sidekick per se. Indeed, he slips seamlessly from the houseboy to the sidekick; unlike the dual identity of the Green Hornet/Britt Reid, his name, "Kato," seems to be adequate for both of his roles. His subordination cannot be overcome simply by putting him in the spotlight, as Bruce Lee tried to do. According to previous analysis of sidekicks, the superficial reason that they exist in the narrative is to lend the hero a helping hand, but the deeper, unconscious reason for their existence is that they take on markers of deviation and vulnerability so that the hero can compare more favorably. Similarly, while Robert G. Lee does not argue that the master of the house benefits from direct comparison with the Asian domestic servant, it is also clear that no Anglo-American master would risk feminization by taking up domestic labor; the masters preserve their masculinity and elite status by delegating domestic labor to racialized others.

Ultimately, both the domestic servant and the sidekick provide support by being different and lesser, which means that the support they provide simultaneously places them near the hero/master but maintains their distance from them. Thus, simply giving Kato more presence within *The Green Hornet* does not necessarily overcome the way that exclusion is built into Kato's inclusion.

[2.10] Similarly, Lee's performance as Kato impressed audiences and critics, but it did not lead to many opportunities in the US entertainment industry. Lee's kung fu was the first time that many audiences had seen martial arts on television at all and captured audiences even before his films. Filmmaker Reginald Hudlin recalls that "As a kid, we watched *The Green Hornet* for him—we couldn't care less about Green Hornet—he had a fly car, I'll give him props for the car, but Kato was incredible" (quoted in McCormack 2012). Grams and Salomonson write that based on the amount of fan mail sent to the actors, Kato was more popular with children than the Green Hornet was; his mask especially was in high demand, and Dozier kept replicas in his office to send to fans (Grams and Salomonson 2010, 320). However, *The Green Hornet* only aired for one season, which some believed was the result of being played too straight for an adult audience, in contrast to Dozier's *Batman*, which played up camp (Pollard 1967, 14). From the end of the show's run to Lee's return to Hong Kong in 1970, Lee only found supporting roles. Lee's pitch for a kung fu Western television series to Warner Bros. resulted in the series *Kung Fu* (1972–75), but the network cast the white actor David Carradine as the hero and not Lee. Despite stretching the representational capacity of the role of Kato, Lee remained a sidekick in Hollywood.

3. *The Green Hornet* in Hong Kong

[3.1] Lee's reception in Hong Kong, however, was quite different. His widow, Linda Lee Caldwell, claimed that *The Green Hornet* was airing when they went back to Hong Kong to deal with immigration for Lee's mother, and that it was popularly known as *The Kato Show* (in McCormack 2012). The international broadcast of *The Green Hornet* followed quickly after its American broadcast. The show first aired in the United States from 1966 to 1967, and in 1967, it was already being shown in Japan, Thailand, Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Canada (Pollard 1967, 18). In Hong Kong, it first broadcast in August 1968 on TVB Jade, in the Sunday 6 p.m. time slot, ending in February 1969, in the Wednesday 11:15 p.m. time slot, with a break in October.

[3.2] Whether Hong Kong audiences really referred to *The Green Hornet* as *The Kato Show* is difficult to verify, but they have certainly localized *The Green Hornet* in a number of ways. *The Green Hornet* finished its broadcast in February 1969. By the end of March, a young man calling himself Green Hornet began robbing residents in Kowloon and was apprehended in April along with a stash of jewelry and watches (*Kung Sheung Evening News*, 1969). The press did not release any statement from this Hornet, but perhaps this was his interpretation of the Green Hornet's social interventions. Hong Kong residents also later associated the Green Hornet with charitable work. In 1978, a relay race for charity featured a contestant calling himself

the Green Hornet (*Kung Sheung Evening News*, 1978); and a team called Green Hornet also won first place in a 1983 shooting competition (*Wah Kiu Yat Po*, 1983). These were highly public and publicized events, suggesting that the competitors involved chose Green Hornet as a name that audiences and sponsors would easily recognize and associate with physical aptitude. In turn, they point to the place that *The Green Hornet* continued to have in the public consciousness. These competitions took place eight and thirteen years after the broadcast of *The Green Hornet*, so it seems that the generation who watched the show as children and teenagers brought the show forward as they grew into adults.

[3.3] Some of these audiences in turn also became part of the Hong Kong film industry, as evidenced by Kato's iconic getup of a black uniform and black domino mask appearing repeatedly in later Hong Kong films, such as *The Green Hornet* (1994), *Black Mask* (1996), and *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* (2010) ([note 2](#)). In *The Green Hornet*, the titular hero is a young man named Dong, who takes down a human trafficking and weapon smuggling ring backed by a neo-Nazi colonel while eluding the police and Tom, a journalist who falls in love with him and who attempts to uncover his identity. *Legend of the Fist* is the second sequel to Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* (1972) and follows the kung fu hero Chen Zhen (whom Lee played) as he returns from World War I to fight the Japanese occupation in Shanghai, this time adopting a costume. *Black Mask* features Tsui Chik, a supersoldier who escaped the People's Republic of China to lie low in Hong Kong but comes out of hiding to protect the city against other rogue supersoldiers; he uses a disguise to elude his friend in the police force. These films render the Green Hornet Chinese through a number of moves. First, there are no references to Britt Reid or any previous American version of the Green Hornet. The stories always take place in China, and the heroes are given Chinese origin stories. Second, racebending also involves genre bending; the narratives in these films use the superhero trope of the disguise in a story that is otherwise a kung fu tale.

[3.4] These films are hybrid texts, not simply because they mix genres, but also because genre mixing challenges mechanisms keeping the Green Hornet and Kato separate. Drawing from colonial policy texts as well as postcolonial literature, Homi Bhabha (2004) explains that European colonizers attempt to legitimize their authority by asserting that European culture is wholly distinct from that of the colonized, yet also timeless and universal. Bhabha argues that this discourse did not actually exist prior to colonization; instead, it was a defense mechanism enacted when European culture was confronted with racial and cultural difference in the colonies. Thus, European colonial culture is actually articulated in relation to an Other and therefore arguably a hybrid product. However, colonists disavow this for fear of losing justifications for power and instead mask it with discourses of cultural purity and difference. Under these circumstances, "hybridity reverses the *formal* process of disavowal so that the violent dislocation of the act of colonization becomes the conditionality of colonial discourse" (163, emphasis original). In other words, making hybridity explicit forces power to acknowledge that its assertions of distinctiveness and universality are false. By combining kung fu and superhero tropes, the Hong Kong films I discuss reveal mechanisms of racial distinction for what they are.

[3.5] Of the three films, *The Green Hornet* responds most directly to the original franchise, with a character explicitly named after the superhero. The film was written and directed by Lam Ching Ying, who worked on action choreography in Bruce Lee's films and later became a well-known Hong Kong actor for Chinese zombie films. Lam's *Green Hornet* exhibits strong martial arts genre tropes, and in doing so counteracts some of Kato's racialization based on technological primitivism. Following martial arts genre tropes, Dong lives a simple life removed from society. He and his two uncles, who instruct and guide him in his missions, live as peasants outside Shanghai. Indeed, this Green Hornet does not take advantage of any modern technologies. In addition to kung fu, he only uses a boomerang, while the film suggests that high-tech weapons are the purview of the dealers and the Nazi colonel. For their part, the uncles correspond with their contacts in the criminal underworld via carrier pigeons. These details change the significance of Kato's partial technologization. As previously discussed, in an urban American superhero narrative with a high-tech Green Hornet, mastery of martial arts marks the sidekick Kato as different and implies his primitivism. However, in a martial arts narrative, it is hand-to-hand combat that is superior because it is untainted by dirty money and exploitation. By representing the Green Hornet as a hybrid of Chinese kung fu hero and superhero, Lam's *Green Hornet* also asserts that a Chinese peasant who does not have access to technology can nevertheless be a superhero. This means that Britt Reid's wealth and technological superiority are not prerequisites for being a superhero, which suggests that it serves another function, such as racial distinction.

[3.6] *Legend of the Fist* also exhibits hybridity, though its reference to *The Green Hornet* does not challenge the racial distinction of Britt Reid so much as it rehabilitates Kato's position as a servant. In *Legend of the Fist*, Chen Zhen leads a double life as a nightclub musician and a nationalist underground operative. Upon discovering a Japanese plot to assassinate a Chinese general, he steals a disguise from the closest source, which is a movie theater displaying a costume from an in-universe film called *Masked Warrior*. This costume is essentially Kato's crime-fighting costume, and after Chen Zhen rescues the general and his wife, he also chauffeurs them to safety. While the film follows up Lee's *Fist of Fury*, the original did not contain any superhero elements, and Bruce Lee's Chen Zhen did not adopt any disguises; the choice to put this World War II-era folk hero in a costume is reaching back further in Lee's performance history to Kato. One reason for Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity is that anticolonial movements can also resort to discourses of purity to establish legitimacy (Bhabha 2004, 171). Indeed, a common assertion from Hong Kong scholars is that Bruce Lee's films embody the spirit of Chinese ethnic nationalism (see Teo 1997); however, Lee's earlier work as Kato is never mentioned, most likely because Kato's status as a servant to a white American does not fit into this oppositional narrative. By evoking Kato and even his domestic work as Reid's chauffeur, *Legend of the Fist* brings Kato and his work into the Chinese nationalist tradition and suggests that Kato's service is not inherently demeaning. As hybrid texts, Lam's *Green Hornet* and *Legend of the Fist* narrow the gap separating the original Green Hornet and Kato by striking down some of the criteria that produces the Green Hornet's superiority and reframing the criteria that keep Kato a subordinate.

4. Mimicry, mockery, and Kato's implied menace

[4.1] Interestingly, the three Hong Kong films all reference Kato with their costuming choices, but Kato himself is never mentioned by name. Instead, all the heroes are (mis)recognized as the Green Hornet. Lam's *Green Hornet* is the most obvious in this regard, as the criminals in the film seem to know the hero by name. The film also establishes that the Green Hornet identity has been handed down throughout Chinese history, as evidenced by a history lesson from Dong's uncles when they become concerned that a potential relationship with Tom is distracting him from his missions. In a basement hideout reminiscent of Batman's batcave, the uncles point to exhibits of past Green Hornets and explain how violating Green Hornet codes of conduct has led some of them to misfortune. The first mannequin that the uncles point to is the Green Hornet from the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), and the second, the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), each wearing historically contemporary armor with a mask covering the top half of their faces. Both of these Hornets, the uncles explain, fell to ruin for fraternizing with women. However, the last mannequin that the uncles point to is Bruce Lee in Kato's uniform; the uncles explain that he broke the code that forbids the Green Hornet from using the hero persona to gain personal fame and fortune.

[4.2] *Black Mask* also references Kato in its costuming choices, yet again the costume is recognized as the Green Hornet's. In a behind-the-scenes interview with Tsui Hark (the writer and producer) and Jet Li (in the role of Tsui Chik/Black Mask), the camera briefly focuses on one of the costume department staff holding a book with a photo of Bruce Lee in the role of Kato (Shuiyuzhengfeng900 2015), which is clearly the reference for Black Mask's costume. However, a scene from the film shows Black Mask fleeing the scene and accidentally dropping his cap, to be picked up by his friend, police inspector Shek. Shek puts it on and spins around quickly to face fellow officers who come running after him, causing his coat to flare dramatically. His fellow officers stop short in surprise, but then applaud and comment that with this getup, Shek "has become the Green Hornet."

[4.3] The screenplay does not have the officers compare Shek to Kato, despite the conscious choice during production to model Black Mask's costume on Kato. In addition, it is interesting that the officers do not simply say that Shek looks like the Green Hornet, but specifically that he has become the Green Hornet. This also characterizes the aforementioned Kowloon thief and athletic competitors who call themselves the Green Hornet—in particular moments, they fully took on the Green Hornet identity. The frequency and ease with which Hong Kong audiences performed the Green Hornet across racial lines differs from how nonwhite fans are generally positioned relative to white characters. When discussing cosplay as performance, Nicolle Lamerichs writes that cosplayers tend to choose to play characters who match their identity, role, or physical attributes (2011). Ethnicity is frequently a factor in this assessment. In "Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending," Jenkins writes that "children of color often have to struggle for the right to play characters that are white in the original, often forced to play subordinate or marginalized roles" (2015). For *The*

Green Hornet, such a role would be the sidekick Kato, yet he is not named in Hong Kong popular practice and media. Kato's elision is not likely due to Hong Kong audiences forgetting which role Bruce Lee played, nor does it seem to be the result of audiences identifying with more powerful heroes over their sidekicks. What seems to have happened is that audiences implicitly acknowledged that Lee played Kato but over time substituted Kato for the Green Hornet, perhaps unconsciously.

[4.4] I argue that substituting Kato for the Green Hornet overcomes the fact that Kato is the Green Hornet's sidekick, but this process was also facilitated because Kato is the Green Hornet's sidekick. Two related factors contribute to this double articulation. First, the sidekick is a figure of partial inclusion in the narrative, as they are differentiated from their heroes by weaknesses yet also emulate their heroes to some degree. Second, one area where the sidekick tends to emulate their hero is their disguises. However, costuming conventions in the superhero genre favors iconicity rather than individuality, potentially counteracting markers of the sidekick's difference. Together, these two factors make the sidekick's subordination unstable. The sidekick's position is very similar to the partially reformed colonial subject in Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry. The colonial project seeks to reform colonial subjects according to the principles of Western civilization; however, it would disadvantage the colonizer if subjects were to be entirely reformed, since the colonized would be the same as the colonizers and thus entitled to the same privileges. This is one kind of threat that colonial subjects can present to colonizers. Colonizers defend against it by implementing partial reform (Bhabha 2004, 124), where colonial subjects are similar to the colonizers, but not quite the same—Bhabha points to colonial middlemen who are anglicized to work for the English as an example (125). While this partial reform is by design, it is still potentially subversive. Colonial subjects who bear only some of the colonizers' attributes can no longer be representatives of their supposed civilizing mission, and so this mission is revealed to be insincere. In addition, Bhabha argues that having partial attributes points to mimicry and not representation (128–29)—that is, partial and superficial imitation that does not reflect any cultural essence. This becomes subversive because bearing some attributes of Western civilization no longer reflects an essential right to power and authority on the part of the colonizers (129). Thus, mimicry has the potential to become mockery of colonial authority.

[4.5] In the superhero genre, Bhabha's partially reformed subject is the sidekick. The tendency to continuously differentiate them from the hero can be read as a way of managing their potential threat. Especially when the sidekick is a younger hero or a hero in training, the implication is that he will grow to be a hero, such as Robin becoming Nightwing; the threat is that the sidekick may grow to be the hero he works for and take that hero's place. Kato poses a similar threat, especially since Trendle, Striker, and other writers for *The Green Hornet* have, perhaps inadvertently, given him the tools to be the Green Hornet. Kato is not a sidekick like Robin, who is a sidekick because he is young and untrained. To be the Green Hornet's sidekick means that Kato must fight as effectively as the Green Hornet, have technical expertise to maintain the Green Hornet's equipment, and share the Green Hornet's dedication to justice. Thus, Kato's Asian ethnicity and the association of Asianess with servility are the most salient

criteria to justify his sidekick status. In general, by marking sidekicks with gender and race, which are seemingly insurmountable biological conditions, superhero narratives seem to succeed in safeguarding the authority of the hero. However, Hong Kong fans of *The Green Hornet* have solved this problem—not by making Kato white, but by making the Green Hornet Chinese.

[4.6] This maneuver seems simple but actually factors in what mimicry means for the superhero genre specifically. As Ellen Kirkpatrick writes, the superhero genre is particularly conducive to cosplay, since the concept of dual identities of many superheroes means that identity shifts are a part of the genre, and "changing the visibility of the body through costuming allows a different reading in identity, be that alter ego to superhero/villain or cosplayer to source character" (2015, ¶ 3.3). Kirkpatrick notes in passing that this kind of translation happens in superhero narratives as well, since superheroes are continuously revamped with different individuals inhabiting the heroic identity slightly differently. While she focuses on how a cosplayer's individuality can change the superhero they represent, the reverse is also true. As discussed previously, Coogan (2006) notes that a convention that defines the superhero genre is that the hero presents themselves with an iconic identity. Coogan also draws on Scott McCloud's discussion of icons to argue that iconicity also leads to simplification and abstraction. Thus, for superheroes, the identity shift in the superhero genre is not simply from one identity to another but often from an individual identity to a symbol or icon, and with it comes some loss of individuality. Coogan writes that the superhero persona usually has two components—the codename and the costume. Especially when the costume functions as a disguise, it further pushes iconicity and effaces individuality.

[4.7] This abstraction of identity inherent in much of superhero disguises also affects ethnicity. In shots of the Green Hornet and Kato as costumed vigilantes, it is not immediately obvious who is who. The domino masks, which are meant to hide individual identity, also serve to obscure ethnic identity. For the ethnically Asian Kato, hiding the area around his eyes also hides the privileged marker of Asian racialization, the eyes. Thus, Kato's hero image both literally and figuratively masks his Asianess. It is important to note that as the Green Hornet's sidekick, Kato is following the Green Hornet's costuming imperatives as a subordinate member of their crime-fighting duo—or, stated in another way, he is mimicking the Green Hornet's means of disguise. However, this mimicry has an effect of obscuring an identity marker that naturalizes his sidekick status and thus enables his image to become less racialized, and more iconic.

[4.8] Costuming does not only tone down Kato's ethnicity; it also tones down Britt Reid's ethnicity. Arguably, the one attribute that no colonial or subordinated racialized subject can have, even under complete reformation or cultural integration, is skin color and features associated with whiteness. This is also the reason that in the history of American racial formation, ethnicities once designated as nonwhite, such as Jewish and Irish, have gradually been counted as white, but Asians, Latinos, and blacks continue to be racialized despite socioeconomic gains (Omi and Winant 1994). In Bhabha's analysis, mimicry calls into question the equation between having Western cultural

attributes and an inherent right to power. If whiteness is associated with the right to power, then Reid's hero persona dilutes his whiteness. As a wealthy newspaper mogul, Britt Reid is an Anglo-American, but there is no ethnicity inherent in the Green Hornet, his superhero persona. Thus, being costumed vigilantes pushes both Kato and Reid toward ethnic neutrality and dilutes their difference.

[4.9] Similar to how partial reform undercuts the colonial project, including a character such as Kato opens *The Green Hornet* to a revisionist audience, who can actively fulfill the menace that Kato implies. Since the Green Hornet persona has no associated race, and Kato the sidekick is as capable as Reid, Kato is the natural successor to the Green Hornet persona, or Kato should have been the Green Hornet in the first place. Seeing a fellow Hong Konger—Bruce Lee—in the role of Kato was the final invitation Hong Kong fans needed to make this move. Thus, in Lam's *Green Hornet*, the previous Green Hornet is shown to be Lee in the role of Kato, and Dong, a peasant, is his successor.

[4.10] Finally, it is no accident that the fans and producers who took advantage of Kato's partial inclusion were the audience of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong of Bruce Lee's time was still a British colony, and the prospect of governance from the PRC was still relatively far off ([note 3](#)). In many ways, Hong Kong encapsulates Bhabha's colonial middlemen. In his discussion of the history of television in Hong Kong, Eric Kit-Wai Ma gives some background to the cultural environment: "The British government had always stressed the economic value of Hong Kong as a middleman in Sino-British trade. The colonial government did not want to produce colonial subjects loyal to the British government; it aimed at making a Hong Kong Chinese who was able to speak the language of the dual centers of China and Britain" (Ma 1999, 29). In addition, accounts of the cultural climate in Hong Kong suggest that rather than directly impose racial ideologies, British rule enforced them subtly. Rey Chow reflects on her education in 1970s Hong Kong, where Cantonese and Chinese languages were included in the curriculum, but "a good level of English was the key to future success" (2014, 44). Bruce Lee's own films speak to Hong Kong's decolonial preoccupation, and accounts from his family and friends report that when he lived in Hong Kong as a child, he used to get into fights with British schoolchildren for picking on Chinese students (Lee 1989).

[4.11] The British government adopted a relatively laissez-faire approach to Hong Kong media, and this resulted in a great influx of foreign media and with it, foreign ideology. A glance at newspaper advertisements for films of the 1960s shows American productions such as *Nobody's Perfect* (1968) and *The Green Berets* (1968), and the British production *The Face of Fu Manchu* (1965). I highlight these three films since they contain American or British representation of Asians according to varying degrees of racist stereotyping. It is true that Chinese media in Hong Kong flourished alongside imported media—Ma specifically argues that the cultural imperialism thesis did not fit Hong Kong well, since Chinese programs exhibited melodramas and kung fu genres that are quite culturally specific and local. However, because they were local, they were arguably ill-equipped to deal with the compounded American and British dissemination

of racial stereotypes on a global scale. The popularity of Bruce Lee's films in Hong Kong is accounted for significantly by his ability to blend kung fu tropes with a direct challenge to international racialized inequality, which was quite novel at the time. Although Kato is quite a servile character compared to Lee's film heroes, it seems that Hong Kong audiences first saw themselves in him, and Hong Kong fans were also uniquely positioned to notice and exploit the possibilities of Kato's partial inclusion as a racialized sidekick.

5. Conclusion: Transcultural poaching

[5.1] The maneuvers to make the Green Hornet Chinese also nuance theories regarding fan agency and transcultural fandom. Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto (2013) have proposed the concept of transcultural fandom instead of transnational fandom, as focusing on the nation-state can privilege national culture over all other kinds of culture and result in judgments of good or bad fans based on whether they align with or resist state cultural policies. Thinking about fandoms as transcultural enables scholars to consider fans as multiply situated by virtue of affinity to particular transcultural texts. In a recent essay, Chin and Morimoto broaden their earlier framework even more to argue that most fandoms are now transcultural, as increased global flows of media and fandom presence online make contact between different fan cultures and subject positions unavoidable. They also place more emphasis on power, writing that in conceptualizing fandoms as groups of homogeneous affinity, "we lose sight of the disparities and disjunctions that may characterize transcultural interactions within fandoms" (Morimoto and Chin 2018, 174). This leads the authors to define transcultural fandom according to Mary Louise Pratt's idea of contact zones, with which cultures negotiate and grapple in the context of power asymmetries (Morimoto and Chin 2018).

[5.2] Chin and Morimoto do not return to the nation-state, understandably to avoid reifying it as the guarantor or withholder of power. Indeed, especially with their focus on online fandoms, other axes of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality potentially play a greater role in fandom experience and interaction. However, it would be remiss to ignore how racial ideologies often define national culture and state policies, and this affects both media content and fan strategies. The original *Green Hornet*, for example, exemplifies racializations of Asians that were particular to the United States. Similarly, while a series of decisions brought the Green Hornet to Hong Kong, the majority of audiences there would not leave Hong Kong or be able to speak back to William Dozier and Greenway Productions and had to summon highly local responses to grapple with the series and its foreign ideologies.

[5.3] As a result of power disparities, local responses on the part of Hong Kong fans to American racial construction in *The Green Hornet* also comprise textual poaching (Jenkins 1992). Texts and their producers impose dominant interpretations on audiences, but audiences may use elements from the text in unintended ways to build their own interpretations and creative work. When Jenkins discussed this concept, he did not look at transcultural fandom or racial ideology in particular. However, as the

Hong Kong fandom around *The Green Hornet* demonstrates, fans of color who cannot engage in dialogue with media production centers have to poach from imported texts to work against racist ideologies—to combine scholarship on textual poaching and transcultural fandom, we can call this transcultural poaching. In the case of *The Green Hornet*, transcultural poaching took advantage of superhero genre conventions and Kato's partial inclusion as an Asian character to make him a local Hong Kong hero. In comparison, it took until 2014 for Marvel to publish comics where Sam Wilson/the Falcon, long-time sidekick to Captain America, takes on the role of Captain America. With a great deal of recent controversy over nonwhite characters stepping into superhero roles, we should not overlook how Hong Kong fans ushered Kato into the role of the Green Hornet, perhaps before his time.

