NET GAINS:

Media Fandom and the Evolution of Women's Online Presence and Identity

Thesis submitted to

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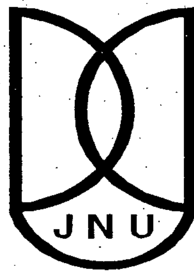
Master of Philosophy

by

Rukmini Pande



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Certificate

This dissertation titled "Net Gains: Media Fandom and the Evolution of Women's Online Presence and Identity" submitted by Rukmini Pande, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree, diploma of any university or institution .

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Declaration by the Candidate

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INTRODUCTION

> Real isn't how you are made. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real. (Williams, 4)

It is difficult to trace the root of an idea in the labyrinthine circuits of the human mind, harder still to narrow down the source of its inspiration – that magical, critical moment when idle musing turn sharp and all the pieces of a particular puzzle fall into place. I, for one, am personally hard pressed to recall when my fascination with popular culture began; perhaps it was the first time my mother read me *The Hobbit* as a bedtime story, or the first time I watched *Hum Hain Rahin Pyaar Ke* on the big screen. I am not sure. I was lucky to be exposed to a ridiculously rich library as a child and given free reign to read what I liked and that resulted in my having intense phases where at one point my time was devoted exclusively to Austen, and at another I was hunting frantically for the last book of Burroughs' *Tarzan* series, while at a third I discovered my grandmother's stash of Georgette Heyer's Regency romps.

This eclectic reading history was instrumental I think in my always having trouble with the "low" and "high" culture divide I would encounter when I started off my undergraduate career. Despite most of my academic life being spent in the study of canonical and thus apparently "elevated" literary texts, I have been grateful for teachers who pointed out that Shakespeare did indeed write primarily for the unwashed masses in the gallery, and that this fact was not incidental to my readings of his plays. The suspicion of the popular that seemed to become so entrenched in modern literature and its criticism was always troublesome, and so I think my focus instinctively turned to avenues in which I could interrogate it.

It was particularly serendipititous that around the same time that I was getting increasingly dissatisfied with the canonical readings I was restricted to in my courses, that I was introduced to the world of anime (Japanese animation films) and through it to the phenomenon of media fandom. At the time of course I had no idea of the scope of what I was looking at, it was just a way to extend my enjoyment of a particular anime when I was done watching the "canon". It only strikes me now, looking back on that first feeling of delight, that the reason I was so thrilled was because, for the first time I was no longer constrained by the bounds of the author(ity) that I chafed at

in my academic studies. Fans were delighting in expanding and reinterpreting concepts and relationships between characters and the subversion effected thus was delicious to my contrarian brain. This subset of popular culture became a part of my life and in time I tapped into a global community of fans engaging in the same acts of interpretation and reinterpretation on an entire gamut of popular cultural texts. My participation in this community mediated my own entry into cyberspace (when I entered college in 2000 my use of the internet was still limited to sending the occasional email) and still remains a vital component in my online identity.

It was perhaps inevitable that the two major interests in my life would converge, but I certainly did not think that an idea tossed around idly with a friend while sitting outside the canteen of the Delhi School of Economics would eventually become central to my academic life, and grow in scope to produce this dissertation. It has however turned out be an entry point into a fascinating and ever-evolving field and I hope to shed some light on its more intriguing aspects in the following chapters. Through the specific prism of fan culture and more specifically media fandom (both concepts will be explained in more detail in just a bit) I hope to show how women in particular have chosen to chart their trajectories through cyberspace, and the impact that their interpretive and creative activities around popular cultural texts have had at both an individual and meta-level.

While the development of cyberfeminist discourses has allowed us to explore the potentialities of the cybercultural domain for women and to engage with various questions that surround their encounter with associated technology, it does not seem to have produced many "success stories" as it were. While the utopian dreams of a non-gendered domain that was first imagined by cyberculture theorists, were challenged and disproved by feminist, queer and postcolonial theorists, the academia has also been remarkably blinkered when looking at sites of subversion that might be "off the beaten click" as it were. The internet and its associated technologies have emerged as uniquely challenging terrains to negotiate, with issues of resource allocation that dictate hierarchies of use and ease of access, their potential for encouraging escapism from "real life", the ghettoization of queer/alternative spaces, issues of (dis)embodiment etc all coming up as valid questions to be interrogated. These newer lines of theorization have of course only enriched and enabled cybercultural discourse to grow steadily more nuanced.