6. Notes

1. The timing and nature of shifts in Kato's ethnicity often reflected the prevailing contemporary attitudes that the United States held toward various Asian countries. For example, although he was conceptualized as Japanese, during World War II the radio program consciously emphasized Kato's Filipino identity (Grams and Salomonson 2010). In the two Universal Pictures film serials produced in the 1940s, Kato's ethnicity was changed to Korean.
2. These films are not first and foremost fan works, since they are commercially produced films with input from many parties. However, fandom studies can be used as a general reading strategy when we acknowledge how both canon or commercial media and fan works are intertextually linked and that fannish behaviors can exist in a variety of contexts. While media convergence and digital fandom have facilitated the legitimization of fan works and derivation in the cultural industries, these phenomena are not limited to the last couple of decades. Anne Jamison (2013) notes that much of postmodern literature responds to previous literary texts or extends them in new directions, and such derivations enable these texts to be read as fan works. In addition, Kristina Busse's distinction between fannish identity and fannish behavior (2009) is also useful here. Fan behaviors, such as affective investment and derivation, can be found in activities and communities that are not traditionally considered fandoms. These nuances mean that in addition to a topic of research, fandom studies offer a methodology with which scholars can look for traces of fan investments in a wide range of texts and practices. This approach also has the advantage of enabling fandom research on times and places where the concept of the contemporary fan as a particular kind of mass media audience did not or does not exist. This is certainly a problem for research on popular culture in 1960s Hong Kong, especially prior to Bruce Lee's fame. Thus, in this article I use secondary sources to infer fan motivations and strategies.
3. *Black Mask* does seem to display some anxiety regarding the impending handover. It was based on a Hong Kong comic book that did not feature government testing in the protagonist's backstory, and the geopolitical backdrop of the stories is also unclear. On the other hand, the film opens with an explanation that the government testing took

place "in a certain country up north," most likely referring to the PRC, possibly encapsulating an anxiety regarding how socially engineered, "unnatural" people from a Communist regime may affect Hong Kong.

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SYMPOSIUM

Transformative racism: The black body in fan works

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[0.1] Abstract—This article examines the potential pitfalls with the depiction of black bodies in transformative fan works that do not actively consider and account for the history of racism directed toward black bodies in American mass media texts.

[0.2] Keywords—Antiblackness; Media history; Race

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[0.3] The most dangerous place for black people to live is in white people's imagination.

—D. L. Hughley

I. Introduction

[1.1] If the root of American media fandom and therefore Western fan studies is the archive from which fan texts and texts about fan texts blossom, then that root is planted deeply in a generational oppression that neither fandom nor fan studies have sufficiently reflected upon. By now, the history of the investment of the media cultures of the United States in the dehumanization and destruction of blackness should be common knowledge.

[1.2] From the 1840s to the 1870s, blackface minstrelsy was the country's most

popular medium (Springhall 2008, 57). The practice, which was essentially white men engaging in a racist and reductive cosplay of the black body, was also often a justification for black enslavement. D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), considered to be the first Hollywood blockbuster, is one part Confederate apologetic and one part propaganda piece, justifying lynching and the set of racist pogroms that would come to be known as Jim Crow. *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS/NBC, 1928–60) was a long-running hit radio program in which two white actors portrayed, or misportrayed, two black characters in a style that evoked the then-defunct blackface minstrelsy era. The radio program then moved to television, where it had a short-lived but commercially successful run (CBS, 1951–53), with black actors taking over the roles, before being canceled thanks to protests by the NAACP.

[1.3] After the *Amos 'n' Andy* debacle, and because of the combined racist attitudes of television and movie producers and the American public, black filmic and televisual depictions were scarce throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In those rare moments of inclusion, black characters occupied peripheral spaces where white spectators could safely ignore them if they so desired. And this is exactly what fandom and fan studies have done.

[1.4] Fan studies' denial of the significance of race in media began with John Fiske's (1992) now infamous overt refusal to analyze race because, according to him, he could not find any studies on nonwhite fandoms. This same refusal continued for decades without any thorough engagement to the contrary. Recently, Kristen J. Warner (2015), Rebecca Wanzo (2015), Rukmini Pande (2018), and Mel Stanfill (2018) have done exemplary work in forcing fandom and fan studies to confront its erasure of black fans, announcing its ignorance of the genealogy of black acafandom, challenging the belief that fandom is a utopic or even positive space in relationship to identity, and bringing to the fore fandom and fan studies' obsessive investment in whiteness. Similarly, embedded within the imagistic manifestation of the black body is the presumption that any black body stands in for all black bodies and that black bodies can be bartered, sold, and traded.

[1.5] Consider this notion in relationship to potential fan works, particularly Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's categorization, following *obsession_inc*, of fan activity as affirmative and/or transformative. According to Busse and Hellekson, affirmative fans "collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique" that text in such a way that it affirms the text's obvious ideological position (2014, 3–4). In contrast, transformative fans "take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artwork, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take" (4). Of course, we know that affirmative fans can and do challenge a text's ideology when it disagrees with their own and that even the categorization of affirmative and transformative is not a true binary. Rather they are overlapping and at times intertwined modes of engagement that could either affirm or transform a text's canonical and ideological framing. Still, Busse and Hellekson, like many fan studies scholars to date, view the ability of the fan to wrestle control away from corporate media as an emancipatory move in which the participant-

consumer challenges the authority of the regressive content creator and manufacturer. In most instances this might very well be true; however, what is at stake when fans transform rather than affirm a mediated corpus is the control and ownership over canon.

[1.6] This is not to say that fans who engage in transformative works are claiming sole ownership over a text, but they are inherently claiming a form of authority; nor am I implying that all fans are white or that only white fans can replicate antiblackness in their transformative works. Instead, I posit that when fan texts are heavily informed by black bodies, regardless of the racial identity of their creators, the concepts of ownership and authority are imbricated with the history of racist representations from the blackface minstrel shows to the continued use of images that invoke enslaved people in contemporary advertisements, such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. There are few consequences when fans assert this authority over white mediated bodies, at least in the abstract. However, when fans are either unaware of or unsympathetic to the histories of oppression that black people have experienced and how those histories have constructed a Western visual regime that relies upon the objectification of the black body in order to further materialize white supremacy, the transformative works that those fans produce will inevitably take part in the systemic order that has extended what Saidiya Hartman (1997) calls the afterlife of slavery.

2. The conundrum of representation

[2.1] This article seeks to build on the work of the previously mentioned scholars by posing a question: What if, rather than treating race and in particular blackness as the third rail, fandom centered blackness and black bodies in its transformative works? On the surface, the answer to this question seems to bend a little toward the utopic. For black fans and those who want to see fandom address the historic erasure of black characters and black texts through inclusion, this would appear to be a dream come true. I argue the opposite.

[2.2] For decades, black thinkers and critics have argued over whether it was better to have no representation or poor representation. In the late 1950s, Hollywood studios started to minimally address the overwhelming whiteness of their leading men by making films that featured or starred Sidney Poitier. And while Poitier is largely regarded as a trendsetter and legendary actor, among some black critics and black film scholars he, or at least the characters he played, are thought of as sexless, sycophantic characters who exist largely to appease and please white audiences. The same has been said about Eddie Murphy, Bill Cosby, Will Smith, and other black stars who, it can be argued, sold their soul and their blackness for temporary white acclaim.

[2.3] On the other side of the coin, blaxploitation cinema was originally thought to be a revolutionary genre that directly countered Poitier's phallically challenged black men. Except, as many critics and scholars have pointed out, blaxploitation films eventually rendered black life into white-produced hyperviolent and overly sexualized spectacles of flesh. Historically, black people have been denied access to representations that

depict their basic humanity without having to first make affordances to the white gaze. Instead, black people and black bodies have been occupied and utilized as objects for the procreation of white supremacy. There is no reason to suggest that, left to its own devices, fandom would do anything differently, particularly when we consider the ongoing primacy of slavery as a formative framework of blackness.

3. Mediated black representations in the afterlife of slavery

[3.1] Saidiya Hartman's 1997 foundational text *Scenes of Subjection* questions the existence of the black subject when factored through the long and ongoing afterlife of slavery. For Hartman, and for other thinkers who consider themselves Afro-pessimists, the ontological nature of blackness itself is slavery because the conditions that both necessitated the creation of blackness and mired black people in a seemingly never-ending rubric of oppression have not been alleviated.

[3.2] From this perspective, black enslavement did not truly end with emancipation but instead shifted and extended in material, cultural, and visual forms throughout the nineteenth century and into the present. As Hartman herself states, "To be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another" (1997, 3). She goes on to claim, "This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6). The afterlife of slavery extends this brutality to the present-day material conditions of black life in part through a mediated American culture that has historically been invested in maintaining white supremacy vis-à-vis the rendering of the image of the black body into violent spectacles and dehumanizing caricatures.

[3.3] What is at stake in Hartman's work is not only a topography of black oppression but also a philosophical unmooring of the notion of black subjectivity. The mediated ramifications of the afterlife of slavery are nearly as profound as the material conditions. This history complicates the fan studies narrative that fans' disruption of the top-down narrative of media production and consumption by transforming a text in ways that challenge the text's previous ideological framing as inherently emancipatory. As noted earlier, blackface minstrel performances, Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, and other works illustrate both the various visual methodologies employed to instantiate white supremacist dominance over black objects and the fact that black bodies are always already fandomized.

4. The case of Antoine Dodson

[4.1] For instance, in 2010, Hunstville, Alabama native Antoine Dodson was interviewed on a local NBC affiliate after an attempted rape of his sister Kelly in the home the two shared. In the interview, Dodson, who is black, speaks in a Southern

accent and dialect. Dodson's interview spread across the internet, going viral a few days after it first aired. I argue the reason why the video of the interview became so popular is that people in the United States are accustomed to seeing black cultural performance as a form of entertainment, even when it is not explicitly intended to be entertaining.

[4.2] Dodson's performance—and Dodson himself—were turned into spectacles simply by existing within a mediated culture in which any recorded act can be consumed as an act of entertainment. Not only did Dodson's interview proliferate rapidly across the internet, fans of the video also created various remixes and other transformative works. The most popular of these works was the Gregory Brothers' song "Bed Intruder." The song ended up on the Billboard Top 100 chart, and its music video has been watched an astounding 141,000,000 times. What the interview and the remixed transformative works that were inspired by the interview reveal is that if anything can be consumed as entertainment, then anything can be fandomized. And while this would appear to be a trait of contemporary digital culture, as the continued legacy of blackface minstrelsy tells us, black people have always been vulnerable to this process.

[4.3] The fascination with Dodson's interview, and the subsequent works created from the video of the interview, centered on Dodson's iteration of black vernacular English and his performative black body. In one of the most famous and quoted lines from the interview and the song, Dodson states: "Hide yo kids, hide yo wife," while wagging his head back and forth. It is Dodson's unwitting callback to the earliest instantiation of the black body in American popular culture—blackface minstrelsy performances—that seemingly activated an American viewing public that often finds pleasure and joy in the more outlandish forms of black cultural performance, regardless of their authenticity.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] While it is doubtful, and irrelevant, that the Gregory Brothers meant to recreate a history of antiblackness and white supremacist logic, the fact remains that they were guilty of it nonetheless because of either their ignorance of or disinterest toward the idiosyncrasies inherently involved with the representation of blackness. Still, the video's overwhelming popularity makes everyone who shared and bought the video and song complicit on some level. The songs and videos of Dodson that were made by internet content creators reveal two important points about the status of the black image and the way representations of the black body have been consumed.

[5.2] The first is that the ontological status of the visual black body is in no way removed from the ontological status of its referent. Which is to say, borrowing again from Saidiya Hartman, that the primary ideological condition of images of the black body is one of accumulation and fungibility. The second point is one that has always been true but that the internal logic and methodologies of fandom culture only make clearer, particularly in the digital age: for those who both create and consume content,

there exists the capacity to occupy the black body, to imbue it and embody it with deeply rooted historic aggressions that reify the systemic and institutional oppressions found in the DNA of the United States. In order to avoid this reification, creators must make a deliberate and concerted effort to use antiracist and decolonial methodologies. Simply wanting to be inclusive is not enough; it has never been enough.

[5.3] Historically, black people have had limited control over how their imagistic and textualized bodies are encoded with meaning in mass media culture. Transformative fan works of the black body can lead to a further destabilization of the authority that black people have fought so hard to obtain. At best, this means that predominantly black fans will have to spend time and emotional labor in correcting those fans who are reproducing white supremacist logics without intending to. At worst, it leads to a violent participatory culture in which the images of the black body are used either as a justification to terrorize or as the terror itself. Of course, as Rukmini Pande (2018) has pointed out, this is a similar argument that racist fans have used to deflect from their racism. I am not suggesting that the racism of white fans and white fan studies scholars who have ignored black characters and black texts should be disregarded. I am, however, suggesting that when we call for greater inclusion within fan spaces, we must be careful what we are asking for, and from whom we are asking it.

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SYMPOSIUM

Latina fans agitate respectability: Rethinking antifans and antifandom

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[0.1] Abstract—This piece proposes that the fields of ethnic studies, fat studies, and sexuality studies (with a focus on racialized sexualities) can help us think about antifans and antifandom from a different lens. I utilize identity hermeneutics to analyze some of my own fan sites that center fat women of color, nonnormative sexualities, and Latina deviance. I offer the heuristic of agitation and agitated discourse to think through the hater (antifan) comments that Latinas encounter online about their fat racialized flesh.

[0.2] Keywords—Ethnic studies; Fan studies; Fat studies; Porn studies; Racialized sexuality

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[0.3] For the fan, popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps. Within these *mattering maps*, investments are enabled which empower individuals in a variety of ways. They may construct relatively stable moments of identity, or they may identify places which, because they matter, take on an authority of their own...By making certain things or practices matter, the fan "authorizes" them to speak for him or her, not only as a spokesperson but also as surrogate voices (as when we sing along to popular songs).

—Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective

I. Introduction

[1.1] What happens when your racialized fan investments, the mattering maps that you value, that empower you, and that shape your identity, are often under attack, judged, devalued, policed, or viewed as unproductive and deviant? What happens when your surrogate voice, the singer, porn star, or artist of whom you are a fan, is constantly attacked for her sexual looseness, drunkenness, fatness, and "shameless promotion of single parenthood" (Cohen 2010, 58)? What happens when this star dies and your posthumous consumption of her, through listening to her music, performing her, watching her on TV, is the deviant trace that keeps her alive and interpellates you into her deviancy?

[1.2] As an acafan of music, porn, burlesque, and many more raunchy subcultures, I constantly ponder these questions because the racialized mattering maps that I analyze are often attacked by antifans for agitating respectability politics. The racialized and working-class fan engagements that I write about are usually pathologized, viewed as broken, disgusting, problematic, and therefore politically valueless. Thus, a framework of antifandom is very useful to understanding the reasons for these agitations. In my (2016) research on Jenni Rivera's fandom and antifandom, I analyze why her haters attack her and how her fans become interpellated in these attacks. In my (2018) research on Gordibuenas and Latina BBW (big beautiful women) porn stars, I use a similar methodology and pay attention to why antifans attack these women's fat bodies. In both of my research sites, antifans identify the porn stars' fat bodies as a reason for their troll comments. In this paper, I elaborate briefly on how I engage antifandom and why I think the fields of ethnic studies, fat studies, and sexuality studies have a lot to offer fan studies, particularly our theorization of antifandom. I propose the heuristic of agitation and agitated responses as a way to critically analyze troll comments by antifans.

[1.3] Rebecca Wanzo's (2015) theory of identity hermeneutics has been influential to my theorization of agitated responses and my own remapping of the field of fan studies. In her groundbreaking article, Wanzo argues that there is a rich history of Black fan criticism and acafandom that is "largely invisible in some of the most cited works in American fan studies" (§ 1.2). Wanzo believes that one of the reasons why race is neglected in fan studies is that it challenges some claims and desires. For Wanzo, Gerald Early's (1988) work on sports, Jacqueline Bobo's (1995) work on culture, Robin R. Means Coleman's (1998) research on comedy, Jefferey A. Brown's (2000) work on superheroes, and Tricia Rose's (1994) and Imani Perry's (2004) work on hip-hop both supplement and obfuscate key methods, theories, and arguments in the field of fan studies. As such, Wanzo argues, fan studies scholars need to incorporate an identity hermeneutics approach, which places a particular identity—in this case, African American identity—at the center of reading or interpretative practices.

[1.4] Since my focus is Latina women fans, I explore the politics of excessiveness that the literature of Latina sexuality also offers fan studies. This literature makes visible that, akin to Black women, Latinas are "discursively constructed as always completely other to Western normativity" (Wanzo 2015, ¶ 2.5). Bridging ethnic studies and fan studies allows me to argue that fandom and antifandom toward Latina music celebrities and fans cannot be separated from the process of racialization in which they have been inscribed by histories of colonialism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments. Thus, centering Latina fans forces us to acknowledge the "dialectical relationship to normativity" (¶ 2.4) heretofore unacknowledged by fan studies—but which fan studies can no longer ignore.

2. The antifan in literature

[2.1] Jonathan Gray (2003) argues that we have to analyze antifans and nonfans in order to understand the interaction of media and fan texts. Gray compares texts to atoms: just as atoms are always colliding and intermingling, texts are always "intersected and interrupted by dense networks of intertextuality" (68). At the center of an atom exists a "stable nucleus," which Gray describes as the text and the "closer reader" (69). In this analogy, the fan is the proton for its "positive charge" and the antifan is in the electron cloud for strongly disliking "a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (71). Gray states that critics assume that antifans make poor informants because they know little about the text and do not watch it or listen to it. However, Gray insists that antifans are important to study because they "must find cause for their dislike in something" (71).

[2.2] In popular music studies, Liz Giufree (2014) investigates three types of antifandom: industrial, creative/artistic, and personal. Personal antifandom is similar to Gray's (2003) framework, where antifans create their own dislike for a text, artist, or genre. Industrial antifandom acknowledges that the infrastructure of popular music has created the antifan for marketing purposes. An example of an artist who used antifandom as a marketing tool was Elvis Presley, whose manager, Colonel Tom Parker, sold both "I love Elvis" and "I hate Elvis" badges. Another example of this type of antifandom is the "perceived competition between bands" who are "positioned as the direct antithesis of one another" (Giufree 2014, 55). Creative antifandom includes attacks against song lyrics or music videos founded on "a clear ideological rejection of the music and artists" (56). In her study of reggaeton music, Michelle Rivera notes that the antireggaeton moment is caused by "generational differences in forging distinctive tastes in music" (2011, 288). Rivera argues that Herbert Gans's concept of taste culture, particularly the power struggle between high and low culture, expands to the study of popular music because "standards of high and low tastes are often debated" in the antireggaeton blogsites that she studies (292). Moreover, Rivera shows how the visual culture of antifans is gendered. For instance, one of the antireggaeton images that she analyzes is directed against *el perreo* dance, associating it with "ignorance, foolishness, and sexual depravity" (294). Rivera underscores how the woman who is *perriando* "is read as submissive and sexually available, creating discourse which also polices female

sexuality" (295). Because *perriando* has created a moral panic relating to female sexuality, "the discourse of reggaeton as corrupting influence particularly targets women within a punitive patriarchal narrative about sexuality and decency in public spaces" (295). Rivera's focus on the targeting of female sexuality is relevant for my work on antifans because it shows that antifandom is not only about the music but also about dancers' bodies, flesh, and deviant acts. Following Raymond Williams's (1982) and Mark Duffett's (2013) method of keywording as a heuristic device, in the rest of this paper, I examine antifandom through what I call the agitations of antifans and their agitated responses.

3. Haters get agitated: Using the heuristic of agitation to rethink antifandom

[3.1] *Merriam-Webster* defines *to agitate* as a feeling of disturbance. The vernacular usage of this term relates agitation to anger. While in most contexts, the word *agitate* carries a negative connotation, in ethnic studies, it often carries a positive connotation, as in, "You agitate the status quo." As such, Jenni Rivera, April Flores, Sofia Rose, and their fans can be considered to agitate, while those who police their so-called transgressions get agitated. What I find intriguing is why the antifandom for these women is not only about their cultural texts but also about their own and their fans' bodies, ontologies, and existences. While the phrase *agitated responses* refers to the hater comments that antifans (or nonfans) make toward these artists and their fans, agitation is the carnal disgust that antifans display when they police the behavior of fat sex-positive women and their fans. Agitation is the disaffection—the visceral aggression or enmity—that people who hate these artists express when they write, say, or gesture agitated responses toward the artists. Of course, my own positionality as a fat Latina acafan is central to my theorization of this heuristic because I am aware of the high political stakes here. I am also aware of the epistemic violence that emerges when we do not take this type of antifandom seriously, and I wish to identify it as an act of hate discourse that is hypervisible to fat racialized subcultures.

[3.2] My research is identifying a pattern regarding who receives these agitated responses: queer fat women of color. Let's take, for instance, Latina BBW porn star April Flores, who on November 21, 2017, posted two photos on Instagram (@theaprilflores) responding to the agitated responses that she was receiving calling her disgusting. Her post said,

[3.3] I just had to block users & delete comments from several people for describing me as "disgusting" & other terms that were meant to be hurtful. This is not new territory for me & it actually doesn't hurt. It does however, validate the IMPORTANCE of my work & REPRESENTATION. These people give me strength and motivate me to keep putting my FAT, NAKED, SEXUAL self out there! To all my fellow fats doing the work, THANK You! I know dealing with these fools isn't always easy, but our work matters to so

many people!

[3.4] Her post shows that fat racialized sexuality is viewed as a threat to these antifans because it disrupts ideologies of normative sexuality. As Flores states in *Fat Girl* (2013), fat women are not widely considered to be beautiful and sexy. Therefore, the agitation here is that fat, sex-positive women are feeling themselves, as the Black fat-positive singer Lizzo (2016) states in "Scuse Me": "I don't see nobody else/"Scuse me while I feel myself/"Scuse me while I feel myself."

[3.5] The term *agitated response* acknowledges that antifandom discourse is not just about the text itself; for instance, in Flores's porn movies or erotic photography, her flesh, ontology, and fatness are at the core of her cultural production, so they have to be analyzed too. Flores's caption for the same 2017 Instagram post states, "I choose to draw strength from the haters." The additional affective labor that Flores has to negotiate to process these agitated responses by haters is a component of why her fans follow her.

[3.6] In my ethnographic work, I have heard comments like, "Well, the cultural business lends itself to critique; you have to put up with it," or, "These responses are not unique to just fat women." I disagree. While it is true that structures of misogyny warrant attacks on women in general, an identity hermeneutics lens elucidates the added layer of racialized fatness as a factor that antifans use freely to attack the female artists and fans with whom I work. Thus, rather than suggesting that we use one model for explaining agitated responses, I agree with Wanzo (2015) that if we move to a framework of identity hermeneutics, each situation will require its own theoretical lens. In my work, agitation results from various factors: from what Jillian Hernandez calls "sexual-aesthetic excess" (2009), what Deborah Vargas calls "suciedad" (2014), what José Esteban Muñoz calls "chusmeria" (1999), or what I have identified as "chuntiness/chunteria" (Garcia-Hernandez, forthcoming) and "pirujeria" and their "intoxicating pleasures" (Garcia-Hernandez, 2016). My intervention focuses on methodology—I ask fan studies scholars to engage with corporality in our theorizations of antifandom. The atom approach is useful to view the intertextuality of fandom, but we need to move on to think about how centering the flesh—race, fatness, class, gender, sexuality—offers new insights into thinking of antifans and antifandom as descending from historical violence, racism, fat phobia, and disgust toward working-class women of color and queer communities. This requires a different analogy for both fans/antifans and fandom/antifandom, one that takes into account the following: historically and structurally racialized stars have constantly been viewed as agitators of morality and deviancy; fans of color agitate our fields, and we need to listen to them; antifans get agitated and post agitated responses that we must take seriously because they show us that their agitations are not just a distinction of taste; and last, as acafans of color, we must continue to agitate from below.

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SYMPOSIUM

Race, storying, and restorying: What can we learn from Black fans?

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[0.1] Abstract—Tracing storytelling traditions from historic roots within Black cultures to contemporary fandom, this essay argues for more research and critique on the ways that today's Black fans engage in restorying, with implications for reader response theory, research in digital literacies, and Black studies.

[0.2] Keywords—*Black Panther*; Fantasy; Race; Science fiction; Star Trek

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I. Introduction

[1.1] Rebecca Wanzo argues powerfully for a rearticulation of histories of contemporary fan communities and cultures by asking that scholars acknowledge decades of Black scholarship in popular culture.

[1.2] One group of scholars who often could be categorized as acafans but who do not claim the name are many black scholars of popular culture. A number of scholars who study black popular culture have, for all intents and

purposes, been acafans, with an intimate knowledge of the black community that has often been essential in fields where black histories have not been addressed. A rich critical history of black fans and black acafandom exists, although the latter is never described as such...these works, produced by fans of their subjects or about African American audiences, as well as discussions of race, are largely invisible in some of the most cited works in American fan studies. Even African American scholars trained in film and television studies are often excluded from scholarship about fandom; their absence from many studies cannot thus be solely attributed to disciplinary divides. (2015, ¶1.2)

[1.3] We take up Wanzo's call to contribute to "a new genealogy of fan studies...that includes different kinds of primary and secondary texts that have explored responses of black fans" (2015, ¶0.1). Indeed, the experiences of Black fans since 2000 have been illustrative of the kinds of critical race counterstorying that Black people and other peoples of color have engaged in for centuries, with Black fan and audience responses to popular culture in the United States predating the contemporary media cultures that gave rise to what we think of as fandom.

[1.4] In our 2016 *Harvard Educational Review* article, we focused on one form of critical race counterstorying, bringing our observations of racebending in fan cultures to bear on conversations about reader response and transactional theory in our own fields of reading, literacy, and English education. In it, we wrote, "We are particularly interested in how young people who do not see themselves reflected in dominant narratives engage in interpretive struggles, especially when many have access now to a wide variety of tools and spaces that invite them to create their own textual representations and to push back against dominant perspectives" (316). While we believe that this kind of push back has happened throughout human history in response to narratives that excluded some and not others, we also believe that the same new media technologies that led to the rise of fan cultures have also afforded new ways for participants to use digital tools to read and write themselves into existence, then broadly disseminate those new narratives to the entire world. Following Wanzo, we suggest that a genealogical approach to understanding how young people write themselves in to narratives also operates as a way of writing people of color in to the metanarratives of fan culture.

[1.5] In this Symposium essay, we briefly trace storying traditions from historic roots within Black cultures to their roles in contemporary narrative landscapes. From there, we briefly explore a few of the ways that today's Black fans are using fan fiction, fan meta, and fan art to engage in restorying, connecting this to reader response theory and research in digital literacies. We conclude by calling for more theory, criticism, and research in this area.

2. From storying to restorying: Black fan work in

historical context

[2.1] In his book *The Grey Album*, visionary poet and Schomburg Center director Kevin Young whimsically describes storying as "animal tales; the spirituals as codes for runaway slaves; runaway slaves themselves; maroons; the blues code of life, tragic and comic, 'laughing to keep from crying'; nothing but a good man feeling bad; nothing but a bad woman feeling good" (2012, 3). He then quotes Sojourner Truth: "Sell the Shadow to support the Substance," and notes, "The lost shadow book is the book that Blackness writes every day. The book that memory, time, accident, and the more active forms of oppression prevent from being read" (14). Yet amid this persistent oppression, there is potential for new narratives: "The spaces between performance and pain, between blackness as a problem and a possibility, illuminate the storying tradition... Storying describes the way in which black writers have forged their own traditions, their own identities, even their own freedom" (67).

[2.2] Traditions of Black storying extend deep into the African past, predating the Middle Passage, yet the Door of No Return changed the tenor of Black Diasporic narrative (Brand 2012). While a historical feature of the Maison des Esclaves in Gorée Island, Senegal, the Door of No Return as a metaphor is described by Dionne Brand as "that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings" (5). Thus, Black stories became irrevocably entangled with Black embodiment. The Black presence in the United States came to define the project of the new nation-state, as Toni Morrison reminded us more than a quarter century ago in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). Indeed, what Morrison calls the "abiding, signing Africanist presence" in US letters is in itself a multitude of stories, emerging as Black storytellers found new words to share their lived experiences, imbued with memories and rememories, imagining new worlds.

[2.3] Albeit absolutely influential to popular cultures in the United States and beyond, the Black storying tradition has been suppressed over time, from Hollywood to children's literature (Smith et al. 2015; Tyner 2018). This suppression was even noted in one of the most enduring science fiction franchises of all time—Star Trek. andré m. carrington's *Speculative Blackness* provides insight into the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–99) episode "Far Beyond the Stars" (6.13), in which Star Trek's first Black protagonist, the newly promoted Captain Benjamin Sisko (played magnificently by Avery Brooks), falls into a reverie where he and his space station crew have become a pulp science fiction magazine staff in 1950s New York City.

[2.4] During the course of the episode, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* viewers follow the journey of hopeful writer Benny Russell, who writes a story titled "Deep Space Nine," complete with a pencil illustration of the iconic late-twenty-fourth-century space station. carrington argues that "casting Avery Brooks in stark relief against the trenchant White supremacy of the mid-twentieth-century United States, the episode [raises]

troubling questions about the inspirational rhetoric of science fiction—and *Star Trek* in particular—by situating the dynamics of racial conflict squarely within the history of the genre" (carrington 2016, 159). Of course, Russell's story is rejected, signaling the real-world astronomical odds of Black writers of short speculative fiction becoming published (Kane 2017). Even though Black authors of novel-length science fiction and fantasy—Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Tananarive Due, N. K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor—have won the highest honors in the field, as have notable Black comics creators like Dwayne McDuffie, Christopher Priest, and Nilah Magruder, with few exceptions, Black storying remains peripheral to most canons that are foundational to contemporary fan culture. Thus, it makes sense that in Steven Barnes's novelization of "Far Beyond the Stars," as carrington observes, Benny Russell is situated "along an infinite string of Bennys whose experiences Russell understands as his own" (189), signifying the episode's resonance beyond the world of *Deep Space Nine* or even *Star Trek*, and tying it into the rich Black tradition of the shadow book—and storying.

[2.5] "Far Beyond the Stars" frequently appears on lists of best *Star Trek* episodes for good reason. Here, we use it to mark that this suppression of storying led to a landscape of restorying that predates today's science fiction and fantasy. Such efforts to restory narratives that have excluded and silenced Black voices have a long history, joining centuries of work by people from nondominant groups to make their humanity legible through counterstories. These counterstorying practices have always embraced technologies for dissemination and collaboration. Just as publications from David Walker's 1829 *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* to the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement on Black feminist organizing used the affordances of the printing press to challenge privilege, supremacy, and institutional power, the mass leveraging of social media has led scholars, activists, artists, and writers of all ages to tell powerful stories that reframe the dominant narratives about Black lives. Perhaps the most seismic example of these restorying efforts in recent years has been the Black Lives Matter movement, a global political project to affirm Black people's humanity that is rooted in the herstories of three radical Black women organizers.

[2.6] Tracing these historical antecedents of restorying is important for understanding how stories are told, shared, and revised in relation to metanarratives about whose stories matter. Today's young people, particularly young people of color, are engaging in fan practices that position them at the center of their literate worlds, as they agentively create counterstories that assert, *I exist, I matter, and I am here*. A central locus for this work is in fan communities online.

3. Radical reader response: How Black fans are restorying

[3.1] In our work on restorying, we have been particularly concerned with how relationships among readers, writers, and texts are being transformed in relation to new tools and platforms. We suggest that these relationships are characterized by a struggle

over meaning, as young people who are not represented in dominant narratives push back through new media counterstorying practices. Our position on digital-age reader response not only theorizes reader-writer transactions as part of a dynamic and fluid relationship (Rosenblatt 1985) but also places identity at the very center of all interpretive acts. Digital media tools make possible new forms of representation and new pathways of circulation, inviting people into those sites of struggle over whose stories matter.

[3.2] If social media transformed the ways that teen audiences were able to interact, then Black teens, youth, and young adults both transformed and were transformed by the social media age. By 2015, according to Pew's survey on teen internet and social media use, "African-American teens (were) the most likely of any group of teens to have a smartphone, with 85% having access to one, compared with 71% of both white and Hispanic teens." Additionally, "African-American and Hispanic youth report(ed) more frequent internet use than white teens. Among African-American teens, 34% reported going online 'almost constantly' as do 32% of Hispanic teens, while 19% of white teens said they go online that often." Discourses about digital divides do little to describe the zeitgeist of our era: Black youth and young adults drive a disproportionate number of conversations on social media. The social phenomenon of Black Twitter, Black children and teens joyfully declaring "do it for the Vine!," the circulation of Black bodies as visual humor across platforms via GIF memes, and the rise of Black digital activism dominated social media platforms through the 2010s (Chow 2016; Clark 2015; Jackson 2017).

[3.3] The 2010s marked the concomitant rise of Black girls and women using social media to connect with other fans, advocate for more and better representation, and even create their own alternatives to popular culture. After the explosion of the RaceFail controversies of 2009 at the end of the previous decade, sites like Black Girl Nerds (founded in 2011), Graveyard Shift Sisters (founded in 2013), and others helped fans find each other across fandoms and created visibility and awareness about the plight of Black girl and woman characters in books, television shows, and movies. By 2015, periodicals like *Black Enterprise* were noting the power of Black girls and women in fandom (Evans and Darling 2015). They were among the first media outlets to acknowledge rising audience investments in characters like those from Shonda Rhimes's popular #TGIT lineup of shows like *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–), *Scandal* (2012–18), and *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014–); CW shows like *The Flash* (2014–); and cable shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011–) and *The Walking Dead* (2010–). Much like other fans, Black women and teen girls used social media tools like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram to talk about their favorite shows. They also used social media to engage in civic action and social justice activism (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2017).

[3.4] Moreover, young readers are choosing to restory characters from popular narratives as mirrors of their own experiences. After a viral 2015 BuzzFeed article by Alanna Bennett (<https://www.buzzfeed.com/alannabennett/what-a-racebent-hermione-granger-really-represen-d2yp>) was shared among Harry Potter fans online, a new social

media movement formed that insisted that Hermione's description in the popular novels meant she was really Black.

[3.5] One author of a viral "Hermione is Black" post, Breianna Harvey, talked with us about growing up with the Harry Potter series as a child and reading the uberpopular girl protagonist of the series as a mirror of the self:

[3.6] Prior to Tumblr, I had thought Hermione was like me and [the film] was my first experience at being upset with deviations from the book, specifically casting. But like many other Black girls in my situation, I kept my mouth shut. It wasn't until Tumblr that I started to speak up about it. I saw drawings of Hermione...where the artists would subconsciously draw Hermione darker than everyone else. Then my friend started posting fancasts of [multiracial Welsh actress] Jessica Sula as Hermione and I really loved it. Then I started to see fanart where she was darker than Jessica and followers were engaging in conversation with me about how much a Black Hermione would make sense along with speculation of her origins. (Personal communication, November 12, 2015)

[3.7] Breianna's reading of Hermione as a Black girl is quite radical, yet she is not alone. Black fans across fandoms are increasingly engaged in similar agentive readings of popular narratives and sharing their observations through fan work—fan fiction, fan art, and fan meta.

[3.8] It can be difficult to track the racial and ethnic identities of fan fiction writers and fan artists. While writing *The Dark Fantastic*, Ebony sought to collect links to Black fan work all over the web. However, fans are not always forthcoming about their identities (Brock 2009; Jenkins et al. 2016; Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). As an acafan, Ebony herself is a case in point—although her early 2000s Harry Potter fan fiction was connected to her real-life identity, since then, she has written fic in more than half a dozen fandoms under pseudonyms (Klink and Minkel 2015). This preference for anonymity has led some observers of fandom to underestimate the number of Black fans and other fans of color participating in fan work communities (cf. 2013 AO3 Census, <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63208278796/ao3-census-masterpost>). However, writing and art by Black fans abound, even when not identified as such. Even if racial identities are not specifically articulated, often, Black fan creators focus on restorying often marginalized characters of color, such as Gwen in *Merlin* (2008–12), or Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–17). As andré carrington notes, "The narratives fans construct around minor characters respond to the discourse of trauma that inform nonheteronormative and diasporic identities...Through fan fiction, forgotten characters reappear, not quite undoing but remembering their marginal status, and complicating their...identities in the process" (2016, 212). Such cathartic, restorative work of narrative repair is integral to the Black storying tradition; unsurprisingly enough, it, too, seems critical to restorying.

[3.9] As fan writer Sharon (2015) notes:

[3.10] As a Black girl, when I first started to write fanfiction (privately), it was borne not out of a need to see a fictional version of myself hook up with the show's resident dreamboat (but even if it was, so what?), but to combat the nameless feeling that came over me every time I fell in love with a story that took place in a world where people like me, apparently, didn't exist—or worse, served only as the punchline or background characters. If I did see characters like me, the dialogue seemed to consist of tired stereotypes—your standard "oh hell nos" and "You go girl." There's nothing wrong with talking like that...but when that's the only Black girl on your show, you have a huge problem. And so, so much of what I see on TV and read in books—especially in genres I love, like fantasy and science fiction—has a huge problem.

[3.11] Sharon's essay is illustrative of Black fandom meta, a burgeoning genre of fan meta in the 2010s. Meta is where the contributions of Black fans to fandoms have been most visible, evident, and influential in recent years. Meta is to fandom what criticism is to society; in other words, fandom produces its own intellectual canon to explain phenomena in canon and within fanon. For instance, the Hermione is Black posts were meta. Other notable sources of Black fan meta include the following: Black Fangirls Unite (<https://blackfangirlsunite.tumblr.com/whatthisblogaimstodo>), Diverse High Fantasy (<https://diversehighfantasy.tumblr.com/about>), Stitch Media Mix (<https://stitchmediamix.com/>), and Phoenix-Ace (<http://phoenix-ace.tumblr.com/>).

[3.12] More research, theory, and critique is necessary to understand how Black fans are restorying canons that have mostly excluded Black lives. Additionally, the stories and restories that Black fan artists and cosplayers are telling using traditional and digital art tools—as well as their own bodies—should be highlighted in fan studies as well (Scott 2017).

4. Conclusion

[4.1] It remains to be seen how—or if—*Black Panther* (2018) and other big-budget comic, fantasy, and science fiction narratives will fundamentally transform the landscape of popular Black storying and restorying in the digital age. As of this writing, there are over 1,800 *Black Panther*-tagged fan fiction stories at the Archive of Our Own website, and many others on Wattpad and Fanfiction.net. Some believe that *Black Panther* has the potential to ignite the next generation of fandom movements (Taylor 2018). Still, it must be pointed out that the modern versions of *Black Panther*—developed by Black creators from Christopher Priest and Reginald Hudlin in the past to Ryan Coogler, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Nnedi Okorafor in the present—are themselves restorying the original Silver Age superhero created by two White men, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. While *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*'s tragic Benny Russell reminds us of the impossibility of Black authors publishing popular, fandom-worthy speculative narratives in the mid-twentieth century, it is twenty-first-century Black storytellers who have given that hero the breath of life.

[4.2] Many of today's Black storytellers began telling stories as fans. Ryan Coogler, director of *Black Panther*, notes the influence that comics had on him as a child:

[4.3] "The thing that got me most excited is that [*Black Panther*] was the first African American character that I was introduced to in the mainstream comics," Coogler tells MTVNews. "I used to go to a comic shop right next to my elementary school in between basketball practice and track practice. We would go there and hang out. I remember one day, I asked the comic book owners, 'Are there any comic books about black people? Like X-Men or different things?' And he pointed out a couple of issues of *Black Panther*." (quoted in Davis 2016)

[4.4] The Black imagination is vast and contains multitudes. The promise of Black storytellers and storytelling—across genre and mode—is similarly capacious. And part of the work of the Black Diaspora storyteller in these long centuries beyond the Door has been to restory. Kevin Young reminds us that the Black imagination contains underground railroads of meaning—"a practice we could call the Black art of escape" (Young 2012, 19), involving what gets hidden in plain sight, storied and restoried. If this rich restorying has led us to the global phenomenon of *Black Panther*, surely fan studies, media and communication studies, and education have much to learn from Black fans and their story worlds.

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SYMPOSIUM

Fandom, the Filipino diaspora, and media convergence in the Philippine context

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[0.1] Abstract—In an analysis of AlDub (the romantic pairing of actor Alden Richards and dubsmasher Maine Mendoza) and its fandom, I focus on the show's combined usage of old and new media, which has implications for media convergence in the Philippine context as well as the ways in which fandom in this context is used to negotiate identity and belonging in the context of diaspora and deterritorialization.

[0.2] Keywords—AlDub; Fandoms of color; Globalization; Romance; Transnational fandom

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I. Introduction

[1.1] On October 24, 2015, #ALDubEBTamangPanahon broke Twitter by bringing in more than forty-one million tweets within 24 hours (Hegina 2015). It surpassed a world record set during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in the competition between Brazil and Germany. AlDub is a Filipino supercouple or love team composed of matinee idol and actor Alden Richards and YouTube dubsmasher Maine Mendoza, nicknamed YayaDub after her character in the Filipino noontime show *Eat Bulaga*. That day, members of AlDub Nation, the moniker for AlDub's legions of fans, flocked to a sold-out charity event in the fifty-five-thousand-seat Philippine Arena—considered one of the biggest concert arenas in the nation—to witness the couple meeting without any restrictions for

SYMPOSIUM

Narrative extraction, #BlackPantherSoLIT, and signifyin': *Black Panther* fandom and transformative social practices

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[0.1] Abstract—This article examines the history, creative labor, and social practices around the #BlackPantherSoLIT hashtag on Twitter. Two years before the *Black Panther* movie event, the hashtag created a fandom of Blackness itself. Once the film was released, Black audiences experienced freedom from fan labor practices typically used when consuming content without significant Black representation.

[0.2] Keywords—Black American culture; Fan labor; Fans of color; Race; Transformative works; Twitter

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I. Narrative extraction as Black fan labor

[1.1] Science fiction and fantasy fans are adept at stretching their imaginations to include fictional concepts in science fiction, technology, and human abilities. This sometimes takes a bit of effort, depending on how the narrative is presented, but that is

what fans sign up for. That stretching, imaginative labor is part of our fun. What nonmarginalized fans may not realize is that marginalized audiences take on additional yokes of labor in order to enjoy and identify with content that does not present their lives and/or lived experiences in full dimension. We not only stretch our imaginations, but we mine and extend the narrative itself in order to see ourselves in it, like Tony Stark manipulating a hologram to gain new understandings (figure 1).



Figure 1. Screen capture GIF of Tony Stark manipulating a hologram in the Marvel Studios film *Iron Man 2* (2010).

[1.2] I call this labor "narrative extraction." I define narrative extraction as the process and labor that audience members undertake when engaging with narratives that don't represent them as protagonists or fully realized characters. By fully realized, I mean round characters instead of flat ones, characters with agency, characters whose actions affect the story's plot. Narrative extraction is the work of finding, creating, and translating identification—and meaning—when one is not represented. For the purposes of this article, I am focusing on this concept as it relates to Black fan consumption and labor.

[1.3] An example of narrative extraction is the practice of Black fans claiming cartoon characters as Black. In these cases, the animated characters are either racially ambiguous, nonracially defined, or even nonhuman, and yet Black fans and children find a way to pull the narrative closer to themselves by assigning Blackness where it fits. For me, that list includes Patti Mayonnaise and Skeeter from *Doug* (1991–99), Arthur and D. W. from *Arthur* (1996–present), Goofy and his son Max from *A Goofy Movie* (1995), and the Pink Panther from *The Pink Panther Show* (1969–80). Some of the characters had darker complexions, sure, but others just felt Black to me. They were Black by behavior. Black by their humor, their resilience, their style, and their cleverness. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized I wasn't the only one who pulled cartoons closer to me by racializing the characters. Sarah Hagi (2017), noting that many Black people share this practice, finds support in the work of Lisa Nakamura, a professor at the University of Michigan whose work focuses on how race is portrayed online: "Nakamura also believes a big part of finding these non-human characters black has to do with 'finding yourself in places where you're not supposed to be.' It's almost an act of resistance. We didn't see ourselves reflected in what we loved to watch as a child,

so we created our own narratives despite being showed our representation didn't matter."

[1.4] Narrative extraction is about digging through the narrative to claim what can be claimed. Another manifestation is in claiming and owning the individual elements of a story that feel most identifiable and true. Once those are found, they become our point of access. Salamishah Tillet (2018) describes her experience of reading the classic book *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) prior to seeing the 2017 movie starring Storm Reid, a Black actress, as Meg. Tillet explains: "But for African-American girls like me, identification with Meg was not as easy. Even as we saw parts of ourselves in Meg's heroism, we also had to resist our own invisibility in a novel that was unable or unwilling to imagine any people of color as inhabitants of the many planets, including Earth, to which its characters traveled."

[1.5] I deeply understand Tillet's experience here, because I also had similar feelings when reading the novel as a teenager. This work required digging into the earth of the story to pull out the things that belonged to me. Like Tillet, I mined the character of Meg. Tillet writes, "So instead of seeing my full self in Meg, I ended up cherry-picking the traits to which I could relate: her bravery and intelligence, or even more rare her feelings of abandonment and anger caused by her father's absence" (2018). Beyond these traits, I felt a kinship with Meg's stubborn nature. (My mother had once described me as stubborn and so did my teachers, as Meg's did.) I extracted and synthesized and cowrote a mental narrative of Meg that was separate from her physical appearance. Meg was enough of me that I could make that story my own and not feel ignored by it. Meg was me-enough.

[1.6] Every fan who creates a transformative work is creating something new from narrative content, but this labor typically begins after the initial engagement. Fans watch a television show and then go home to write a fic in that world. Fans play a video game, and then sew a costume to cosplay as their favorite character. A key difference with the conceptualization of narrative extraction as fan labor is that it is work that occurs in real time in order for marginalized fans to experience, identify with, and enjoy the non-POC-led work. It's an experiential and consumptive process done as we view the movie, as we watch the television show, as we read the book. This is the labor required in order to "resist our own invisibility" (Tillet 2018).

[1.7] So, what then is the result when Black fans don't need to do this work? What is the experience of viewing a film that does not require extractive analysis and synthesis in order to see oneself in the story? Or in order to identify with the protagonist or the characters with agency? The answer is, quite simply, relief. An immense feeling of relaxation and empowerment vis-à-vis representation. Familiar consumptive muscles were able to let go, because the story was not us-adjacent, it was us-direct.