However, to return to my earlier point, it seems that theorists have concentrated on only certain areas or nodes of activity while researching these issues and so seem to have ignored others that may appear to be trivial when first surveyed. That certain strands of development in cyberspace have been deemed as "serious" or "valid" questions to be interrogated is interesting because its genesis was certainly anything but neatly ordered. As Stone recalls, "The concept of cyberspace which Gibson pulled from the kinds of electronic networking he already saw in use all around him, interpellated a large and diffuse assortment of workers in a variety of professional, academic, and military pursuits, as well as a considerable number of researchers whose work could not be collapsed into any traditionally identifiable category. They had been doing what they were doing for some time, but the arrival of *Neuromancer* (1984) was for many of them a signal announcing their existence to a larger audience, and simultaneously naming their subculture for themselves in a spectacular and definitive manner." (33)

It is therefore extremely curious that for a medium whose conception and development has been influenced to an extraordinarily large degree by popular cultural texts, there has been a signal lack of interest in how other forms of popular culture (apart from highly influenced genres like cyberpunk) have adapted themselves to new media forms. One area that is of particular interest to me (and what will be a guiding narrative thread in my argument) is the way the internet has allowed fans of these texts, from diverse backgrounds/locations/demographics, to interact, network and engage with the texts in a variety of different ways. This has, in my opinion, resulted in the creation of fanworks that share a pretty unique type of creative and critical relationship with their source material. I also think that because media fandom has traditionally been seen as a female dominated space (Jenkins, Hills), this process should attract the interest of feminist scholars in particular.

The discourses that have developed around the relationship between women and technology have not always seen the relationship as positive or indeed desirable. Wacjman summarises some of the approaches as follows: "These approaches took the debate about gender and technology beyond the use/abuse model, focusing on the political qualities of technology. Where liberal feminism sees the problem in terms of male control of neutral technologies, radical feminists argued that gender power relations are embedded more deeply within technoscience. This was also a forceful

assertion of women's interests and needs as being different from men's, and highlighted the way in which women are not always well served by current technologies. However, in representing women as inherently nurturing and pacifist, it tended to reinforce an essentialist view of sex difference. The historical and cultural specificity of our modern understanding of women as being radically other than men was overlooked (Merchant, 1980). Too often the result was a pessimistic portrayal of women as victims of patriarchal technoscience." (146)

In the light of these and other discourses around women and technology, like ecofeminism for example, that sometimes see them in opposition, it is vital to also look at the other interactive patterns that formed between the two. It is telling that the seminal text for cyberfeminism, Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, was written in 1985, somewhat before the internet was recognisable as the coming century's (ie the 21st Century) most transformative communication technology. That the transition to using such computer mediated communication technologies was harder for women, has been commented on numerous times, and even today questions like "where are all the female bloggers?" are heard frequently. It is this (in)visibility of women on the internet, within the context of and through the development of media fandom, that I hope to interrogate and question in my research. I hope to examine the specific evolution of media fandom, attempting to try and trace its history and chart the trajectories of its evolution in my first chapter.

One of my primary research queries will focus around the ways women have chosen to establish their identity online and the factors that have mediated this process. While the progress of technology, whereby complicated coding and knowledge of computer languages like html was no longer necessary to navigate the internet, is certainly a contributing factor, when looked at in terms of media fandom participants, this question becomes more layered. The fact that cyberspace was a terrain that was far from easily navigable for women at the beginning of the internet explosion has been well documented, but what factors motivated women to get online and get active? My contention remains that since communication and community building remain crucial underpinnings to any study about women and their use of the internet (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner and Schmitt, 2001) it is important to look at pre-existing networks that show up with remarkable alacrity when examining the first fledgling communication systems that came up as precursors to the internet like

USENET etc. Media fandom activity can be seen in the earliest forms of computer-mediated-communication and this fact I feel is crucial when thinking about when and how women were motivated to adopt these systems. I will be exploring this in my research, more thoroughly in my first chapter.