2. *Black Panther* as a cultural event

[2.1] *Black Panther* think pieces have hailed the 2018 Marvel release as not just a movie, but a movement. Not just a theatrical film, but an event. Not just a superhero spectacle, but a cultural phenomenon. *Black Panther* embedded itself into my lived experience as a Black fan in ways that no other movie—MCU or not—had before. I found that I was carrying the film with me as I moved through the world; *Black Panther* came up in my conversations with Black people who were strangers, as if we were old friends. I once chatted about *Black Panther* with the parking attendant at my doctor's office garage. "You seen *Black Panther* yet?" was, for the month of February 2018, a perfectly adequate way to greet another Black person. It was our way of checking in. For a while, *Black Panther* was in the air we breathed.

[2.2] As an obsessed fangirl, I saw the movie in the theaters several times, not only to throw my fannish weight behind content I loved and wanted more of but also to seek out and relive the emotions generated by representation: affirmation, joy, hope, pride. Each time I went to the theater, I saw Black moviegoers in friend and family groups. Group photos of fans at theaters were common on social media (figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of a February 15, 2018, tweet from Twitter user @eazy_jeezy. The tweet was posted on opening weekend for the film, and appears to show a photo taken by a family on that same weekend.

[2.3] As a fan-scholar, however, I watched in fascination both before the movie released and during its theatrical run as familiar fannish practices and fan labor, such as the production of fan content after media has been consumed, got flipped and deployed in ways I had never seen before.

3. #BlackPantherSoLIT: A fandom phenomenon almost two years in the making

[3.1] In May of 2016, casting announcements for the Black Panther film, which included multiple prominent Black actors such as Lupita N'yongo and Michael B. Jordan, moved Twitter user @BPSoLIT to create the hashtag, #BlackPantherSoLIT ([note 1](#)). The hashtag quickly went viral on Black Twitter, a term I'm using here to refer to both the digital community of Black Twitter users and the ecosystem of content created and circulated by and for Black Twitter users. Clicking hashtags allows users on Twitter to view related tweets by other users and, in some cases, track ongoing and/or trending conversations. Black Twitter's tweets leading up to the movie expanded the basic conversation-linking functionality of the social media hashtag by creatively integrating additional content in their hashtagged tweets. Examples of this additional content include images, GIFs, video clips, and in-community references.

[3.2] Prior to *Black Panther*, my experience of fan production had been that fans generate work in a postcontent setting. For example, a fan might go home to write fan fiction about favorite characters from a movie they've just seen in the theater, or they might draw fan art of a show they've been watching obsessively for months. The timeline of origin for #BlackPantherSoLIT is significant, because fans created their own often transformative content in an entirely precontent setting. Fans were generating creative content around and in response to the film not only before the film premiered but before we had seen a trailer, and even before filming began in January of 2017 (figure 3).

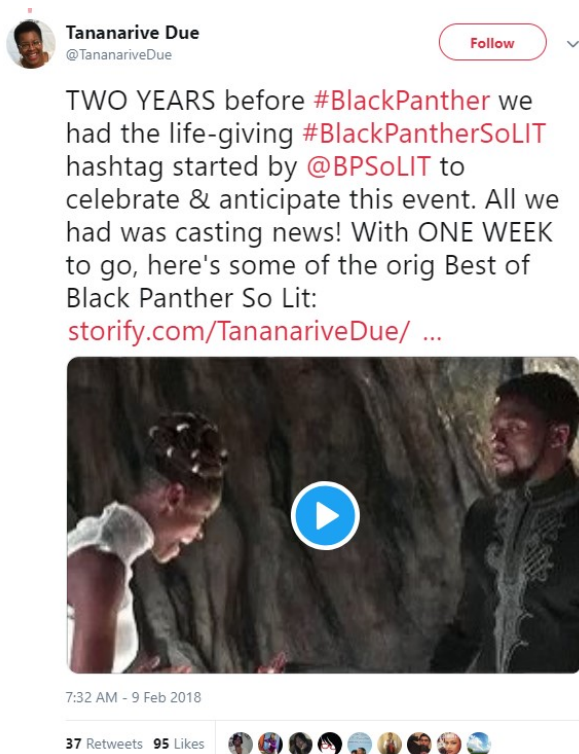


Figure 3. Screenshot of a February 9, 2018, tweet from Tananarive Due, an award-winning horror fiction author and educator. A few days before the film premiered, Due tweeted about the role of the #BlackPantherSoLIT hashtag in the film's fan community and the hashtag's timeline of origin.

4. Narrative insertion: Black fans call in media, pop culture, and history

[4.1] #BlackPantherSoLIT creators did referential, generative, intertextual work. Their tweets called in other popular media and history as much as they called out fans' excitement and anticipation for the film itself. I call this labor practice calling in because it is a practice in opposition to narrative extraction. Calling in is invitational instead of extractive. The end results are collage-like tweets that, like other types of transformative works, create a new end product with ingredients from the original text. These tweets relied on intertextualities to make meaning out of the very idea of a film no one had seen yet. By calling in outside narratives to help tell the story of the film, the tweets communicated claims about the film's cultural context and role.

[4.2] In one tweet by user @mnmtwinz, a momentous moment in Black history was called in. @mnmtwinz's tweet (figure 4) makes reference both to the 1965 civil rights march to Selma on the Edmund Pettus bridge and the dramatized version of this same march in director Ava DuVernay's 2014 historical film, *Selma*. This reference, read alongside #BlackPantherSoLIT, suggests that *Black Panther* is a historical event for the Black community, not just a pop culture event, and connects the act of viewing the film to a lineage of communal action.



Figure 4. Screenshot of a May 14, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @mnmtwinz. The tweet itself includes a screen capture from Ava DuVernay's historical drama, *Selma*.

[4.3] Some users drew a direct line between *Black Panther* and *Coming to America*

(1988) starring Eddie Murphy, a film often cited as a milestone for Black representation. *Coming to America* and the Black Panther comic book the film is based on both tell stories of African royalty in and outside of the diaspora. They also both provide powerful and positive images of what Blackness and Africa could have been without colonization. The tweets below use *Coming to America* screen captures and clips alongside #BlackPantherSoLIT and suggest that fans will be dressing, attending, and/or leaving the theater not just as fans or audience members but as royalty themselves. Read together, the film imagery and the tweets suggest that the film will be transformative and empowering (figures 5, 6, 7, and 8).

What y'all wearing to go see Black
Panther movie?
Me:



Figure 5. Screenshot of a tweet from within blogger MissMondayMonday's February 5, 2018, post titled "Black Panther. So. Lit." The tweet includes a screen capture from *Coming to America* (1998).



Figure 6. Screenshot of a May 13, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @RyanMcBain. The tweet features a screen capture GIF from *Coming to America* in which members of the royal family from the fictional wealthy African country of Zamunda exit their limousine and are greeted by servants tossing flower petals.



Figure 7. Screenshot of a May 13, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @amzilla22. This

tweet features a screen capture GIF from *Coming to America* in which the main character, fictional Prince Akeem, arrives in the United States dressed extravagantly and with a full royal entourage.

[4.4] One fan added a second pop culture reference to the use of *Coming to America* by quoting a lyric made popular from Beyoncé's *Formation*, a 2016 pop anthem and narrative video that celebrates and dramatizes aspects of Black culture in the United States. The layering of this Beyoncé reference into the tweet adds a call for solidarity among Black audiences and fans, suggesting that the community must come together to support the film (figure 8).



Figure 8. Screenshot of a May 13, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @sarcasticblerd.

5. #BlackPantherSoLIT as a form of signifyin'

[5.1] In her piece, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter'," Sarah Florini (2014) describes the ways in which Black Twitter serves as a site for signifyin'. The phrase *signifyin'* operates alongside the meaning-making function of language, semiotics, and signs but is used as a broad umbrella term for certain types of African American rhetorical play and oral traditions. Common verbal practices under this umbrella include the use of figurative language, doublespeak, wordplay, and engaging in participatory verbal games or contests. Connecting signifyin' to Black Twitter, Florini says, "Signifyin' serves as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences" (224). In Florini's essay, she examines specific types or subgenres of the signifyin' as they play out on Twitter. Following in Florini's footsteps, I turned to the specific format and popularity of certain #BlackPantherSoLIT tweets to understand how they might be operating within this framework.

[5.2] As the imagery of the word *viral* suggests, viral web content is made popular due to rapid sharing between users and their networks. Web content can spread even further, even faster when shared by websites and blogs with large readerships. Within days of #BlackPantherSoLIT's creation, sites and blogs like Nerd Reactor, Mic, Collider, The Source, and HipHopWired published articles about the hashtag and its popularity, often with live, embedded tweets in their posts. But I believe that the framework of signifyin' on Black Twitter contributed to the popularity and virality of #BlackPantherSoLIT tweets because many of these tweets became a digitized version of the signifyin' game, playing the dozens.

[5.3] Playing the dozens or The Dozens is a rhetorical game of one-upmanship, sometimes performed in front of an audience. In this form of signifyin', participants compete by going back and forth with increasingly humorous and astute insults in order to one-up one another. Insults may poke fun at a competitor's mother, their appearance, their intelligence, or another personal topic. The typical sentence structure for the insults in this game is "Yo [possession] is so X that Y." Insults in a typical Dozens game escalate, with the goal being to make one's competitor give up the contest.

[5.4] In the hands of Black Twitter, this game became inverted during #BlackPantherSoLIT's early popularity; it didn't challenge a competitor to win, it asked a community of users to join. If we read the phrase #BlackPantherSoLIT as a condensed variation of the insult sentence structure of the Dozens ("*Black Panther* is so lit that...") each tweet challenges community members to offer up a new take on how lit, or how great, the movie will be. In this way, the hashtag used the Dozens to uplift, not tear down, and to bring the Black Twitter community together in the creation of these intertextual tweets. The examples below (figures 9, 10, and 11) can be read in the Dozens structure and rely on shared knowledge and what Florini calls "cultural competencies" for humorous effect (2014, 229).



Figure 9. Screenshot of a May 13, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @DubOnDaBeatz. Above the text is a screenshot of a GIF from the 1993 cult hip-hop movie *CB4* and

overlaid on this image is a song lyric from the scene in the movie. This GIF is a common meme and in-community reference within Black Twitter. If read in full Dozens structure, this tweet might become "Black Panther is so lit, that when they ask me for my ticket at the door imma tell em (I'm biggy-black-blackety-black and I'm black)." A culturally competent viewer of this tweet and GIF would be able to sing the lyrics as the end of the sentence.



Figure 10. Screenshot of a February 9, 2018, tweet from Twitter user Tananarive Due. The invocation of James Brown alongside the image of a Black church and choir is a powerful visual. It also serves as a layered in-community reference to a Black musical icon, Black spirituality, and the Black church community. If considered in full Dozens structure, this tweet might be read as "Black Panther is so lit that opening night will be like (Black church, the feeling of being in church, a spiritual experience, etc.)."



Figure 11. Screenshot of a May 13, 2016, tweet from Twitter user @KiraJW. This tweet features a GIF from *Soul Train* (1971–2006), the long-running music and dance television show often featuring Black social dances and music popularized by Black

artists, such as R&B, soul, and hip-hop. If read in full Dozens structure, this tweet might become, "Black Panther is so lit, there will be a soul train line when you enter the theater."

[5.5] Florini's analysis of dissing, another game of verbal insults, as it operates on Twitter echoes my earlier thought about the Beyoncé/*Coming to America* tweet in figure 8 and its encouragement of solidarity. She says of dissing, "For Black users within this tradition, their performances are not only about them as individuals but also about encouraging others to participate, thereby generating a sense of solidarity." In the case of #BlackPantherSoLIT, community momentum around these types of Dozens tweets and their inclusion of escalating in-community references created a fandom of Blackness itself, alongside a fandom for *Black Panther*. So, when the film finally premiered, it felt to me like a culmination of community labor and shared enthusiasm. It felt like we helped make it.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] In the months following *Black Panther*, much has been made of its box-office earnings, its Oscar potential, and its cultural impact, but the examples of Black fan labor are what I find most meaningful.

[6.2] *Black Panther's* cultural significance is not just what it generated but what it removed. It removed the need for chronic narrative labor on the part of Black audiences, Black women, and Black fans. In place of that labor of viewing while Black or loving stories that didn't always love us back, there was relief. And *Black Panther's* offering of relief is part of what made it revolutionary.

[6.3] #BlackPantherSoLIT did not wait until the film had been released to call it an achievement. The hashtag did not wait until fans had passed judgment to generate a fandom. Black Twitter's signifyin', its joy and its incorporation of broader markers of Black culture and its confidence in the film's significance brought grassroots authenticity to the hype in a way that trailers couldn't.

[6.4] I watched *Black Panther* as a fangirl and as a scholar, but what will stick with me for years to come is the memory of watching it as a daughter. On my last viewing, I brought my seventy-one-year-old Black father to the theater, even though he'd never seen an MCU movie before and he doesn't go to the movies in general. I paid for his ticket, knowing he might not go if I didn't. I watched the movie for myself, but I kept peeking at my father beside me to see his reaction. He watched, rapt and engaged. He laughed when Shuri teased T'Challa, his eyes grew wide at the Wakandan tech. He also shook his head solemnly at N'Jobu's plight and the representation of civil rights in Oakland. I watched him sigh heavily at T'Challa's fight with his father on the ancestral plane. At the end, my father left the theater impressed and moved. He said, "Thank you for bringing me. I never thought they'd put us onscreen like that."

7. Acknowledgment

[7.1] This piece draws in part on related work I pursued while doing graduate coursework at Duke University under my former professor and friend Dr. Negar Mottahedeh. I'm thankful for her work on hashtag labor and online communities.

8. Note

1. When @BPSoLIT originated the hashtag #BlackPantherSoLIT, they spelled the word *lit* in all caps. However, after the hashtag went viral, it was sometimes spelled #BlackPantherSoLit by other users. I used both spellings in my searches and in this piece as they were used by content creators.

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SYMPOSIUM

Competition and controlling images as the fuel igniting Beyoncé and Rihanna fandom fights

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[0.1] Abstract—Beyoncé and Rihanna, two of the most commercially successful black women of all time, have long been painted as rivals by the media, which in turn negatively affects the relationship between the women's fan bases, known respectively as the BeyHive and the Rihanna Navy. These controlling images of black women, which uphold the norm of competition in pop music fandom, dictate the production and dissemination of stereotypes of black women.

[0.2] Keywords—Advocacy; Hierarchies; Multiracial white supremacist patriarchy (MRWaSP); Neoliberalism

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[1] Chris Riotta (2016) touches the surface of the years-long rivalry between fans of pop artists Beyoncé and Rihanna, known as the BeyHive and the Rihanna Navy ([note 1](#)). As Riotta points out, Beyoncé and Rihanna are two of the most commercially successful black female artists of all time, and the media-constructed competition between them produces the problematic narrative in popular culture of pitting black women against each other. However, Riotta seems to make fans responsible for the construction of this narrative, concluding, "Fandoms, put it to rest. Go spread the good word of your queen in peace." As a black female Rihanna "stan" ([note 2](#)), I argue that

there is a much larger picture to this narrative—one that was constructed not by fans but by the imperatives of the multiracial white supremacist patriarchy (MRWaSP) (James 2015; hooks [1994] 2006).

[2] Building on what Booth (2014, ¶1.3) describes as "a neoliberal turn in fandom," I first focus on the basic economic principle of competition. According to Foucault (2008, 120), competition is a "formal game between inequalities" that can only be actively produced. This production of competition is significant in Beyoncé and Rihanna fandom, for it produces "their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and their surveillance" (Foucault 2004, 242) as black women in popular culture. Beyoncé and Rihanna are aligned this way in order to categorize black femininities into racialized archetypes that are then put to work by being juxtaposed. As Robin James, using the example of media-generated juxtaposed images of Barack Obama and Osama Bin Laden after the latter's execution, notes, "Some styles of blackness are conditionally incorporated within MRWaSP's privileged mainstream, they don't generate 'otherness' as efficiently as do newer, more exotic and unruly racial identities do" (2015, 154).

[3] The juxtaposition of Beyoncé and Rihanna within media discourses serves a similar purpose, but it also affects the ways their fans practice advocacy in defense of their favorite artist. Fans will defend their favorite entertainers adamantly, as well as "against other readings," as a way to authenticate their status within the fan base and to mutually recognize each other's shared passion (Sandvoss 2005, 105). This sociality—which, "at a collective level, display[s] constants that are easy, or at least possible, to establish" (Foucault 2004, 246), such as the constants that collectives are centered around a specific person and members of the collective will defend that person as a display of their dedication—makes sense in the practice of being a fan. Media discourses make competition the norm in fandom. An example of this norming is music award shows like those of iHeartRadio, MTV EMA, and BET, which introduce award categories such as "Best Fan Army," "Biggest Fans," and "FANdemonium," where fans must compete with each other and vote in order to be deemed the biggest fans (MTV 2017). Consequently, fans and stans perform the labor of placing black femininities in competition with one another by performing particular practices of advocacy—practices that may indeed constitute their fandom.

[4] The media-constructed Beyoncé-versus-Rihanna narrative is not the first time that competition between black women in popular culture has been actively produced and perpetuated—or even fabricated, in Rihanna and Beyoncé's case—by media discourses. For example, "Catwalk Catfight: Tyra Rips 'Hateful' Naomi" (Hutchinson 2004) documents the feud between supermodels Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell, which dates to the 1990s. This very type of discourse has been used by the news media, celebrity gossip columns, and music sites, as screaming headlines like "Rihanna: Move Over, Beyoncé" and "Beyoncé Furious with Rihanna: New Song a Diss Track?" attest (Taylor 2005; Cox 2015). Words with strongly negative, even violent connotations ("catfight," "rips," "move over," "furious," "diss") sell the idea that these women are angry at each other, illustrating Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) concept of controlling images. Here the angry black woman trope takes center stage, forcing their relationships

with one another to be read as a hierarchical struggle.

[5] These controlling images of Beyoncé and Rihanna must be taken into account because they indicate to us how they come to be competitively aligned and how these manufactured fandom fights occur. Beyoncé is an African American woman who hails from Houston, Texas; in contrast, Rihanna is an Afro-Caribbean woman from Barbados who moved to America as a teenager to pursue her music career. Each woman's story plays along a trajectory of race, gender, class, and nationality; the tropes that come with these trajectories have been racialized and positioned within this narrative.

[6] On August 29, 2011, the night that Beyoncé revealed she was pregnant with her daughter, Blue Ivy, at the MTV Video Music Awards, the Tumblr meme shown in figure 1 circulated widely on Twitter.



Figure 1. A Tumblr meme released on August 29, 2011 (https://78.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lqpntx53O1qicqv6o1_500.png), after Beyoncé announced at the MTV Video Music Awards that she was expecting her first child. Beyoncé is pictured sitting with a child on a bed with a laptop. Typed in red is a displeased message to Beyoncé.

[7] This message to Beyoncé evokes the archetype of the strong black woman, in which she has "too many obligations but she is expected to handle her business" and must continue "to be everything for everyone else" (Springer 2007, 252). The strong black woman trope goes hand in hand with older controlling images of African American women, such as the black woman who "works twice as hard as everyone else" (Collins 2000, 89). In this meme, Beyoncé is expected to get "back on that stage," as she is a hardworking, high-achieving woman with an all-consuming career; she does not have time to start a family because she "JUST took a year off."

[8] Such messaging falls in line with the meritocratic ideal of neoliberalism: if you work hard enough, you will reap the benefits (Littler 2017). However, black women have to work, and they are expected to work twice as hard. Furthermore, to get back to the trajectories that dictate Beyoncé and Rihanna's competitive alignment, Beyoncé must get back to business because "that Barbadian is racking up #1's like she collectin fuckin coconuts." By acquiring Number 1 songs on the US Billboard Hot 100, Rihanna is here othered as an unworthy Caribbean migrant whose success threatens the

progression of African American, middle-class, strong black women. To emphasize Rihanna's migrant status in this context, we are invited to imagine Rihanna "collecting coconuts" as a primitive exoticization of Caribbean life. This example of Rihanna dangerously "racking up #1's" also corroborates Alisa Bierra's point that "though the material circumstances of Rihanna's life are radically different from those of most Afro-Caribbean immigrant women in the United States, her resources did not prevent her public persona from being haunted by these archetypal stereotypes of 'island women.'" These stereotypes mark her as already being "dangerous" and "out of control" (2011–12, 105), as opposed to being respectable and humble like the archetypal strong black woman (Rodier and Meagher 2014).

[9] Figure 1 also exemplifies a deregulated controlling by MRWaSP imperatives, which creates distance between the background conditions of its agenda (an inclusive approach to racist and sexist oppression that has its origins in exclusionary slavery and colonialism) and the activities of fans and their favorite artist. This distance undermines the constructedness of the background conditions of MRWaSP at play. Thus, fans in the BeyHive and the Rihanna Navy who "appear to operate 'free' of direction" are susceptible to the danger of reproducing archetypal stereotypes of the women of color we stan for by practicing competitive advocacy against another black female entertainer's fan base. This renders unintelligible the background conditions that posit black women as adversaries in popular culture (James 2015, 97).

[10] What the dynamic between Beyoncé and Rihanna fandoms brings into question, as Rebecca Wanzo (2015, ¶2.1) highlights, is the notion that "fan culture stands as an open challenge to the 'naturalness' and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies" (Jenkins 1992, 18). If fans of black female entertainers, who are competitively juxtaposed by media discourses, are increasingly at the "center of media convergence" (Busse 2009, 356), then we become amplifiers of the consumption, competition, and conditions that naturalize such controlling images. These fandom fights between the BeyHive and the Navy are further complicated by the defense of Rihanna or Beyoncé (when they are juxtaposed) because it is also a defense of their own investment in the fannish consumption of these singers.

[11] During an interview on *Larry King Live* (2009), Beyoncé said of Rihanna, "I'm here to support her, as well as all of my family. She's like family to me [...] Jay and all of my family." Similarly, in the April 2016 issue of *American Vogue*, Rihanna noted that the rivalry is fabricated by the media: "They just get so excited to feast on something that's negative. Something that's competitive. Something that's, you know, a rivalry. And that's just not what I wake up to" (Aguirre 2016). Beyoncé and Rihanna's solidarity is a form of resistance to the processes that competitively pit their black femininities against each other, as Collins argues: "Self-defined and publicly expressed Black Women's love relationships, whether such relationships find sexual expression or not, constitute resistance. If members of the group on the bottom love one another and affirm one another's worth, then the entire system that assigns that group to the bottom becomes suspect" (2000, 170). Simply put, if fans engage in their juxtaposition, it counteracts this resistance.

[12] This is not to say that there are not instances of resistance by Beyoncé and Rihanna fans, which indeed need perusal. Still, this is an underdiscussed aspect of popular culture that needs further critical exploration, as it brings the whole MRWaSP societal agenda into question. Analyses of these constructed fandom fights, which pit black woman against each other and seek to reinforce stereotypes, illuminate wider societal complexities that greatly affect the practices of fandoms centered on women of color. Such cultural analysis raises further questions about the processes that actively work against black female solidarity and "harnesses the pleasures" and practices of their fandoms for the continuation of the dominant MRWaSP (Booth 2014, ¶2.11).

Notes

1. Beyoncé's fan base is known as the BeyHive, shortened to the Hive. Rihanna's fan base is called the Rihanna Navy, shortened to the Navy.

2. "Stan" is a term derived from a 2000 Eminem song of the same name. My master's thesis, "How Is the Term 'Stan' Being Used as a Classification of Status in Pop Music Fandom?," explores how fans use it as a term of distinction. It can be used as a verb or a noun.

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SYMPOSIUM

Transnational audiences and Asian American performance in the musical *KPOP*

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[0.1] *Abstract*— This essay contends with the question of how K-pop, audience performance, and race are intertwined by examining the award-winning musical *KPOP*. Through its immersive multimedia structure, *KPOP* reveals how the complex and racialized intertwining of mediated idol and mediated audience complicates the performance of Asian and Asian American identity, and ultimately leads its audience to a different space than an us-versus-them binary.

[0.2] *Keywords*— Identity; Idol; Multimedia; Race; Theater

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I. Introduction

[1.1] As K-pop continues to gain attention in the US mainstream media, questions of how will always be posed. For US entertainment outlets, the dominant question is how something perceived as South Korean and Asian made headway in an industry notoriously difficult for Asian artists. For K-pop companies, how can they obtain and sustain transnational success? And for some, how will this affect Asian American artists—or not—as they are perpetually caught in between, being at once viewed as too

foreign and not foreign enough in the United States?

[1.2] This essay looks at how one theater performance, aptly named *KPOP*, contends with these questions. *KPOP* is a musical by Jason Kim and was produced in 2017 by the Ma-Yi Theater Company, Woodshed Collective, and Ars Nova in New York City. The show is set up as an experiment for two fictional companies. The first one, JTM, is a Korean entertainment company that trains and produces idol groups. The second one, CROSSOVER, is headed by Jerry Kim, a Korean American who wants to help K-pop cross over into the American market. After an initial introduction, the audience is split into three groups and led through different rooms to experience three K-pop acts: Special K, a new girl group; F8 (Fate), an established boy band; and MwE, a superstar diva and industry veteran. Crucially, Jerry tells the audience they are a test audience, immediately putting focus on their reactions to the groups and industry practices illustrated in the show. In fact, as the show goes on, Jerry and the owners of JTM, Moon and Ruby, repeatedly emphasize how this whole setup is for us; the entire show is posed as an immersive experiment, constructed for an American audience, to ask us how K-pop can cross over into the United States.

[1.3] This question, however, feels more like one from 2009 (with the ultimately failed attempts of both solo singer BoA and girl group Wonder Girls to break into the US market); or 2011 (with the English-language release of "The Boys" for girl group SNSD); or even 2012, after the surprising success of Psy's "Gangnam Style." To me, a K-pop researcher and fan, this did not feel like a relevant question for 2017, when I was attending a sold-out K-pop concert the very next night, or when KCON, the world's biggest K-pop convention, was on its sixth year in the United States. It felt like K-pop, however circuitously and unexpectedly, had arrived in the United States in the hearts of at least 128,000 fans ([note 1](#)). This is not to dismiss arguments that it is still significant when there is major Asian and Asian American representation in US mainstream media, as was evident by the fervor around K-pop boy band BTS breaking US Billboard charts in 2018, but rather to suggest that the K-pop question was an already evolving conversation. However, what might be more important is how the show answers its own question. I suggest that through its immersive multimedia structure, the musical *KPOP* reveals the complex, racialized intertwining of mediated idol and mediated audience, complicates the performance of Asian and Asian American identity, and ultimately leads its audience to a different space than an us-versus-them binary.

2. K-pop as transmedia performance

[2.1] *KPOP* did not begin with the run of the show but rather with promotional materials that served as an introduction to the K-pop experience. When the Ma-Yi Theater Company sent promotional emails for *KPOP*, it included a segment called "KPOP-Pourri," which delivered the "weekly lowdown on KPOP." This segment introduced a real-life entertainment company, special K-pop terminology, and the world of K-pop fandom, with links to fans' YouTube videos. This primes the uninitiated for the K-pop experience, signaling that the industry is so vast that one needs guidance

before even attending the show. However, it also sweeps the audience into K-pop's media sphere, showing how K-pop crosses not only geographical bounds but also media. Communications scholar Youna Kim calls K-pop a "total entertainment," meaning that K-pop encompasses all entertainment forms, such as music, dance, television, movies, and advertisements, with much of it happening through digital media (2013, 8). In fact, many Hallyu scholars ([note 2](#)) argue that the K-pop industry relies on its ability to harness digital media and spread transnationally; the current number of groups simply could not survive in the Korean market alone.

[2.2] Theater scholar Suk-Young Kim similarly calls K-pop a kaleidoscopic or multimedia performance that includes not only the aforementioned forms but also concerts, musicals, and those performances considered the realm of theater, drawing attention to how it combines the digital and the live (2018, 9). In this way, *KPOP* as a musical and its immersive, interactive experience fits perfectly with K-pop's vibrant media ecosystem. What is most significant for Kim, however, is how K-pop's transmedia experience enables a deep, affective relationship between idol and fan through multiple platforms, which *KPOP-Pourri* also emphasizes with its links to fan-made videos and glossaries of fan terminology. Through *KPOP-Pourri*, the show illustrates that in order to provide the audience an all-in K-pop experience, they need to be immersed digitally before the show begins (or rather, the show starts when the immersion experience begins), and they need to understand K-pop's online transnational fandom.

3. Interacting with the K-pop factory

[3.1] While fans do not feature as characters in the show itself, the audience takes their place as the ones interacting with K-pop, becoming as knowledgeable about and as attached to the idols. Perhaps the most stinging critique of how K-pop, media, and audiences relate is the section where the audience follows new girl group Special K through the K-pop factory. The word *factory* refers to the idol training system in South Korea, where young adults train for several years in singing, dancing, media, and foreign languages, with only a slim chance of debuting in an idol group. We wind through four main rooms: dance studio, vocal coach, media training, and plastic surgery. The dance studio shows a choreographer picking apart the six members' movements, making them dance the routine over and over. Once the members exit to various other rooms, the choreographer turns to the audience, defiantly, saying that she might be tough, but they will be perfect.

[3.2] However, this process is about not only singing and dancing but also the idol's ability to shift and perform for different audiences, and the Special K section is specifically designed, in theory, for an American audience. In the media training section, Jerry instructs two members on how to present for American media. He berates member Callie for having too thick of an accent. Jerry asks the audience, "Why hasn't K-pop succeeded in the US?" An audience member shouts "Racism!" Jerry agrees, but then he reframes racism as an accent problem, which justifies—in his mind—why he

was so hard on Callie, as if her saying "my name is Callie" in a perfect American accent would make all the stereotypical associations with Asians go away. The issue of blending in rears its head again when Jerry does media training with member Tiny D, who is both Korean American and mixed race. She feels she does not look or act completely Korean or completely American and therefore cannot brand herself accordingly. This confusion continues into the plastic surgery room and manifests as a fear of the way she is racially perceived. Tiny D says she is 50–50 (as in, she looks 50 percent Korean and 50 percent something else unidentified), but she would prefer to look 70–30 or even 90–10. Eventually she becomes too uncomfortable, leaving the room before the surgeon can begin, still unsure of her identity.

[3.3] This complex section allows the audience to see the idols as mutable products, consumable objects, and hard workers, and also through its interactive elements creates an affective bond with the idol. As Callie pulls me into a room, just me and her, she asks, "which one sounds best?" She then precedes to say "My name is Callie" three different ways. I stumble; they all sound the same. I say, "Three, maybe?" for no reason, then revise: "I don't know, you sound fine. You sound good." Callie thanks me, relieved, happy maybe. As I exit the room, I think what I should have told her is to be herself, love herself, and not worry; why would I even give credence to Jerry's accent training? I realize that this section is about having the audience interact with not only the idols but also the system that creates the idols. It implicitly argues that we, the audience, cannot feel an affective connection to the idols through polished performance alone, but rather we have to understand the process they have gone through, and how we—as the entire reason they are going through it—are complicit.

4. Which audience is this, anyway? Asian Americans and K-pop

[4.1] When Jerry says that we are the test audience, that we hold the answer to whether K-pop can cross over, I wonder which audience is being framed in what way. The biggest question for me as an Asian American audience member is that when the show presumes Americans neither know nor will accept K-pop, is it presuming a non-Asian American audience? Though K-pop might be new to some Americans, because of its heavy circulation in Asia and through Asian diasporas, Asian Americans have been noted as some of its core transnational supporters, at least in earlier years (see Park 2008; Balance 2012; Ju and Lee 2015). Or are Asian Americans more aligned with the idols, as Tiny D's story might indicate, than with the American audience? Of course, not all Asian Americans have a familiarity with Asian pop culture products, as Jerry is quick to point out at the beginning of the show, bringing an Asian American experience into the equation from the start. When explaining why he wanted to partner with JTM, he calls himself a bad Korean and relates his own failed attempt at trying to be an actor in Korea, because he does not speak Korean or understand the culture very well—but all of this already indicates a much more complicated, emotional relationship to K-pop for Jerry than blank unknowing, as he has now made it his mission to get these

particular parts of his identity to cross over, to sit more comfortably within himself.

[4.2] However, Asian American scholar Christine Bacareza Balance points to another connection between K-pop and Asian Americans—or rather, Asian American YouTube stars and their similar affective virtual networks. Balance notes the affective labor that popular YouTube stars like Ryan Higa (nigahiga), Kevin Wu (kevjumba), and Wong Fu Productions perform, "transforming alienation into humor, hate into love," and how the platform's penchant for both the intimate and the viral (spread) creates an affective Asian American community (2012, 149). Balance compares this to K-pop's transnational dissemination online, as an embodiment of the Korean diaspora, exemplifying the interplay between the virtual and the material (146). Hyejung Ju and Soobum Lee come to a similar conclusion in their article on Asian American K-pop consumption and how its flow creates a sense of pan-ethnic Asian identity for the fans they interviewed (2015, 334) ([note 3](#)). This is perhaps why when Ryan Higa created a parody K-pop group, which has released two singles thus far on YouTube, he called it BgA—Boys Generally Asian—drawing attention to both the fetishization of K-pop idols (as recognizably Asian and marketed as such) and the impossibility of clearly defining the geographical boundaries of K-pop groups (as the group is not fully Asian but "generally Asian"). BgA topped the iTunes charts and drew international attention with their second single "Who's It Gonna Be?," showing that the transnational digital networks associated with K-pop and these Asian American YouTube stars go hand in hand with the affective intimate connections fans have to them.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] At the end of the show, JTM CEO Moon announces to the audience, now all reconvened, that this experiment was a mistake. He apologizes to Jerry, then proclaims: "We don't need to cross over to you, you need to cross over to us." The audience cheers, as if this is answer enough, as if this accounts for tensions and contradictions brought up throughout the show. Beyond the theater space, the show was also hailed as a success, winning three Lucille Lortel awards ([note 4](#)). As Ashley Park said when she received her award for best actress: "I thought, you know it's never gonna happen because nobody in the American Theater is going to take the risk on a story about Korean Americans crossing over into mass media in America. And guess what? [They] did" (promotional email, May 10, 2018). The conflation of Korean Americans with the show's mostly Korean characters (and the idea that they, though American, still need to cross over) seems to reiterate the constant in-between space that Asian American performers hold in American media and that their success is dependent on the success of Asian performers.

[5.2] After Moon's proclamation, the show itself ends with a spectacular concert, complete with projections and confetti. As I look around the room at the audience members' excited faces, some people even shouting the idols' names as they come onstage, I believe the show has succeeded in making them K-pop fans, at least for the night. And maybe that is answer enough to demonstrate that Americans can accept

K-pop; but I don't know where that leaves me, or Jerry, or Tiny D.

[5.3] This theme of crossing over is obviously more complicated than it seems, as the show has pointed out in numerous ways; from K-pop's transmedia crossings and transnational fan networks, to the ways in which K-pop idols transform themselves to suit a new album concept or audience, to how one subset of the audience—at least for the scope of this essay—is already familiar with a surprisingly similar negotiation, even as it plays out differently in individual circumstances. What does it mean when you have crossed multiple times, both physically and virtually? When those crossings are so intertwined that they bleed into each other, overlap, and were never that divided in the first place? Perhaps the crossing that *KPOP* talks about is not a matter of being stuck between two countries nor a matter of feeling not foreign enough or not American enough, but rather of being in a crossover state. This crossover state is not static but made up of the flow and movement of the numerous crosses we have taken, both virtual and physical. The moments of crossing in the show—from audience to fan, from medium to medium, and across the web of Asian diaspora—reflect a cross-section of relations with ourselves and each other, culminating in a moment when you look at K-pop idols and do not see a line to be crossed, but rather how they—their flows, their transformations, their movements—comprise where you already are.

6. Acknowledgment

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7. Notes

1. This is the combined number of attendees for KCON LA and KCON NY in 2017. In 2018, this number jumped to 147,000.

2. "Hallyu," or the "Korean Wave," refers to the global increase in spread and popularity of South Korean culture and entertainment, such as movies, TV dramas, and music.

3. This sense of global Asian community through Asian pop culture is often seen as complicated by scholars, as it suggests a practice of community building through consumerism; see Cho (2017).

4. The Lucille Lortel awards are for excellence in off-Broadway productions. *KPOP* won for best musical, best actress, and best featured actor.

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SYMPOSIUM

Approaching whiteness in slash via Marvel Cinematic Universe's Sam Wilson

JSA Lowe

[0.1] Abstract—This essay articulates the privilege of being a white writer within fandom and addresses the importance of Sam Wilson as a specifically black character in considering the author's own status as a disabled queer woman.

[0.2] Keywords—Critical race theory; Fan fiction

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[0.3] This is not a thought experiment. America is literally unimaginable...without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2018)

[0.4] This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

I. A sort of question

[1.1] My unswerving devotion to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's character Sam Wilson began without warning, just like any other fandom "origin story," as Mel Stanfill (2018) has called them: I walked into a movie theater as one person, and walked out another. My theater companion was too perceptive not to notice my starry-eyed euphoria after *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014)—a movie that I promptly

saw again the next day, in spite of complaining to her, "I can't have another ship!" Her expression was knowing as she replied, "Looks like it's a little too late for that." And thus my first Marvel ship became Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) and Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie). The characters met cute on the Washington Mall, followed by an intensely personal conversation about being veterans of war, Sam's unquestioning sheltering of Steve and Natasha Romanoff when they have to flee S.H.I.E.L.D., and his waiting beside Steve's hospital bed as he sleeps. Through all of this, the two men have fabulous chemistry—and, at least as far as I was concerned, flirted outrageously throughout the whole film.



Figure 1. Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers at the Veterans Administration in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). Screen cap by Gavia Baker-Whitelaw.

[1.2] Another element of Sam's character called to me, though—not just his potential as part of a pairing, but also his traumatic past. For I am an American living with a disability. I have PTSD, in addition to several other clinical diagnoses. I go everywhere accompanied by my psychiatric service-dog partner, I am regularly hospitalized, and I will probably be in treatment for the rest of my life. Because I am also a white queer cisgendered woman, it might seem strange that I immediately cathected Sam Wilson, a black man whose deep loyalty both to service and to Steve Rogers is without question. When Steve visits Sam at the VA and overhears him addressing other military veterans, something in me resonated at the same frequency: beyond Mackie's to-be-looked-at-ness (per film theorist Laura Mulvey) or Wilson's compelling comic book qualities, the character spoke to me directly. When Sam Wilson states that there are memories one must choose to leave behind in order to go forward, I believed him, as if he were someone who knew exactly what that entails. Sam seemed to emanate the calm awareness of someone who has entered fire and come out the other side after great suffering and hard inner work. The character's depiction approached a level of verisimilitude for me that I wasn't expecting from a superhero film.

[1.3] You can imagine my disappointment, then, when I couldn't find nearly as many fan works celebrating Sam Wilson as I hoped, and those I did find were frustratingly inadequate to my needs. His unwavering loyalty to Captain America is certainly a defining feature of his character, but it's not his only trait; Sam is also intelligent, dry-witted, and charming, though under duress he does lose his cool. Fan fiction featuring Sam seemed divided into two approaches, neither of which I found satisfying. Most frequently, fan writers seem to take advantage of his background in social work and that same generally calm demeanor and press him into employment as the Avengers' free therapist. That the Avengers all desperately need therapy isn't the issue; it's that Sam

Wilson then becomes sidelined as support for various traumatized characters (Coker and Pande 2018). While I was grateful to see Sam in fan fiction at all, this limited role wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

[1.4] The other popular instantiation of Sam presented him in an oddly race-blind way: he might be shipped with Steve Rogers and thus take on a major role in the story, but the texture of description in the writing overlooked or purposely ignored his identity as a person of color to the point where he seemed almost translucent. In otherwise meticulously crafted fiction, while Steve's physical beauties are vividly enumerated, even lingered over, Sam's skin, hair, eyes, features, and voice are often never even mentioned. Apparently fearful of fetishizing him, writers instead effaced him almost out of existence. Given fans' passion for in-depth physical descriptions and sensory details, this gaping absence puzzled me. Mackie's distinctively African American Vernacular English line readings are a major part of the character's charm. Sam Wilson is both visibly and audibly African American, especially surrounded as he is by very white characters.

[1.5] I could feel the lure of either position in my own fannish affect; one of my tags on Tumblr has long been "Sam Wilson is better than you," because frankly I felt that he was. His recovery from trauma seemed aspirational and, in some ways, out of reach. Perhaps some writers lionize him out of fear of rendering him flawed. By now the wince-worthy faux pas of describing dark skin using food metaphors is common knowledge enough for most readers of any race to laugh at those who commit it. Yet slash writers are otherwise driven to take risks, at least certain kinds of risks, in their writing. Generally they do not shy away from lavish, even abject, levels of physical detail; thus (primarily white) writers either turn away from his blackness or are unable to see him as he is — what Caliban, in Aimé Césaire's 1985 *A Tempest*, calls "the privilege of nothingness" (28). When Ta-Nehisi Coates (2018) states that the national identity is unimaginable without the condition of whiteness as belonging, this imprimatur extends to the slash body, predicated as it is on bodies more like those of Steve Rogers.

2. In lieu of an answer

[2.1] I was arriving at the conclusion of every fan writer who came before me. If I wanted a serious, reflective, thorough, granular investigation of Sam Wilson and how he became who he was, I would have to write it myself. The repeated omission of his fundamental blackness couldn't be overlooked — or at least I was not able to overlook it, and as we know, the problem with not being able to ignore something is that then one is called from theory to praxis, as Toni Morrison (1992) discusses in the shift in perception vis-à-vis the absence and/or depiction of black characters:

[2.2] My early assumptions as a reader were that black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers. [...] This was a reflection, I thought, of the marginal impact that blacks had on the lives of

the characters in the work as well as the creative imagination of the author. To imagine or write otherwise, to situate black people throughout the pages and scenes of a book like some government quota, would be ludicrous and dishonest. But then I stopped reading as a reader and began to read as a writer. [...] I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive, an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this. [...] What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence. (15–17)

[2.3] I did not want to be a white writer whose transformative works suffered such a "choked representation." Nor did I wish to fall into the category of those doing "hard work *not* to see this," devoting considerable rhetorical acrobatics to arguing away my failure to pair or even include characters of color. Any time I have chosen, however unconsciously, to wave away reality, it has always been to my own harm and that of those with less privilege. To attempt a remedy would not be an onerous task. I wondered if I would be able to write Sam Wilson, and what he might say or do in the event that I tried to depict him with attention and craft.

[2.4] The other concept that kept resurfacing as I thought about making such an attempt was that of the Derridean trace. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes it in her translator's preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "Derrida's trace [erasure] is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack of the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (1998, xvii). Sam's strangely pellucid appearances in slash seemed bounded by precisely this kind of function. His racelessness was the absence of a presence, a curious sort of originary lack repeatedly pushing him, even when ostensibly given half the attention, into the blur of background. Again, though, slash writers are usually particularly gifted at pulling what is disregarded into sharper focus; as Spivak remarks, "The bricoleur makes do with things that were meant perhaps for other ends" (xix). In the case of Sam Wilson (whose version in the graphic novels later becomes Captain America himself), he was clearly meant to be as rich, densely textured, and full-bodied a character as his on-screen counterparts. I thought he deserved to be written as such.

[2.5] Everything crystallized for me one night at a dance club when a friend darted into the swirling crowd to rescue a fallen beer bottle, afraid someone would step on it, while the rest of us did nothing. As I watched her, I thought, in that distanced way writers have, "That's something Sam Wilson would have done." Nearly ninety thousand words later, I still have not finished figuring out what Sam Wilson would have done or why he might have done it. It turns out, though, that after one watches half a dozen documentaries on Air Force pararescuemen, one learns that Sam's service record is far more impressive than any of the regular human Avengers' training. Parajumpers endure

years of demanding physical and mental preparation, and they daily perform some of the most grueling rescues known to the armed forces. I had also become a fan of the military sci-fi program *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004–9), one of whose main characters, John Sheppard, is an Air Force officer and helicopter pilot. It felt instinctive to pair the two: both served in Afghanistan and lost friends in combat; both are orphans; both their universes are set in the present day. I found myself curious about what might happen if the two men met in the summer of 2014, after the events of *Stargate: Atlantis* and *Winter Soldier*.

[2.6] In approaching this project I had several goals, primary among them to write, as a white gay woman, a black gay man in a way that read as convincing and unforced. I wanted his career as a social worker and his military background to be intrinsically a part of him in the same way that his maleness or his blackness would be—not something a reader could isolate or a writer could excise, but rather something woven through his entire character and mode of being, yet also without solely defining him. "Difference," Derrida states, "cannot be thought without the trace" (1978, 57). I thought that to create (or be created by) such a trace would be like the visual artifact of a moving light source that convinces us we see a line instead of a point. *Veteris vestigia flammae*, Virgil wrote, describing Dido's pyre: "traces of an ancient flame." What remains—what perdures, what is remnant—can point us back along its path toward what is, and possibly to what could be. I decided that even if a recovered Sam Wilson began a relationship with a recently traumatized white career officer, he couldn't be used as an emotional can opener; each character needed to have his own story and his own resources to be used toward solving his own problems. I wanted the point of view to switch back and forth between chapters, and because I also wanted to be ruthlessly quantitative as a way of ensuring that Sam wouldn't slip unnoticed into the background, I made a spreadsheet to track the word count of each chapter. Finally, I wanted to explore my own PTSD diagnosis, my treatments, and my recovery through both characters' stories.

[2.7] None of this is in any way revolutionary, or shouldn't be, but it has been a revelatory struggle for me nonetheless. The driving intersectional questions have been less "Can the subaltern speak?" and more "How many adverbs is the subaltern allowed to use before my beta cuts him off?" Against a hundred episodes of *Stargate: Atlantis*, there exists only approximately half an hour of Sam Wilson's time on screen, so I ransacked the graphic novels for more of his origin story. The *bricoleur*, says Derrida, quoting Claude Lévi-Strauss, "is someone who uses 'the means at hand,' that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary" (1978, 290).

[2.8] Sam Wilson and John Sheppard therefore have become repositories, bricolaged simulacra of people I know, from military servicemen and servicewomen in documentary films to fictional characters, including other versions of themselves from well-known fan fiction. Au fond, though, I am drawn to telling my own story—the story

of how any person repairs his or her intrinsic *eidos* after trauma, which is to say a disruptive, violent breach of the self. Trauma, psychologist Bessel van der Kolk (2002) tells us, overtakes our normal coping capacities and can be defined as that which "comes to dominate how victims organize their lives," while psychiatrist Jon Allen puts it thus: "The bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness" (2008, 22). Trauma researcher Judith Herman has a similar definition, one focused on that loss of agency: "Psychological trauma is an affiliation of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. [...] Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (1992, 33).

[2.9] Intersectionally speaking, I have more in common with my partially inherited, partially concocted version of Sam Wilson than with other source-text Marvel characters. In a work of fiction, the two characters can stand eternally on either side of the divide, both wounded and healed, forever disabled and forever able, because the beauty of fiction is that, as with any other dramatic agon, the writer-reader need not pick a side. The stichomythia of two characters as they argue remains intact for other participants in the rhetorical practice to investigate. My only task, and one I have tried hard to adhere to, was to set my unexamined biases and privilege aside as much as possible so the story could fight its way through.