In my second chapter I hope to move on to a specific enquiry into the platform chosen by the majority of media fandom i.e. the journal blog and look at specific instances in which fans have used their interpretative strategies to make vital points about problematic themes in popular cultural texts. It is my contention that the lack of visibility on the internet that seems to plague women does not stem from a lack of activity on their part, but rather a lack of "acceptable" and "valid" activity that would merit critical attention. This is in part because of the message (that is the context in which the activity takes place, particularly here media fandom) and the medium (again in this case specifically the journal blog), both of which are seen as "trivial" due to stereotypical judgements about what can constitute valuable interjections and reified notions about which platforms can host cultural critiques. I hope to complicate such notions and hopefully point to the very valuable contributions that can and are being made to cultural debates through non-traditional means.

To return to my opening quote, I have used it in the same way that Jenkins does when he describes the activity of media fandom and its relationship to the popular cultural texts that form their focus. The referenced conversation is between the rabbit and a cloth horse about who or what can be considered a "real" toy. According to the horse it is the *process* of being used and loved that makes a toy "real". The process can be hard on the toy but it is ultimately worth it and use does not in any way detract from its value. This idea then complicates the simplistic view that fanworks are merely derivative or, as some have unkindly termed it, parasitic to "real" works of imagination. Fanfiction, and by extension fanworks, then delight in intertextuality, in blurring the boundaries between the established "canon" and the inferred fanon, in picking up subtextual clues and debating what they might mean (and also of course grinning in triumph when authors sometimes "prove them right"). In my view it is in this constant reinterpretation, through repetition and extension that the original work becomes even more REAL (to go back to the Velveteen Rabbit) and therein lies a wealth of possible authenticities, perhaps more productive than clinging to the idea of a single "true" narrative. In my last chapter I deal specifically with

fanfiction (and focus on a particular subset) in greater detail and hope to show how it incorporates all these themes and serves as a site of major resistance and subversion. Finally I would like to stress that the idea of multiple authenticities and interpretation is central to and informs most of my work. I hope that this dissertation will go some way in complicating notions about women and their use of the internet and perhaps complicate simplistic judgements about which interjections in cultural debates can be considered "valid" and "valuable", and perhaps encourage the opening up of newer areas in the fields of cyberculture, popular culture and feminism to further research.

GIRL ... CONNECTED

WOMEN'S IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES ON THE INTERNET

Two men walk into a bar... but no, hold on ... that's not how this story goes. In this one, a playboy called Dean Winchester walks out of a bar looking rather smug. His brother Sam, who is rather used to his success with women, is curious as to who has fallen for his charms this time. Dean reels off some pertinent information (including her name, which is Carly) but then looks puzzled and takes out a piece of paper, waving at his brother for explanation ...

Dean: And I don't know what this thing is ...

Sam (looking at the scrap): Carly's MySpace address?

Dean: Yeah ... MySpace ... What the hell is that? Some kind of porn site?

Sam says nothing, but turns away grinning hugely ...

Dean: What ... what?

Crossroad Blues, *Supernatural*

I do have a point here (quite apart from the thrill of citing a favourite TV show at the beginning of my dissertation), which is that Dean, with all his natural charm, is stymied in his pursuit of Carly simply because he is not "online", and in today's increasingly "networked" world, this is what gives his "geeky"[1] brother the edge. The interaction takes barely a minute of screen time, but the very fact that an encounter that *should* have been strictly on a one-to-one level was automatically assumed to lead to an interaction mediated by technology, is what caught my interest, and forms an important impetus for my work as a whole. Clearly then any comfortable boundaries one may have had even subconsciously maintained between "real life", or RL as it is often called, and "life online" must be investigated. That we are *never* not in contact with some kind of technology is already a fact of our lived reality. To pretend otherwise would be foolish, but the increasing role the internet plays in mediating everything from our everyday routines (the almost automatic must-check-mail reflex

[1] I use the term in two senses: (i) To denote a person who is traditionally seen as comfortable with technology but not so successful on the social inter-personal front. (ii) A person immersed in a certain subculture (usually based on some aspect of television or other entertainment media). I will propose that both categories, while traditionally seen as derogatory, have undergone a significant retrieval. I see this happening due to both the increasing role of technology in mediating social interactions (as seen in the example quoted) and the increasing visibility/power of these popular subcultures.

when near an internet terminal for example) to our professional/academic lives to our social communication and "networking" activities must also be acknowledged.[2]

Our relationship to technology, and computers in particular, has moved from looking at them purely in terms of functionality to something more "intimate" (to borrow Turkle's formulation). "The computer is personal again" an advertisement for a popular brand of laptops tells us[3], underlining the same idea that Nayar also proposes, that "Unlike modern technology, high tech is no longer defined solely in terms of its functionality. High tech today is also a matter of style" (25). From this it is but a short step to seeing the computer as an extension of our very bodies, perhaps as a *prosthesis* (as cyber-feminism does, but here I pre-empt myself somewhat). Our changing relationship with computers also points to another area of flux. With our entrance into technoculture (as Nayar formulates our existence in an increasingly technologised world) also come questions of the mechanisms of our involvement in that highly nebulous terrain, cyberspace[4].

The theorization of cyberspace has been a highly contested one with wildly utopic visions (Rheingold, Benedikt) jostling for space with equally dark narratives presaging alienation and apocalypse (Baudrillard, Virilio). It is primarily the categories of "identity" and "community" (already interrogated by postmodernism) that have been further problematized by our entrance into the realm of cyberspace. Interestingly it is the same categories – fluidity of identity with the possibility of free play, the breakdown of binaries between the "real" and the "virtual", the "natural" and the "artificial", "(wo)man" and "machine" – that seem to alternatively enthuse and trouble thinkers. An example of the latter would be the pronouncement of Kroker and Kroker that "The virtual elite is a mixture of predatory capitalists and visionary computer specialists for whom virtualization is about our disappearance into

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[2] I stress these seemingly trite truisms at the start of my dissertation because of the deep suspicion I have encountered in academic environments in India about the "validity" of cyberculture studies. While admittedly a vast majority of people in India are not affected in the slightest by the questions concerning cyberspace, a significant proportion is very much implicated in its workings. A simple but illustrative example of course is the enormous popularity of India-centric online networking sites like Orkut. The very real danger being posed by increasingly tech-savvy terrorist organizations is a much darker aspect, but both point to the fact that such issues can no longer be seen as vaguely "out there" or as affecting "someone else".

[3] I refer to the advertisement campaign for the HP Pavilion series.

[4] I use the term to mean primarily the world of the internet, as it is experienced by most PC users around the world. I do not include the highly technologised VR environments that for the most part do not impinge on common online experience. There might however be some slippage in the term as used by other theorists I quote who have used it alternatively to signify both VR and the internet.

nothingness. We are talking about a systematic assault against the human species, a virtual war strategy where knowledge is reduced to date storage dumps, friendship is into cyber interactions, and communication means the end of meaning" (101).

While much of the hyperbole (on both sides) has calmed down since the first heady days of debate when the scenarios discussed seemed to be straight out of sci-fi films like *Blade Runner*, I feel that many of the charges laid against the notion of participation in cyberspace, particularly those regarding escapism, fear of participation in "real" life and community, and by extension politics, are still very much in circulation. While discussing how these debates have evolved is not the primary thrust of this study, I will now try to briefly interrogate these notions in light of more recent trends in internet usage. I feel this is important, as without establishing cyberspace as a milieu in which genuine social connections can be formed as well as political activism mobilized, any further discussion will necessarily founder.

Political Activism and Cyberspace

> I think the presidency ought to be held at a higher level than having to answer questions from a snowman (Mitt Romney, on the YouTube debate)[5].