[2.10] Inevitably I failed. I won't recount the Beckett quotation that has become an Instagrammed bromide to soothe our humiliations. Yet I want those humiliations to stand. As a white person with privilege, I want every single time I have been in error, and been fortunate enough to have that error pointed out to me, to ring out for as long as possible, like a struck tuning fork. While it still sounds, I can locate the trace and track back along it to an originary lack, that primitive source of deferred *déferrance*, and investigate it. The wretchedly uncomfortable hot sting of guilt is as vitally necessary as the flashlight bobbing in the darkness ahead. After a long time, and after a great deal of practice in therapy, even as flawed and discursive an organism as a traumatized human being can learn to approach a negative stimulus rather than avoid it. Moving toward the cue rather than away from it thus becomes an additional layer in the transformative nature of our creative work. Moving toward Sam Wilson with interest, curiosity, affection, and respect has been important to me, not simply as a fan author but also as a white and disabled thinker and scholar—and as a broken, learning human being.

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ROUNDTABLE

Fans of color in femslash

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[0.1] Abstract—This roundtable discussion brings together a group of fans of color to discuss their experiences specifically in femslash fandom.

[0.2] Keywords—Gender; Intersectionality; Racism; Sexuality

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I. Introduction

[1.1] Femslash is a minority of shipping. The top 100 pairings on the Archive of Our Own (AO3) in 2017 were 68% male/male, 20% heterosexual, and only 4% femslash (with 5% general or nonromantic fiction and 3% other) (centrumlumina 2017). Correspondingly, the specific experiences of fans of color in femslash have not been well understood, even as work emerges on fans of color in heterosexual ships (Warner 2015a; Warner 2015b), m/m slash (Pande 2016), and general fandom (Pande 2016; Wanzo 2015). This discussion, alongside work by Pande and Moitra (2017) and Navar-Gill and Stanfill (2018), attempts to fill part of that gap. Modeled on the 2009 "Pattern Recognition" dialogue (TWC Editor 2009), the organizer posed a series of questions, and participants answered them and responded to each other over the course of several weeks in early 2018. The dialogue brings together a group of participants who all participate (or have participated) in the Swan Queen fandom (*Once Upon a Time*, 2011–2018), but have also been involved with multiple other femslash fandoms over time. The conversation that follows has been lightly edited for clarity and flow.

2. Question 1

[2.1] Mel: Tell me about you.

[2.2] Leo: My name is Leo and I'm a recent graduate of the University of Michigan. Next fall, I'll be starting at the School of Social Work with a focus on community organizing. I'm also a 21-year-old Chinese transgender man who writes fan fiction that often centers queer relationships. And I have two moms. Basically, *Modern Family* (2009–).

[2.3] Asher: I'm a black woman from the Caribbean living in the United States for the last 20 years. My first foray into fandom was with the B'Elanna/Seven pairing from *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001).

[2.4] Regina: I'm a nurse who retired early due to disability. I'm mixed heritage with one half being German/Irish/Mexican and the other half Mexican. I'm an out lesbian now that I no longer have a career. I have always been interested in fandoms, but since retirement I have gone from observing them to being more involved in them.

[2.5] Eri: I'm a 29-year-old queer, Brazilian, nonbinary, neurodivergent, light-skinned black person. My first fandom was *Xena* (1995–2001) but I've only been continually in fandom since 2012.

[2.6] Ema: I am a first-gen butch, yellow Trinidadian American who still questions my family's choice in coming here but am still grateful because otherwise I may not have known about Tumblr and AO3. I am an OD survivor with C-PTSD and a myriad of other health conditions, one of which, in some people's opinion, is lesbianism. I am still new to the fandom/fan fiction world, as in I found out last September, but I'm currently working on projects for two of the fandoms I'm in.

3. Question 2

[3.1] Mel: Fandom often likes to think of itself as progressive and femslash fandom even more so because it's primarily queer women and nonbinary folks. Do you find there's any truth to that? Is it better than straight fandom? Worse? Different?

[3.2] Eri: When comparing straight fandom and femslash, yes, femslash is better overall.

[3.3] Ema: I have seen at least racism and mental illnesses addressed more in femslash than I have in straight fandom, but to be frank, I try to avoid all straight fandom like it's a sloppy wet kiss from your great aunt. But I still believe we gays do it better.

[3.4] Regina: I find femslash fandom progressive in some areas such as feminism and queer issues, but in other areas such as racial issues they tend to be just the same as any other fandom I've been involved in.

[3.5] Asher: Fandom is racist, and femslash fandom is especially racist because it is so progressive. The presence of LGBTQ people in femslash fandoms gives people an excuse not to question unconscious racist ideas or beliefs. That said, femslash fandoms provide a framework for the argument and introspection needed to challenge these beliefs in a way that straight fandoms do not. We know how to challenge each other and accept new ideas. It is why we exist.

4. Question 3

[4.1] Mel: It sounds like there's a tension between queerness and race and not a lot of intersectional thinking in fandom. Would you say that's accurate?

[4.2] Regina: I agree with Asher above. I find many of the same harmful attitudes and beliefs about race in the femslash fandom, except with this group they tend to think they're shielded from much of the criticism due to their membership in a marginalized group.

[4.3] Asher: "I don't ship heterosexual ships" is a blanket excuse for dismissing many interracial pairings out of hand. To which, I respond, it is not the rejection of the interracial heterosexual ship that makes you racist. It is, instead, the forms that rejection takes. Is the nonwhite character not good enough? Does the very idea of the pairing make you angry? Do you find yourself attacking people just because they want it to exist?

[4.4] Eri: I agree with Asher, and it's not just the way we reject interracial straight couples but also how we easily pass judgement on shows with queer WOC representation, many times before it even airs ([note 1](#)). And I agree with Regina. Personal preference is often used to justify their racism, and since it's not something they go through, it's easy for them to dismiss it. And I think it's a similar situation with ableism. I very rarely see any conversation about it.

[4.5] Ema: Thank you for mentioning ableism. I deal with it more often than not with some of my medical and mental conditions, with both family and professionals, and I would love to see that addressed in general.

[4.6] Eri: I think racism is probably the most noticeable problem in femslash, and the biggest problem is people refusing to acknowledge they are being racist and they should change. It's easier for them to pretend nothing is wrong than to face that queer people can be, and often are, racist. And it's the same when talking about transphobia and ableism, people refusing to acknowledge a problem if that means having to change, and most of them choose their own prejudice. I know because I lost some friends just

because I asked them to stop saying racist and/or transphobic and/or ableist jokes. Once a person told me I was like poison (because I didn't want to hear racist jokes anymore).

[4.7] Asher: Which brings me to the one truism of fandom. Black people in fandom appear to be few, far between, and often not liked. A popular Tumblr puts it thusly: fandom hates black people, yo. Woo Boy! It is often assumed that I am being aggressive. I find myself the subject of attack in conversations where I am one of many talking about a certain thing. On the other hand, people listen to me on issues of race and privilege. It's an odd combination of being respected and targeted.

5. Question 4

[5.1] Mel: It sounds like you're saying people assume whiteness. Would you say that was accurate?

[5.2] Regina: Yes. I find the need to repeatedly prove my identity as a nonwhite member of fandom to be tedious.

[5.3] Asher: Conversations are hard to get started because you have to out yourself as not white. The default assumption in fandom is whiteness.

[5.4] Leo: I agree with Asher. I also feel like getting involved in a conversation about race immediately puts you in a position of being that person, that one POC who can't just be cool with what we've got.

[5.5] Regina: One thing I find common is when one Latinx voice echoes the white fan sentiment; this gains traction while my voice and the voices of those criticizing get ignored. My posts explaining my issues often die without much discussion.

6. Question 5

[6.1] Mel: So the response isn't that great when you point these issues out to white fans?

[6.2] Asher: No. You have to deal with the fallout. No one likes being challenged, but it becomes easier after a while, as I explained above.

[6.3] Regina: And then it becomes my voice against this rising tide of whiteness that is more concerned with their personal feelings being hurt than the harm against the Latinx community.

[6.4] Leo: And, like Asher said, no one wants to recognize their own biases or acknowledge that a show they like or a character they love is racist. No one wants to admit that something that offers an escape from reality is still just as problematic.

[6.5] Eri: Trying to start a conversation about racism when you're a POC is really hard, but in my experience it's hard in and outside of femslash. And white people don't just deny racism: when denying doesn't work, they start to attack us personally. Most of my experience with this is in real life so people usually frame their racism in a more polite way, but the core of the experiences are the same. So, I think it's basically the same.

[6.6] Regina: I think there are many people who want to learn and most have their hearts in the right place, but human nature seems to place personal comforts and enjoyments above making the world better for us all, and I'd like for people to understand better that sometimes, I just get exhausted of it all.

7. Question 6

[7.1] Mel: Tell me more about that "putting personal enjoyment first" part.

[7.2] Leo: The problem is, we don't have as much as others like to think. Queer and trans POC still have stories that deserve to be represented, and when we try and voice our opinions, we're not taken as seriously. In fandom, I think it's really common to have our concerns dismissed as us not being grateful enough or being too picky.

[7.3] Regina: Since becoming more involved in fandom beyond simply being a reader of fan fic and what they called a lurker, I tend to be more of an activist due to my identity that I'm proud of. It took years to accept myself as a lesbian, but I'd always been proud of my Mexican heritage and always remembered my grandmother's accented voice telling stories of generations of our family traveling north from their Mayan ancestors until she and her husband finally reached the United States. This pride doesn't let me accept what seems to be the majority of fandom's desire for me to sit quietly in the place they give me and be happy with any scraps of attention I may or may not be given. I'm also an older member of fandom, and as such I take a personal responsibility to try to make the experience easier for the younger people who may be walking in my footsteps. I always try to tell myself this time I'll be quiet and simply enjoy, but one example of oppression leads to another, and my fighting spirit rears up.

[7.4] Leo: I completely agree. I see a lot of folks in fandom try and say that having a canon white gay couple is a win for the entire community. But when queer or trans people of color try and point out that many of us don't feel represented, we're told to create our own stories or to be happy with the little progress that's been made so far.

[7.5] And while I identify as a transgender man, I'm a man nonetheless, with privileges I try and keep awareness of. I don't usually write intimate scenes as it may make readers uncomfortable for a man to write love scenes between two women—specifically with the concept of the male gaze so easy for men to fall into. In truth, for the most part, I keep to myself. One of the only times I've actively engaged in fandom discourse is in regards to G!P fics, where one of the ciswomen characters magically or

some other way has a penis. I'm not sure how much of it has to do with my identity as a trans man, but I usually shy away from cis folks writing any sort of trans storylines or references to anatomy that can be related to trans topics.

[7.6] Mel: Can you say more about trying to avoid the male gaze? Similarly, there has been some controversy in OUAT fandom in particular over whether Regina (a Latina character) is fetishized. Do you have thoughts about that?

[7.7] Leo: In terms of avoiding the trope of male gaze and fetishization, I think the topic of intersectionality is once again a major problem in that there isn't any on the show. At least, there hasn't been. Regina, a half-white, half Latina woman, is written as very powerful. Her Latina heritage is also rarely addressed, which makes it easy for audiences to forget her background. But then in fan fiction, I see a lot of people trying to respect Regina's cultural roots with her speaking Spanish and being immersed in a mixture of Latinx cultures; some of them include Regina speaking Spanish as a means of romancing Emma, as if her being bilingual is some sort of kink, which definitely falls under fetishization.

8. Question 7

[8.1] Mel: It sounds like not many people are willing to learn. Is anybody?

[8.2] Leo: It seems like some people know the term *intersectionality* and will use it in discourse, but when we as queer or trans people of color explain that we have multiple identities that we feel are being overlooked, white folks in the fandom suddenly don't understand.

[8.3] Regina: At times I even see superficial understanding of queer and feminist issues, but for these there seems to be more open dialogues for learning while racial education seems to gain no traction.

9. Question 8

[9.1] Mel: So then given all that, why be in fandom? What's good about femslash fandom, for you?

[9.2] Eri: When I was eleven, I cried my eyes out when I watched Xena and Gabrielle kissing for the first time. I refused to believe Xena was gay 'cause that would mean she was still evil. It took me almost a week, but I understood that being gay didn't make anyone evil, and Xena was once again my favorite show. When I was sixteen, I joined Xena fandom and I consumed everything I had access to. I even read some fics in English (which was a very big deal for me at the time). Later I joined *Glee* (2009–2015), and Bering and Wells (*Warehouse 13*, 2009–2014) fandoms, and because of them I joined Tumblr, and that's when I started to be part of the femslash fandom.

But it was only after I joined Swan Queen fandom that I realized how important talking about social issues is. Before I never really talked about social issues in fandom (the main reason for that is because I was part of the Brazilian side of the fandoms I was in, and it's hard to talk about social issues in fandom, even today, at least in my experience) so I didn't know how bad it was (I actually never thought that not talking about something could be a problem).

[9.3] Leo: I was seventeen when I first joined a fandom. Until Swan Queen, the only fan fiction I had ever heard of was from Harry Potter. As a millennial, I have the privilege of growing up with an increasing amount of representation during my teen years and into young adulthood. Even though I had come into my identity as a trans man in middle school, there was still a lot I had to learn about inter- and intracommunity dynamics in queer and trans spaces.

[9.4] I first heard about Swan Queen the summer of Comic-Con 2013, right after comments regarding an LGBTQ story line had been made during a panel. At the time, I figured it's the creators' story, they have the right to go wherever they wish, not acknowledging that they'd been consistently queerbaiting many of the fans, teasing at chemistry between Regina and Emma but with no plans to pursue it. I also thought that since some of the actors identified themselves as allies to the LGBTQ community, that was enough. And I pushed back against the idea that there should be a gay couple on the show just for the sake of having one. I had completely missed the point of Swan Queen and the history of the fandom. I wasn't acknowledging the intersection of attractionality (sexual orientation) and race. The power that Swan Queen had, canon or noncanon, became blatantly clear. And as a nonwhite person, I finally began to understand what Swan Queen represented, or could represent.

[9.5] As I learned more about Swan Queen and what it represented, I saw that there had been a lot of discussion around Regina's Latina identity and what it would mean to have a nonwhite woman in a relationship with another woman. This show was about modern fairytales, after all, so why not?

[9.6] I don't remember what the turning point was exactly, but several folks in fandom had taken the time and energy to call me out on my homophobic rhetoric surrounding Swan Queen. Since then, I've been heavily involved as a fan fic writer for several femslash fandoms. I usually write for Swan Queen but have also written Clexa (*The 100*, 2014–) stories and Berena (*Holby City*, 1999–) fics. As a nonwhite person, I try to do the characters of color justice—acknowledging their canon racial identities and how that can affect social and interpersonal interactions.

[9.7] Asher: I was straight but curious when I joined the fandom for the B'Elanna/Seven pairing from *Star Trek: Voyager* fandom, bisexual a few months later, and an out lesbian within a year. The fan fiction helped me imagine a world in which loving a woman was normal, and the community gave me the support I needed to face a world in which it wasn't. I could not have come out without femslash fandoms. They were the only gay people I knew. From there it was forays into the femslash fandoms of

True Blood (2008–2014) and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001–2005) ending with Swan Queen.

[9.8] Eri: A few years ago, I was in *Carmilla* (2014–2016) fandom. I can't say it was an awful experience, but it was BAD, but because of *Carmilla* I've watched Kaitlyn Alexander's videos on YouTube, and they helped me realize I was nonbinary. Like, I already knew a lot about gender and nonbinary, but it was after watching one video in particular that I got that was an option for me. Femslash connected me with other neurodivergent people and helped me accept that part of myself, something that I refused to do before. I've never met an autistic person in real life, and autism is sort of taboo where I live, so connecting with other autistic people organically through femslash is priceless to me.

[9.9] Asher: Swan Queen has been the experience of a lifetime. The story had so much promise as a modern fairytale but quickly devolved into a lesson on what homophobia, racism, and misogyny really looks like in our society. In our lives and on the show, we were told and shown in every way possible that fairytale happy endings are reserved for straight white people alone.

[9.10] Eri: Asher once wrote a post about not letting your friends be racist toward you, and say something or change friends (I don't remember the words but it was something like that), and I think it's really important advice to follow IRL and in fandom life, and not just with racism, and my life's been better ever since.

[9.11] Leo: My identities as a trans man of color heavily impact my perception of queer ships, canon and noncanon. I'm also a child of two moms, which you'd think would've made me even more open to Swan Queen and femslash. Unfortunately, it took me longer than I'd like to have understood. I appreciate all of the folks who put in the energy and emotional labor to explain to me the significance of Swan Queen and how harmful the show had been. Even now, Asher and Angstbot are some of the folks I find myself constantly learning from on Tumblr and Twitter. I wish I had come around sooner, as I used some of the same problematic rhetoric as many of the homophobic fans outside of fandoms.

10. Question 9

[10.1] Mel: What would you want from white fans in femslash?

[10.2] Regina: I just wish other fans understood the words "None of us are free until we are all free" as more than just a platitude and lived the words they spoke. Stop forcing us to fight all the battles at the same time as speaking over us, using us as shields, and/or demonizing us.

[10.3] Asher: The assumption of aggression on the part of black women is racist. And please stop leaving racism clean up to us. It just makes us targets. Confront racism

when you see it. Quietly ask if you're not sure, but do not leave it to us all of the time. It's exhausting. However, do not use racism as an excuse to push your unrelated pet fandom agenda forward. It is painfully obvious when the actions to deal with racism are thinly veiled attempts to attack a group you dislike or push a preferred ship.

[10.4] Eri: Don't think you know what it's like to go through something that you personally don't/didn't experience yourself. You may think you do, but believe me, you don't. Never stop listening to other people's experiences with oppression, and never stop learning.

[10.5] Regina: I agree, we all bring with us our own life experiences that shape the issues we see as important. Many of us share commonalities, and that can be both a strength when it comes to queer WOC but a weakness when it comes to queer white women.

[10.6] Asher: Not all nonwhite experiences are the same. Let people share the richness of their experience with you. Certain groups will focus on different egregious experiences and that's okay. Asian fans may want you to understand the dangers of the Compliant Asian Woman trope whereas black fans will want you to be aware of the Aggressive Black Woman trope and the Latinas, the Hot-tempered Homewrecker trope. These are all different and all dangerous.

[10.7] Leo: I think because femslash is predominantly queer women and nonbinary folks, those of us who identify as men but also as queer or trans need to be better when it comes to taking on the task of education. Like with any social issue, but especially within a community that's already so overlooked. And as others have already mentioned, I would hope that more white queer folks in fandom take on the responsibility of calling out racism and acknowledging their own biases.

11. Note

1. This happened with *Black Lightning* (2018–), which had its representation of a Black lesbian character dismissed before its premiere by some (white) queer fans because its host network, The CW, had done a poor job of queer representation previously.

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REVIEW

Squee from the margins: Fandom and race by Rukmini Pande

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[0.1] Keywords—Feminism; Media fandom

Lee, Regina Yung. 2019. *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* by Rukmini Pande [book review]. In "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 29. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1671>.

Rukmini Pande. *Squee from the margins: Fandom and race*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018. Paperback \$67.50 (256p) ISBN 9781609386184.

[1] *Squee from the Margins* aims to rectify the dearth of scholarly monographs on fan studies focused directly on the tangle of race, ethnicity, nationality, and their interactions with a centralizing but unnamed whiteness. Rukmini Pande argues persuasively that fan studies must forego the assumption of a white Anglo-American norm to accurately account for what participatory online communities do. Using philosopher Sara Ahmed's (2010) concept of the feminist killjoy, Pande frames her approach as a disruption: her fandom killjoy manifests as a response to both accusations of incivility within fandom communities and the critical silence surrounding these insurrections from fandom scholars. Pande demonstrates the pressing need for transnational and intersectional addresses from within fan studies ([note 1](#)).

[2] Chapter 1 opens with a history of extant scholarship on media fandoms. Pande's deep knowledge of fan studies is immediately evident through citations of familiar names, works, and events, allowing easy entry to the text by fans and academics. Pande's avowed goal, a "rehistoriz[ing] of these narratives" (22), retraces scholarly discourse on fandom as women's work online, then identifies the collective effects of

this history as an often inadvertent, but no less critical, erasure of the differences in women's identities, whether through focus on homogenized fan populations or through analyses that center an uncomplicated Anglophone relation with a canonical text. Instead, Pande acknowledges the diversity in fan presence and identity already present within fan studies' originary texts and historical narratives, while indexing how that diversity has been stifled by the default whiteness of fandom spaces. When Pande undergirds this argument through a sustained examination of specific instances of fandom unrest as the location of unease around raced presence, *Squee from the Margins* presents an abridged reconstruction of fan wank as border skirmish between these contested forms of fan identities. In this context, RaceFail '09 emerges as an argumentative touchstone: "In terms of my argument, it is significant because it marked the first time in online fandom's history when SF/F's racist and imperialist characterizations were debated in a forum where authors and editors of SF/F magazines and journals had to engage with those questions, and the first time that alliances between non-white fans were made across forums and platforms" (33). The focus in fandom histories on the broken communal ties resulting from RaceFail '09 obscure this pertinent observation. By shifting her analytical lens to the lasting transformations in the experiences of fans of color, Pande's scholarship recuperates their understanding of this pivotal fandom event.

[3] Chapters 2 and 3 hold much of interest for sociologists and ethnographers of fandom, as well as for media historians interested in fandom platform use. Chapter 2 pairs foundational new media theory with interrogations of race, gender, and class. While Pande's brief mention of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) does not detail its contested claims regarding cyborg and race, the ghost of this concept persists throughout the chapter's critiques of the ways in which much digital humanities work has staged a "retreat" from the clutter of identity articulation" (Pande 49). In so doing, Pande notes, the digital humanities also disavow ties to colonial histories of media use and dispersal. Pande further argues for an address of diasporic fan communities, specifically their entrées into fandom, through anime's multilingual and transnational histories. The very plurality of Pande's ethnographic results convincingly articulates the necessity of multiple analytics, questioning the elision of diasporic and transnational fans through their clashing and partial accounts.

[4] The ethnographic data is powerful stuff, and the book is particularly strong when it appears. (Reading Te's articulate and thoughtful responses across several chapters is a delight.) Pande quotes respondents extensively to examine the affordances and restrictions of several online platforms as fandom mediums, arguing that the dialogical processes needed to launch that discussion beyond the gravity wells of individual erasure were better enacted through social media platforms like Tumblr than through the single-voiced primacy of journal sites such as LiveJournal or Dreamwidth. Chapter 3 extends this platform analysis into a larger discussion of the legacy of white feminism, evident through a lack of intersectional analyses within fan studies, which Pande reiterates through her discussion of Racebending (100–101), its practical purposes, potential essentialisms, and reception by fans of color ([note 2](#)). The interplay between intersectionality and transnational analysis appears multiple times in the

chapter as fans from Southeast and South Asia reject, question, or cautiously accept race categories applied to them and their fandom production.

[5] In chapter 4, the previous discussions come to a head. This theoretically oriented chapter concatenates the book's analytic threads into a single lens, establishing what Pande calls a "fandom algorithm." This algorithm, a multipart cascading logic, summatively diagnoses the processes that comprehensively muffle, isolate, and shunt aside fans' discussions of race. To illustrate this logic, Pande relies on media scholar Lisa Nakamura's (2013) formulation of the glitch, which argues that what looks like scattered instances of racist interaction are integrated components of online experience. This analytic approach mirrors feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins's 1993 analysis of racist oppression, which has four interlocking levels: the internalized, the interpersonal, the symbolic, and the institutional. These last two levels, which name the role of preconceived concepts as building blocks for the creation and maintenance of systems and structures of oppression, are crucial to understanding Nakamura's concept of the glitch's actual imbrication into the fabric of online interaction itself. Together, these feminist analytics form penumbral foundations for Pande's theoretical formulation.

[6] Pande presents this fandom algorithm in five parts, bolstering each with a specific case study. These build up to a deceptively simple claim: experiencing fandom as a liberatory escape into worlds of fantastic wish fulfillment is more possible for some fans than for others; this gradient runs along axes of race. Fan reconstructions of Marvel's Captain America through a queer history of the United States produce an intensely researched vision of the Marvel hero as concatenating figure for radical queer imaginaries—which simultaneously requires turning away from fellow hero Sam Wilson's canonical participation in activist struggle. Pande's description of searching for Sam Wilson through Tumblr and AO3 tags presents a quantifiable erasure, which provokes recognition of systemic whiteness expressed through a turning away from race, instead of a damaging address ([note 3](#)). The subversiveness of slash has already been troubled in later scholarship on the topic (Jones 2002); Pande extends this analysis to argue that maintaining such an uncomplicated claim depends on arguments about taste or pleasure: "If nonwhite characters are still getting sidelined in terms of fan work produced within such a [favorable] scenario, then it becomes clear that the seemingly value-neutral axioms or fandom algorithms are far from neutral" (135). Seen once or twice, as isolated incidents, perhaps one could consider Pande's case studies outliers. Seen in close succession, through Nakamura's formulation of the glitch, Pande's diagnosis of a repeating pattern gains considerable strength.

[7] Pande's last chapter is a methodological demonstration of her proposed approach. Pande opens a comparative overview of pornography and romance studies to produce a discussion of what the kink meme already knows: that sexual scripts are raced as well as gendered. In this last chapter, Pande seemingly leaves behind the raced for the sexualized body, then merges both analyses in the discussion of the kink meme's parameters for sexiness, illustrating how race is constructed through visibility and exclusion in explicitly sexual online play. Pande presents Kink Bingo (168) as an attempt at diversification still in the glitch, but reparative in intent nonetheless.

[8] Fan studies' struggle to establish its academic genealogies and bona fides also emerge in the silences of Pande's text. These omissions are certainly comprehensible in terms of Pande's overall challenge to fan studies: the gaps reflect the dynamics of its focus on Anglo-American cultural texts and the privileging of specific voices and experiences that has been its inadvertent result. But in construing entire fields of work as irrelevant to her central questions, Pande also reproduces a strange elision between the overtly imperialist histories of area studies disciplines, specifically Asian studies, and the significant contributions its publications have already made to Pande's fields of study.

[9] For instance, in chapter 4, Pande claims that there is "no sustained or book-length consideration of the role of racial identity in media fandom spaces" (112). While *Squee from the Margins* correctly questions whether an emphasis on national identity obscures racial categories, it does not pursue the theoretical issues surrounding its simultaneous deployment of intersectional and transnational analyses. These can be briefly summarized by noting that racial categories are built by and help sustain the national project; thus, the use of one category set in another national context can create artificial dissonance. The responses of fans outside the United States to being called "fans of color" (93–94) become sharper when considered through this dual interpellation. Their analysis requires a subtle address of race and racialization as constitutive national projects, and previous publications have pursued these ideas through sustained analysis of popular media. Combined with Pande's work, the books I have in mind make powerful interventions into fan studies.

[10] The first two books discuss the imbrication of race in national identity, through racialized nationality's strategic deployment as marketing tactic or diasporic shorthand. Another set of texts usefully destabilizes the nation, advancing arguments for linguistically based formations that bring dialect and diaspora to the fore. Sun Jung's 2011 monograph on the cultural hybridity of Korean masculinities is a sustained engagement with how East and Southeast Asian fans structure inter-Asia cultural circulation. Jung's work depends on the concept of inter-Asia cultural flows troubling fixed political or national centers, which together rearticulate geographically clustered identities as occurring between nationalizing frameworks. Ito, Okabe, and Tsuji's 2012 coedited volume on the *otaku* as genre tracks cultural flows within several transpacific participatory communities, as well as discussing how specific fan identities can trouble cultural or national belonging. This volume usefully reframes participatory communities as a querying of national boundaries through forms of practice, deftly reframing the stakes of splits in fannish identities across the Pacific Ocean. These lenses overtly implicate popular media into the national project, giving strength to Pande's claim for the necessity of postcolonial analysis of fan response.

[11] Earlier contributions of theory, such as Shu-mei Shih's 2007 monograph on the Sinophone as analytic mode, circumvent the foreclosure of the concept *nation* as a simple political and geographic claim ([note 4](#)). By disarticulating language and national belonging and focusing on the Sinophone instead of Chineseness, Shih gestures directly toward the postcolonial, diasporic, and fluently polyglot interventions that Pande claims

still need to be made. Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method* (2010) lays out another crucial methodological intervention, a decolonial reformulation of supposedly universal historical and cultural benchmarks away from Anglo-American norms through specific attention to postcolonial splits in national discourse in Taiwan's twentieth-century histories ([note 5](#)). Any of these works would have been useful referents for Pande's analyses, especially in chapter 1's too-brief discussion of the work of anime and manga fandoms in the formation of the diasporic fan and in chapter 3's call for a postcolonial theorization of online communities. These texts could only enrich and further nuance Pande's methodological imperatives to the field. They still can, especially if read and taught in tandem.

[12] I make no claims to widening the remit of fan studies to include more disciplinary homes nor require that fan scholars possess linguistic and cultural competencies at the level required for ethnography in someone else's field. Instead, I join in the spirit of Pande's call to action in promoting the recognition and inclusion of these valuable skills, and the work they produce, as foundations for fandom scholarship. Teaching texts by Chen, Jung, Shih, and Ito, Okabe, and Tsuji alongside Jenkins, Penley, and Pande produces the possibilities of a genuinely transnational fan studies (pace Morimoto 2017), sourced in the work of scholars whose linguistic, social, and scholarly affiliations cut and stitch unexpected affinities back together.

[13] With *Squee from the Margins*, Pande successfully levies the call for a reorientation of fan studies that establishes its baselines through fans of color around the world and that acknowledges its foundational scholarship as both incredibly profound and frustratingly incomplete. Pande's text is simultaneously a strong ethnographic record of fans who process their racial, ethnic, and national belongings through their fandom activities and an important call for fan studies to openly address the whiteness structuring its academic establishment. While the omission of discipline-specific work from Pande's constructed histories weakens the force of some points, its central calls to the work of fan studies remain both clear and urgent.

Acknowledgment

[14] This review was written based on an electronic advance reader's copy of the book. Thanks to University of Iowa Press for providing the ARC.

Notes

[1.](#) A similarly urgent argument about the ideological whiteness of fandom is visible across the work of Benjamin Woo, among several others, in the discussion of fandom and race in Melissa Click and Suzanne Scott's 2017 *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*.

[2.](#) Pande discusses the tricky dynamics of simultaneous disaffection and adherence,

somewhat indexed to awareness and identification with US American identity categories, surrounding this term in more detail in the second and third chapters of the book; see especially the diversity of responses in pages 93–94.

3. This is quite close to Peggy McIntosh's 1989 description of the knapsack of white privilege: the ability to turn away is itself an indicator of privilege.

4. Rey Chow's 2001 edited volume, which troubles Chineseness as an analytic category through disarticulation of national, linguistic, and cultural valuations of the term, would also be useful here.

5. I am grateful to Nishant Shah for recommending Chen's book to me.

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BOOK REVIEW

Bodyminds reimaged: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction, by Sami Schalk

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[0.1] *Keywords*—Black feminism; Fantasy; Intersectionality; Science fiction

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Sami Schalk. *Bodyminds reimaged: (Dis)ability, race, and gender in black women's speculative fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Paperback, \$23.95 (192p) ISBN 9780822370888.

[1] *Bodyminds Reimagined* begins with Sami Schalk's confession that she was "not initially a fan of speculative fiction" (1). Her book showcases the insights that emerge when a queer black feminist disability studies scholar becomes a fan of science fiction and fantasy, realizing after her first encounter with Octavia E. Butler that "this genre... was far more diverse, compelling, and politicized than [she] had ever imagined" (1). Discussions of race in science fiction and fantasy fandom have grown in visibility since the events of RaceFail 2009, a series of tough conversations and confrontations on the topic of race in science fiction (TWC Editor 2009). In recent years, questions of disability and ableism have also begun to gain prominence (Vanderhooft 2013). The intersectional feminist lens that Schalk brings to her study of disability in black women's speculative fiction will appeal to participants in these conversations who wish to deepen their knowledge. A major audience for *Bodyminds Reimagined* is likely to be

those who, like Schalk initially, have so far failed to recognize the transformative power of black feminist speculative fiction. Yet the book also has much to offer fans and scholars who seek a deeper understanding of the intersecting operations of race, gender, sexuality, and disability—both in speculative genres and in the world at large.

[2] Unlike most scholarly monographs, *Bodyminds Reimagined* directs itself as much to audiences outside of academia as to those within it. Schalk elegantly balances rigorous engagement with the scholarly conversations in her fields with a clear and welcoming style that foregrounds the process and experience of writing the book itself. As she states in the introduction, "this book did not write itself" (29). Schalk's analyses are foregrounded as the creations of her own bodymind in community with scholars, activists, friends, and other collaborators. Readers, no matter their entry point, are continually encouraged to join in Schalk's project through her mindful and judicious use of the first person: "I use *I* and *we* because I am a fat, black, queer, nondisabled woman who identifies with people with disabilities and who hopes to bring my communities together in conversation with one another through my work. If you, reader, do not yet identify with any part of this *we*—as part of any of these multiple *we*'s—then I hope that you may begin to as you read this book" (28). This potentially transformative invitation to engage with Schalk's text and with the works it discusses is extended to readers who identify with all, any, or none of the *we*'s Schalk invokes—whether they be students, teachers, fans, or simply interested individuals. Her explanation of the process by which the project developed first as a dissertation and then as a book will be especially useful for graduate students who are developing their own projects in related fields.

[3] *Bodyminds Reimagined* is a short book, less than 200 pages long. The decision to keep it to this length was doubtless part of Schalk's intention to create an accessible and approachable text. Its expansive introduction is followed by four chapters, each of which elucidates particular aspects of (dis)ability, race, and gender through speculative fiction by Octavia E. Butler, Phyllis Alesia Perry, N. K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, and Shawntelle Madison, and a conclusion that highlights the book's contributions while reflecting on the pleasures and struggles of the writing process. Each of the chapters can be read separately, though their power is increased when read in combination, emphasizing an overarching argument about the unique significance of black women's speculative fiction to understandings of disability.

[4] Two key concepts are elaborated across the book as a whole: bodyminds and (dis)ability. These form the foundation for Schalk's elucidation of contributions to disability studies that could only be developed through the specificities of black women's speculative fiction. Schalk attributes bodymind, a term that "insists on the inextricability of mind and body," to feminist disability scholar Margaret Price (5). For Schalk, the term is particularly crucial because it can encompass both nonrealist entanglements of mind and body, such as werewolf psychology/physicality or Butler's hyperempathy syndrome, and the impact that oppression makes "mentally, physically, and even on a cellular level" on marginalized people (5). The parentheticals in (dis)ability—the closest Schalk gets to using academic jargon—mark the "wider social

system" within which "boundaries between disability and ability" are "shifting, contentious, and contextual" (6). The parentheses provide a tool with which to discuss nonrealist representations of disability, ability, and hyperability, with (dis)ability providing a parallel framework for the ways that race and gender name vectors of power in black feminist theory.

[5] In the first chapter, "Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slave Narratives," Schalk takes on a trope that has been intensely critiqued within disability studies: disability as metaphor, when a character's disability carries symbolic or allegorical meaning. (Speculative genres are full of examples, from embittered supervillains whose impairments stand in for their alienation from society to wise blind advisers who see into protagonists' souls.) Disability metaphors are limiting because they obscure the materiality of disability itself by turning an embodied experience into a disembodied symbol. Through an extended analysis of Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred*, Schalk demonstrates that this critique cannot account for the ways in which disabled embodiments traffic as both material and metaphorical. In using fiction to reckon with the historical memory and contemporary afterlife of slavery, (dis)ability operates through and alongside systems of racialized and gendered oppression, and the disabilities represented in the text must be understood as both literal and symbolic. This detailed intersectional analysis of disability in one text both grounds the rest of the readings in *Bodyminds Reimagined* and lays out an approach that may be usefully adapted, as Schalk points out, to "any representation of disability in texts produced by or focused on [people] who...have histories of discourses of (dis)ability being used to justify their oppression" (57).

[6] Chapter two, "Whose Reality Is It Anyway? Deconstructing Able-Mindedness," focuses on Phyllis Alesia Perry's 1999 novel *Stigmata*, a text less widely read within speculative and science fiction fan communities than any of the others Schalk addresses. *Stigmata* focuses on a black woman, Lizzie, whose mystical connection to the traumatic experiences of her foremothers leads to her institutionalization in a psychiatric hospital. Schalk uses her reading of Perry's novel to set forth an analysis of the construction of able-mindedness, showing how "deviance from social norms, especially norms of race and gender, has historically been construed as mental disability, with its related material consequences" (64). Lizzie's experience of a reality in which her everyday life converges with the "rememory" of her ancestors is both a material example of mental disability and a metaphor for the everyday trauma that black people experience in being confronted with the ongoing realities of past and present systemic violence whose impact is consistently denied (81).

[7] With chapter three, *Bodyminds Reimagined* shifts focus from speculative engagements with the past to imagined futures. "The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future" returns to Butler, focusing on the speculative disability of hyperempathy (which leads people to experience the perceived pain or pleasure of others in their own body) created in the *Parable* series. In addition to analyzing *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Schalk draws from her extensive archival work with Butler's papers. The chapter, which I find especially effective as a stand-

alone analysis of speculative disability, examines the possibilities and limitations of the many scholarly engagements with hyperempathy before settling in to engage with the contradictions and complexities of Butler's imagination. Schalk shows how Butler's work overturns the convention of disability's absence from futuristic genre fiction that Kathryn Allan (2013) and other scholars have critiqued.

[8] Finally, chapter four, "Defamiliarizing (Dis)Ability, Race, Gender, and Sexuality," deals with disability as it pertains to nonhuman characters in recent fantasy fiction: N. K. Jemisin's blind demon in *The Broken Kingdoms* (2010), Shawntelle Madison's werewolf with OCD from the *Coveted* series (2012), and Nalo Hopkinson's half-god, half-human formerly conjoined twins from *Sister Mine* (2013). This chapter engages richly with the possibilities that black women's speculative representations of (dis)ability, race, and gender contain, once again merging the material and the metaphorical through nonrealist envisionings of disability that also decenter the colonial alignment of the human itself with whiteness and masculinity. Schalk's decision to combine the work of three writers, where previous chapters focus more intensely on individual works, allows for a broader scope of analysis but also has some drawbacks. Jemisin and Hopkinson's work could easily sustain full-length engagement on the order of Schalk's analyses of Butler and Perry; to merge them together with Madison's series is potentially reductive of both their diverse engagements with the fantastic and the specifics of paranormal romance. I suspect that Schalk is fully aware of this limitation and made a decision not to expand this chapter in order to keep *Bodyminds Reimagined* short and timely—a choice with which I can sympathize even as I was keen to see Schalk's incisive and generous analysis applied with greater breadth and depth.

[9] In the conclusion, as well as in concluding meditations within each chapter, Schalk moves from a more abstract critical voice into moments of first-person narrative in order to elucidate the ways that entering into relationships with the texts she analyzes has shaped her self-perception and her worldview—whether through the tools they have offered for navigating life as a queer black woman within white supremacist heteropatriarchy or through the sheer pleasure that reading them has evoked (145). These are some of the moments where *Bodyminds Reimagined* most closely connects with the concerns of fan studies, especially as the field attends to the production and implications of social difference and to the imbrication of fannish pleasures with oppressive social structures. Schalk shows how attention to disability within a fannish relationship to black women's speculative fiction can become a practice in which bodies, minds, and worlds are reimagined.

[10] That my only quibble with *Bodyminds Reimagined* has been simply that there was not enough of it should go far to demonstrate how much Schalk's book can itself inspire its own fandom. Indeed, in the few short months since its publication, the book has been received with energetic praise in its academic fields, with a well-attended "Authors Meet Critics" panel at the National Women's Studies Association conference in November 2018. Many scholars and fans in *Transformative Works and Cultures'* readership might not expect a book about disability in black feminist speculative fiction to be relevant to their areas of interest—but if they take up Schalk's invitation to join

her fandom, they may well find themselves surprised.

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REVIEW

Boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols: Queer fan cultures in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, edited by Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao

Erika Junhui Yi

[0.1] Keywords—Chinese queer fandom; Transcultural fandom studies; Transnational fandom studies

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Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao, eds. 2017. *Boys' love, cosplay, and androgynous idols: Queer fan cultures in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. Hardback \$60.00/£47.00 (256p), (ISBN 9789888390809).

[1] *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (QFC)* is a collection of case studies focusing on Chinese-speaking queer fandom that aims to fill the gap of literature on queer fandom in a Chinese-speaking context, especially that of mainland China; bridge the traditional Anglo-American media fan studies with the transnational and transcultural Chinese-speaking fandom research; and provide cross-cultural comparison between mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The following sections will discuss the organization of the book in general and provide a chapter-by-chapter analysis, in order to illustrate how this volume addresses the three goals.

[2] This hardcover book consists of ten chapters with occasional pictures, photos, and charts embedded as supportive evidence. The book chapters are divided into three major sections based on the geographic region of the case studies. Echoing the

geographic and cultural regions discussed in *QFC*, the book cover features a photo of four female cosplayers dressed/cross-dressed as characters from the Japanese manga and anime series *Hetalia*; the four characters are the personifications of Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, and Japan. Chapters 1 through 6 in the China section offer a collection of case studies of fandom in mainland China, while chapters 7 and 8 focus on Hong Kong and chapters 9 and 10 on Taiwan. With the China section taking up the largest portion of *QFC*, this book indeed contributes to the much-needed study of queer fandom in mainland China, while the Hong Kong and Taiwan sections serve as great comparison pieces to illustrate each region's uniqueness in queer fan culture due to their vastly different cultural, social, and political influences.

[3] Using the concept of queer as an overall analytical lens, this book unites the chapters as well as the discussion of a broad range of fannish activities under one umbrella, such as fan readings of transnational androgynous celebrities, BL (Boys' Love) fandom practices in various contexts, gender performance of cosplayers, and the fan readings of the transgender media character DongFang Bubai. Queer in this context "serves as an umbrella term used...to loosely refer to all kinds of nonnormative representations, viewing positions, identifications, structures of feelings, and ways of thinking" (xii). However, in each chapter the authors have a unique perspective on the interpretation of the queerness and the queering of Chinese-speaking fandom. For example, in chapter 3, Ling Yang connects the discourse of nationalism with the queer interpretations of Chinese *Hetalia* fandom; in chapter 5, Shuyan Zhou uses carnival theory to illustrate how a celebrity BL matchmaking incident escalated into an online carnival and the fallout afterwards; and in chapter 9, Weijung Chang frames the BL practice in Taiwan within a Japanophilia context. This book not only provides an extremely diverse array of topics but also transcends the study of queer culture above a "polarized resistance/capitulation model" (xxi), depicting a complex cultural ecosystem that is intricately connected with and influenced by technological advancement, local history, media policy, and cultural roots.

[4] One of the most notable features of *QFC* lies in how the authors negotiate a sense of cultural uniqueness via the purposeful use of Chinese pinyin and Cantonese romanization. The authors choose to use Chinese pinyin (romanized representation of Chinese words) instead of English or Japanese translation to refer to several fannish terms, the purpose of which is to emphasize some concepts that are unique to Chinese-speaking fan culture, such as *feizhuliu* (nonmainstream), *weiniang* (fake girls), *leiji* (shocking drama), *shengnü* (leftover women), and *tongzhi* (gay). The authors also opt to use Chinese pinyin to distinguish nuanced Chinese cultural concepts from the corresponding Western or Japanese translations. For example, the term *danmei* is used instead of *tanbi* (Japanese), *ke'ai* (cuteness) instead of *kawaii* (Japanese) or *aegyo* (Korean), *zhongxing* instead of neutrosexuality, and *meili* instead of beauty. Although this use of Chinese pinyin poses readability difficulties for a non-Chinese-speaking audience, some of the usages are indeed necessary. For example, in chapter 2, Shih-Chen Chao illustrates in detail the cultural differences between *ke'ai*, *kawaii*, and *aegyo*, even though on the surface all the terms mean cuteness. Eva Cheuk Yin Li and Maud Lavin explain in chapters 7 and 8 that the term *zhongxing* is often associated with

ambiguous sexual orientation in a Chinese context, as opposed to the simple reference to a gender-neutral fashion style. Although some of the pinyin usages are unjustified due to the lack of discussion within the context of the articles, *QFC* remains one good example for non-Western cultural studies on the intentional usage of original terms to emphasize the contextual and cultural differences of certain terms and concepts even if terms of similar meaning exist in other languages.

[5] The China section starts with chapter 1, which provides an overview of the *danmei* fandom in mainland China. Yang and Yanrui Xu illustrate the *danmei* fandom from three aspects—infrastructures, *danmei* circles, and the online space for Chinese *danmei* fandom, presenting the readers with a technology-enabled transnational fandom sphere consisting of *danmei* content from both local and imported sources. This chapter gives readers a glimpse into the intricate fandom system in mainland China, where the local, the Japanese, and the Euro-American *danmei* materials coexist and mutually influence one another. Chapter 2 is a case study of the Alice Cos Group—an all-male cosplay group dedicated to cosplaying female characters in their girlish and cute gender performances. Chao draws a contrast between the group's feminine performance characterized by *ke'ai* (cuteness) and *sajiao* (coquettish) and the members' real-world heteronormative male identities, highlighting the inconsistency between group members' performed queerness in the public sphere and their assigned male social roles. In chapter 3, Yang illustrates beautifully the Chinese nationalism expressed in Chinese *Hetalia* fandom, as well as a transnational BL fantasy world of grand union—a clever Chinese word play on the double meaning of the word *tong*. The term *grand union* (*datong*) jokingly appropriates the Confucian idea of a utopian world to refer to a dream world for BL fan girls where same-sex relationships (*tongxinglian*) are widely celebrated. In chapter 4, Jing Jamie Zhao discusses transnational fan gossip regarding androgynous celebrity Katherine Moennig. Living in a censored and highly heteronormative media environment, Chinese fans use celebrity gossip to negotiate and explore their gender and sexuality while expressing a longing for an idealized fantasy Western world. Both chapters 3 and 4 discuss the national/transnational fandom practice and manage to go beyond a binary presentation of normality/resistance to present instead a hybrid queer culture with distinct Chinese flavors. In chapter 5, Shuyan Zhou leads the readers through the journey of an online carnival of a BL matchmaking between two Chinese male musicians, Wang Leehom and Li Yundi. Zhou characterizes this online media event as an online carnival and pinpoints the moment when a fan-constructed online carnival transgresses the boundary between reality and fantasy and between the homoerotic and the heteronormative. Chapter 6 showcases similar online fannish activities, wherein fannish products transform a shockingly bad TV drama featuring Dongfang Bubai, a long-standing fictional queer icon, into a precious cultural resource. Egret Lulu Zhao discusses three types of queer readings that empower both this tragic villain and the fans via their creative fannish interpretations. The China section of *QFC* collects a diverse range of topics, bringing some of the lesser-known Chinese queer culture aspects into international academia.

[6] The two chapters in the Hong Kong section present case studies of androgynous female idols. In chapter 7, Li compares the queer readings of Hong Kong star HOCC

before and after her coming out. Similar to the argument in chapter 5, HOCC's coming-out event served as a pivotal point for her queer fans, where the boundaries between fantasy and reality were transgressed and merged. The fan discussion shifted from queer fantasy to the negotiation of an appropriate lesbian embodiment after HOCC's coming out. The queer desire of the fans is entangled with the heteronormative society, restraining their perception of queer performance. In the case study of chapter 8, Lavin takes a different approach to the Corns—fans of mainland star Li Yuchun, an androgynous female idol who achieved international fame and popularity in the music and fashion industries. Lavin explores the identity negotiation of Li Yuchun's mainland-born, Hong Kong-dwelling fans to find a sense of belonging in a city openly expressing bigotry towards mainland Chinese and how they form cross-regional friendships, bonding over the gossip of Li Yuchun's persona. With its focus on androgynous female idols, the Hong Kong section could offer more in terms of topic diversity; however, Li and Lavin contribute fresh perspectives to the study of androgynous idols that largely take into consideration the local culture and policies. Zhao also presents a similar discussion of the influence of local media policy on fans' queer reading of an androgynous idol in the China section. The comparison of three cases suggests that the relatively liberal policies of Hong Kong give fans a real-world footing in negotiating queerness, whereas queer fans of mainland China still long for a Garden of Eden in a fantasy West.

[7] The Taiwan section includes chapters 9 and 10, both of which address the Boys' Love fandom scene in Taiwan. In chapter 9, Chang explores the heavy Japanese influence on the BL fandom practice in Taiwan. Contextualizing Taiwanese *fujoshi* (rotten girls, female BL fans) culture as a form of Japanophilia, Chang pictures the Taiwanese *fujoshi*'s BL fandom practice as facilitated and enchanted by Japaneseness and fueled by desiring Japaneseness. In chapter 10, Fran Martin further illuminates this Japanese influence in a historical context, connecting the policy changes in book publication with the transnational distribution of BL texts. Martin also dwells on BL genres and the readers' exploration into their own sexuality and desires by consuming such texts. The term *worlding* was coined to refer to Taiwanese BL readers' imagined Japan as a BL fantasy land as well as the social bonding among Taiwanese female readers inside "a social subworld at a local level" (211). The BL fandom scene in Taiwan features an intense Japanese influence while mainland China's *danmei* communities consist of circles of Japanese fandom, Euro-American fandom, and local fandom as described in chapter 1. In chapter 3, Yang articulates how the relationship between China and Japan is reflected in the *Hetalia* fandom, and these complicated feelings of mainlanders toward Japan are sharply contrasted with the Japanophilia BL fandom in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the censorship policy in Taiwan puts the region somewhere in between mainland China and Hong Kong, and Taiwanese fans both express a longing for a fantasy Japan like mainland Chinese and use BL fandom as a means to form friendships and social bonding similar to fans in Hong Kong.

[8] In addition to the queer analysis, all ten chapters address in one way or another the essential roles that government policy and censorship play in forming local queer fan cultures. Mainland China arguably has the most heavy-handed censorship policy,

and this heavy state control of mainstream media interacts with queer fans in different ways. On one hand, media censorship represses the queer expression in mainstream media and encourages self-censorship of fans, resulting in queer readings restrained by heteronormative social norms (chapters 2 and 4); on the other hand, heavy censorship in a way inspires fans to explore their sexuality and gender performance in a creative and innovative way (chapters 5 and 6). The *tongzhi* (gay) activism in Hong Kong not only redirects the fan gossip of HOCC but also provides queer fans in Hong Kong hope for "emerging homonormative codes" (148) to normalize queer culture. In Taiwan, the policy changes since the 1950s instigated several different phases of the distribution and consumption of BL texts in the local market, until the rise of the internet reduced the impact of ambiguous policies. Contextualizing the queer fan culture within the local history, government policy, and media censorship proves to be a fruitful approach in the study of non-Western queer cultures. Understanding the context of these cases is essential for transnational and cross-cultural studies in that the development of local queer fan culture is implicitly intertwined with the local traditions. The Chinese-speaking context also sets *QFC* apart from the pan-Asian queer studies, illustrating the local cultural nuances in more detail and presenting the queer fan culture with much more vibrant fibers.

[9] In conclusion, this book achieves its goals of filling the literature gap of mainland Chinese queer studies and contextualizing the Chinese-speaking fandom research that connects with yet differs from the traditional Western media fan studies. However, the cross comparison among mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan is relatively weak and mostly implied, and the chapters do not elaborate or provide sophisticated comparative readings. Another arguable shortcoming for *QFC* lies in some of the seemingly broad claims by the authors. Because of the low number of existing Chinese-speaking queer fan culture studies, it is understandable that the authors have made observations as cultural insiders and used such observations as supportive materials in their research. Some of the arguments do not specify whether the data came from personal observation or other sources, which could potentially discredit the arguments. Overall, *QFC* is a valuable addition to current queer fan culture studies, especially for the Chinese-speaking fandom. The book approaches queer studies with a complex nonbinary analytical lens and greatly improves the theoretical diversity of queer fandom studies. *QFC* will be a great read for those who are interested in Chinese fan culture and in transnational and transcultural media fandom studies, as well as in non-Western queer studies.

REVIEW

Seeing fans: Representations of fandom in media and popular culture, edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth

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Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth. *Seeing fans: Representations of fandom in media and popular culture*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. Hardcover £110 (336p) ISBN 978-1-5013-1845-0; paperback £28.99 ISBN 978-1-5013-3954-7; EPUB/MOBI £31.30 ISBN 978-1-5013-1846-7; PDF £31.30 ISBN 978-1-5013-1847-4.

[1] More than ever, the image of the fan is being redefined. Once told they needed to "get a life," fans have become established in contemporary society and are being discussed in terms of their power, impact, and potential as sociocultural agents. *Seeing Fans* interrogates such relevance, raising an instructive question about fans as influencers in popular culture: Does the contemporary media industry recognize fans as something more than silly, overeager devotees? This anthology offers a mixed response to this question by including a variety of stories told by fans, acafans, and media professionals about how fans are seen in media and popular culture.

[2] In their introduction, editors Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth explain that the collection explores the "multifaceted, complex, and sometimes contradictory" (2) aspects of fans, emphasizing that "fandom is constantly evolving" (8). Indeed, the

arguments by the collection's contributors are multifaceted, complex, and contradictory. By turns reinforcing and repudiating each other, the collection's twenty-five chapters situate authors in conversation, granting readers an understanding of where fans are positioned in the current cultural landscape.

[3] Part 1, "Documenting Fans: Shades of Reality," looks at a handful of documentary films about fans of local and global musicians. Chapter 1 pays attention to a less spotlighted fan identity: the disabled fan. Mark Duffett problematizes the illustration of disabled fans in the documentary *Mission to Lars* (2012) as needing the help of normal-bodied, socially successful nonfans, although he acknowledges that the film overall attempts to proffer a different reading about a fan. Also in this section is Sam Ford's "I Was Stabbed 21 Times by Crazy Fans." This is one of the most interesting and informative writings in the collection, revamping readers' biased images of combative and uncontrollable pro wrestling fans. By introducing the term *kayfabe*, Sam Ford informs readers that the exaggerated sporting event makes not only players but also fans into active performers in the experience. The sports arena functions "as a space for identity experimentation and performativity" (39).

[4] Despite the chapter's contribution to the anthology, it is not part of part 1's thematic stream, and its location between two chapters on documentaries illustrating music fandom is odd. Presumably the editors hoped to introduce the concept of fan performance by placing this chapter before ensuing chapters about another documentary, *Crazy about One Direction* (CAOD 2013). The following chapters in part 1 are indeed based on chapter 3's conceptualization of "fandom as performance" (43). They center on CAOD and on the Directioners, ardent fans of the British boy band One Direction. The film is criticized for "simplif[y]ing the complexity of fan cultures" (76) in chapters 5 and 6. The book editors give CAOD director Daisy Asquith an opportunity to defend her work in chapter 7, in which Asquith discusses the industrial pressure she faced to dramatize the fandom.

[5] Part 2, "Fictional Fans: Reading between the Lines" is the largest in the collection, analyzing representations of fans in TV shows and digital content. Part 2 asks whether the media industry acknowledges and valorizes fans or whether it ignores and dismisses them. The chapters within offer an ambivalent response. The section begins positively, arguing for a repositioning of fans. "The Image of the Fan in *Stargate SG-1*" unpacks the ways in which *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007), a Canadian-American military sci-fi series, "pays homage to both fans and the genre of SFTV by including the coded fan experience" (114). Contributor Karen Hellekson argues that the show's nuanced and metatextual representations of fandom enable it to engage with its fans. However, the following chapters contradict the preceding assertions that fans are becoming insiders, with chapter 11 affirming the significant and enduring power of media producers over fans. Melissa A. Click and Nettie Brock point to the writers and showrunners of BBC's *Doctor Who* (1963–89) and *Sherlock* (2010–17), who describe fan messages as "insane voices" (118) and warn that "fandom is fine if you do it for fun, but obsession is unhealthy" (121). These cases of fanboy auteurs indicate that digital convergence culture does not always allow the line between producers and fans to be

erased.

[6] Although subsequent chapters in part 2 echo this pessimistic view of fans' impact on the media production, they suggest that not all production processes are unilateral. For example, Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis show that some *Supernatural* (2005–) actors have friendly relationships with fans, unlike the show's creative teams. Kristina Busse unravels ways in which media producers also incorporate fannish activities into content. The chapter showcases ways Mary Sue, a common character trope in fan fiction, has been used in some mainstream media content. Finally, chapter 16 addresses the most contemporary and relatable example to younger readers of this book. Louisa Ellen Stein looks at cyberspace to demonstrate new perspectives of nonconformative media producers toward fans by dissecting *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–13), a web series on YouTube. According to Stein, in the digital universe, unconventional media creators—young women in this case—are aware of the importance of fans and their (financial) support. While traditional broadcasting systems are still dominated by male producers who tend to resist fans' input, these nontraditional producers actively respond to fans' needs and avoid negative gender stereotypes.

[7] Part 3, "Cultural Perspectives on Fan Representations," delves into identity issues in descriptions of fans in the mainstream media and suggests that tropes about fans like "danger, violence, and pathology or just loneliness, alienation, and loserdom" persist (188). Mel Stanfill opens this section with an important yet less discussed argument. Stanfill suggests that popular cultural representations operate as a site in which the straight white male body—almost always the norm—is exceptionally pathologized. In popular shows and films, fans with such bodies are feminized and infantilized, lacking "proper masculinity" (190). It's only when these characters "straighten up and fly white" (195) that the characters are allowed to claim their normalcy. Accordingly, Stanfill laments that fans in popular culture are still cast as deviant identities. This argument is echoed in chapter 20, in which Rukmini Pande directs readers' attention to fan scholarship: How does the discipline see fans? She emphasizes the importance of using postcolonial cyberculture theory in order to have unbiased perspectives. Pande discusses the tension between an idealized view of the internet as a liberated space and the reality of the internet mirroring off-line power hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South. Pande surveys fans and concludes that fan studies scholarship "has failed to adequately interrogate the racial demographic makeup of these communities, which has led to significant erasures and biases in their representation" (209).

[8] Part 4, "Global Perspectives on Fan Representation," claims to achieve what "fan studies scholarship has failed to" do—that is, include diverse racial groups (209). It includes chapters investigating representations of East Asian (female) fans—Chinese fans of BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–), Japanese fans of Hong Kong pop stars in the 1990s, and *otaku* and *fujoshi* in Japanese anime and manga. Lori Hitchcock Morimoto examines Japanese women who engaged with Hong Kong pop culture in the 1990s, a period known in Japan as the lost decade. Morimoto outlines the "social, gender, and professional constraints" (248) Japanese women struggled with during the period and

connects it to women's choices to overcome or escape that reality through "Japanese 'Asianization'" (257). The analysis of 1990s-era Hong Kong films in connection to the mentality of Japanese women during the period is outstanding; however, contemporary readers might appreciate an investigation of newer fandom. As the editors assert, "fandom is constantly evolving" (8). Even the Yon-sama fandom (that is, fans of South Korean actor Bae Yong-joon) in the early 2000s does not represent what is happening in East Asia today, and the chapter is not a timely example of how East Asian identities can be conceptualized.

[9] Beyond these academic essays, this volume boasts six interviews with media professionals, ranging from film directors to a fan vidder. These chapters let readers peek behind the media content. They offer readers production perspectives so that they can better understand how media industries see fans. Nonetheless, readers might find that questions are not challenging enough, and accordingly that the answers are not as fresh or critical as they hoped.

[10] This collection of short essays foregoes dense academic jargon. This certainly helps the book be more approachable and diverse. However, (academic) readers may wish chapters were longer and offered clearer theoretical frameworks and more in-depth analysis. The short chapters do not allow their authors to pursue multilayered and multidimensional discussions about their perspectives on fandom. Some chapters are devoid of a critical engagement, comprising only case studies, or they lack full discussion of important concepts. Others are primarily descriptive, summarizing what fans and/or the media industry are doing in a particular context. These limitations may lead readers to ask why some players in the media industry inevitably repeat existing paradigms for how they see fans. In particular, how can we conceptualize the ways contemporary media industries see fans? The editors leave these questions unanswered and do not provide readers with a critical framework to address them. These shortcomings comprise a limitation of the collection. This anthology is therefore not really about presenting academic and theoretical arguments. However, perhaps as a result, it proves to be readable and gratifying, evincing a varied assemblage of what is happening on the ground.

[11] The idea of fandom that is addressed in this collection is wide-ranging in terms of media genre and fan identity. It examines films, TV shows, newspaper, web content, music, and sport, and it includes fans with different identity markers such as ableness, age, gender, and race. The editors therefore claim that the edition attempts to present "how we understand the current landscape" (2). However, readers may still wish for an exploration of more diversity—as can be found with fans of online and video games—instead of finding chapters devoted to familiar subjects as in *CAOD* or *Supernatural*. Yet the decision to showcase popular mainstream media texts may be understandable because they may offer more points to discuss. Nonetheless, I found it discouraging that the claim to examine "the diversity of fan demographics" (211) was not better realized. The fans represented in this book are mostly from the United States, Great Britain, or Japan. Conspicuously excluded are fans in Latin America, Africa, and other parts of Asia and Europe. Racially marginalized and queer fans within the United States are also

bypassed, despite the growing representation of such identities in the media market. In this sense, this collection speaks more to traditional fans and misses ways the media industry is working to address a range of underrepresented fans at local and global levels.

[12] Despite these weaknesses, *Seeing Fans* faithfully achieves its goal. The anthology unpacks representations of media fans on the bases of historical approaches to media fandom and extensive research on various topics. *Seeing Fans* is a meaningful contribution to fan studies scholarship in which some writings reinforce and others tackle rosy perspectives on the power of fans in the contemporary media industry. The collection will complicate readers' perspectives on what industry and fans do. As such, this anthology presents fan scholars with useful frameworks for viewing and approaching fan studies, and it offers fans a glimpse at ways they are framed in the culture industry.

BOOK REVIEW

Speculative blackness: The future of race in science fiction, by andré m. carrington

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andré m. carrington. *Speculative blackness: The future of race in science fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. Hardcover, \$87.50 (304p) ISBN 978-1452949758; paperback, \$25 (292p) ISBN 978-0816678969; e-book, \$14.50 (2717KB), ASIN B01CTOJSOI.

[1] andré m. carrington's *Speculative Blackness* is a provocative examination of race, fandom, media, and speculative fiction. Rather than focusing on the most common subjects of Black science fiction study, such as the much-lauded work of Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, carrington more often attends to Black figures whose work has been underexplored, left on the margins, or escaped critical attention altogether. When he does consider popular figures such as *Star Trek*'s (1966–69) Lieutenant Uhura or Storm of the X-Men, he does so by asking unusual questions, in turn prompting fresh, original answers. Engaging with works as varied as the legacy of the Carl Brandon hoax or the significance of fan fiction featuring minor Black characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003) and the Harry Potter series, *Speculative Blackness* offers up keen analyses at the nexus of genre and Blackness in speculative fiction. carrington's painstaking exploration of race and the speculative is fascinating and invites readers to question their own previous readings of the overwhelming Whiteness of science fiction.

[2] The book is divided into six chapters, bracketed by an introduction and a coda,

that explore race and the speculative from several angles. While a cohesive argument flows throughout, the subject matter of each chapter is distinct enough that each could be read on its own, making it an ideal book to teach. In addition to providing detailed archival research and critical analyses in each chapter, *Speculative Blackness* includes several striking images in each chapter. Pieces published in obscure early fanzines, panels from comics, stills from science fiction films and television shows, and the like are interspersed throughout the text. These images are captivating, but they are also vital to the persuasive close readings carrington performs in the chapters.

[3] The chapters pay close attention to the significance of popular culture in the social construction of identity, with particular attention to the construction of race in science fiction across a variety of genres. To that end, its introduction outlines that the study that follows investigates "the Whiteness of science fiction" and "the speculative fiction of Blackness." carrington uses Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading while "employing a chiasmic formulation that juxtaposes the Whiteness of science fiction with the speculative fiction of Blackness to invoke the ways in which we can frame the meaning of Blackness in speculative fiction and media through a rhetorical structure characteristic of Black speech" (21). The juxtaposition of the Whiteness of science fiction and the speculative fiction of Blackness provides a productive point of departure for carrington's textual analysis, giving him space to probe questions of racial identity in unexpected places.

[4] To that end, carrington's study of the Carl Brandon hoax in chapter 1 exemplifies this notion of the social construction of race in strange places. The chapter looks at science fiction fanzines from the first half of the twentieth century, specifically focusing on how they understood and constructed notions of racial identity, and to a lesser extent gender identity, in fan spaces that were overwhelmingly white and male. Brandon was a Black science fiction fan and editor who was popular among a small circle of fanzine participants—except for the fact that Brandon was the creation of white Bay Area fan writer Terry Carr, and not a real person at all. Before Carr revealed the hoax, Brandon seemed to exemplify that science fiction circles were liberal and inclusive despite the seemingly small number women or people of color. carrington notes, "Although Carl Brandon emerged to inoculate fans against the charge of racial exclusion, the fact that he did not exist and disappeared before another fan identified herself as Black left the presumptive Whiteness intact. By understanding the means of producing Brandon's Blackness, however, we can recognize its continuity with the race thinking in science fiction fandom, rather than treating it as a lacuna" (64). carrington's reparative reading delves deep into what the Brandon hoax invites us to consider about race and genre rather than dismissing the deception out of hand.

[5] Chapters 2 and 3 explore the role of Black womanhood in the examples of Lieutenant Uhura of *Star Trek* and Marvel Comics' Storm, respectively. carrington persuasively argues that Nichelle Nichols's portrayal of Uhura has been undertheorized despite the significant critical and popular attention to the series. He asserts, "Because of the ways in which Black women have been marginalized in the production of popular culture, including the relative alienation of Black women from the SF genre's

conventional ways of envisioning race, gender, and sexuality, Nichelle Nichols...has yet to be recognized for her transformative contributions to the public interrogation of questions at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and utopian discourse" (69). carrington mines the series, Nichols's post-*Star Trek* collaboration with NASA, and Nichols's autobiography in order to excavate Nichols' agency as an actor and advocate. When carrington turns his attention to Storm of the X-Men, he notes, "The X-Men comics offer a revisionist interpretation of Black womanhood through the character Storm...to construct an account of Black womanhood amenable to the utopian ideals characteristic of SF works in the era" (90). By tracing the various trajectories of Storm's story lines—such as her origin story, the root of her claustrophobia, and how she compares to other Black women in Marvel comics, such as Misty Knight—he convincingly makes the case that Storm does more than represent the limits of racialized thinking. Instead, he insists Storm's characterization offers opportunity for the transformation of ideas of race in the genre. The panels he includes from various issues of the X-Men comics skillfully assist in the chapter's close readings. In both chapters, carrington cogently invites readers to reexamine what we think we know about two of the most recognizable Black women figures in science fiction.

[6] Chapters 4 and 5 move away from Black science fiction figures who primarily appear in white settings to analyze the significance of Black characters enmeshed in Black settings from works produced in the 1990s. Chapter 4 focuses on Black-owned Milestone Media's short-lived comics production, with particular attention to *Icon* (1993–97), its flagship title. carrington suggests, "*Icon* makes the fantastic discourse of superhero comics subject to the critical insights and political priorities ascribed to Black youth in the urban United States" (118). carrington profiles Black superheroes that encounter racism and deal with other mundane issues, such as teen pregnancy. In this chapter, as others, the inclusion of images is key. carrington includes several full-page panels reproduced in crisp detail that helpfully bolster his analysis. Chapter 5 returns to the *Star Trek* franchise with an in-depth look at the 1993–99 spin-off series *Deep Space Nine*. carrington's analysis is most fully realized in this section, and his close reading of the 1998 episode "Far Beyond the Stars" and its related novelization is especially adept and compelling. Captain Benjamin Sisko, portrayed by Avery Brooks, was the first Black protagonist of a *Star Trek* franchise, and Brooks also directed this important episode. carrington argues that the episode was a departure for the franchise in that it "replace[d] allegory with history" (161). More specifically, carrington notes that "Far Beyond the Stars" "and its adaptation by [Black science fiction writer] Steven Barnes represent the fullest expression of the series's potential to signify the meaning of Blackness for an era shaped by generations of print speculative fiction and genre television" (161). By foregrounding the role of history instead of allegory in the series, carrington makes the case that *Deep Space Nine* performs transformative work for the genre.

[7] The book's final chapter ends where it begins: with a study of fan culture, and specifically attention to the role of fan fiction in recuperating the stories of minor Black British figures in major science fiction texts. carrington contends, "Contemporary understandings of racial and national identities...and theories of desire that have

animated studies of fan fiction mutually benefit from an archive grounded in the reimagined media histories of people of color" (195). carrington's personal connection to the fan fiction site Remember Us helps flesh out the importance of fan participation in constructing meaning in contemporary science fiction culture. Analyzing fan creations that reimagine or extend the stories of characters, such as Kendra in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Angelina Johnson in the Harry Potter franchise, assert that despite these characters' marginalized status in their original series, viewers can and do have the power to make further meaning of their presence. carrington ends *Speculative Blackness* with a forward-looking coda that invites his readers to "refer to this book as the point of departure for revisionist interventions of their own" (238).

[8] *Speculative Blackness* makes significant interventions in several arenas; however, a few areas truly stand out. In particular, the monograph's study of fan cultures is outstanding. While his attention to fan culture is present in every chapter to some extent, chapters 1 and 6 really highlight carrington's sophisticated understanding of cultural production in science fiction specifically and pop culture more generally. Another significant aspect of carrington's text is its attention to reparative readings. Rather than pointing to deficits in the portrayals of Blackness, his analyses always return the reader back to what a particular character, comic, or series does accomplish. That is not to say that carrington's readings are Pollyannaish; rather, his attention is so keenly fixed on meaning-making that he draws the reader's attention to the presence of Blackness even when there is ostensibly only absence.

[9] carrington engages Black feminist theory among other critical apparatus, and thus the work will primarily be of interest to scholars and graduate students of a variety of fields. *Speculative Blackness* is in conversation with Afrofuturism, Black studies, science fiction studies, studies of fandom, genre studies, and literary studies. Yet his diligent attention to the workings of fandom and genre will also likely invite in the most ardent of fans. The text is remarkable for both its breadth and depth; it never reads as if carrington is a jack of all trades and master of none. Instead, *Speculative Blackness* exemplifies a critical and robust interdisciplinarity that is a model for those interested in engaging multiple fields with precision and complexity.