Reacting to Sherman and Judkins' rather dreamy-eyed characterisation of cyberspace as "truly the technology of miracles and dreams"(qtd in Robins, 177), Robins' pithy statement sums up much of the critique directed at the idea of cyberspace: "The propagandists of the virtual technological revolution tend to speak as if there really were a new and alternative reality; they would have us believe that we could leave our present world and migrate to a better reality ... It is as if the social and political turbulence of our time – ethnic conflict, resurgent nationalism, urban fragmentation – had nothing at all to do with virtual space. As if they were all happening in a different world" (78-79) This idea of the internet as apolitical has thankfully been complicated by its use as a potent tool for mobilization and consciousness raising since then, on issues ranging from environmental concerns in the rainforests of Borneo to an email popping up in my inbox, reminding me to vote in the Delhi elections.

[5] Romney is referring to a question that came up in the famous YouTube debate between the democratic candidates during the run-up to elections in America in 2008. The questioner asked a question on global warming in the form of a digital snowman.

To refer back to the Romney quote I began this section with, the historic success of Barack Obama's recent campaign, was influenced to a great extent by his recognition of the power of the internet. His openness to interacting directly with users through media that many, like Romney, were clearly uncomfortable with, signalled his "connect" with a generation that was seen as notoriously disinclined to vote, and this was definitely a factor (along with a myriad others of course, but important nonetheless) in his thumping victory.

Another point of interest in Romney's reaction here, (that I will also pick up later and expand on in more depth) is the question of "authority" and "validity". Romney dismisses the message due to the medium. The question asked was about global warming, a pressing and urgent matter that by all rights *should* be on the mind of a presidential candidate in the election to what is arguably one of the most powerful political offices in the world. Romney is seen however to be clearly discomfited by the fact that it is a digital snowman interrogating him and cannot reconcile himself to the fact that such "blasphemy" is being *allowed* in a presidential debate. Again an encounter, that should have been only mediated by technology, becomes fraught because the technology becomes *visible*. Romney is confronted by the fact that in cyberspace, you could well have an encounter with a snowman, and he does not know how to negotiate this new relationship. Like in the case of Dean Winchester, the geeks are laughing at Romney. This encounter, while amusing, is also to me symbolic of the deeper issues that cyberculture grapples with (some of which I will be trying to deal with in later chapters): issues of disembodiment, of authenticity and validity, of who can ask questions and further why certain lines of that questioning are ignored, while others elevated.

On another note, from the same scale as it were, from my own location, both geographically and politically, the colonial nature of the language of proponents of cyberspace (as pointed out by Sardar, the frequent allusions to "frontiers" and "new territories" is indicative of how cyberspace is conceptualised by those who seek to control it. (183)) is also troubling. But to posit that the solution is to "disengage" with technology and cyberspace is clearly not the way forward. Nayar's call to "postcolonialise cyberspace" (*Postcolonializing Cyberculture,* 3) is crucially predicated on the fact that we must engage with the technologies that dominate our world, on our

own terms. Speaking in the context of the Sarai project "Cybermohalla"[6], he declares "If in the postcolonial the modern is 'resisted' and used at the same time, and strategies and techniques used without absorption into Western modernity (Ashcroft 2001), I see Cybermohalla as seeking and generating a whole new 'ecology' of techno-cultural practices that 'localize' 'First World' technologies. It is the transformative absorption and adaptation of 'First World' technologies into native languages, cultures and contexts by a formerly colonized nation in the era of the 'raced' 'digital divide' that makes Cybermohalla a postcolonial project." (*Cybermohalla* 2).

I hope this (admittedly truncated) analysis has sufficiently complicated the constructions of cyberspace as purely apolitical and escapist in nature, and thereby underlined that for most people, their online and offline lives are intimately connected, with important "real world" decisions being made on the basis of experiences and discussions that occur "online". As in the case of the blurring of boundaries mentioned at the start of this discussion, there can be no clearly demarcated divisions between the two anymore.

Network, network, network

To pick up again on Nayar's idea of *functionality* no longer being the key operating word when exploring our relationship with technology, it is vital to note a larger shift in theorization about that aspect in cybercultural studies as a whole. This shift can in part be credited to feminist scholars in the field as they (Stone, Haraway) chose to deal with the effect technology had on humans as social beings and underlined the importance of seeing them in an almost semiotic relationship. As Wajcman points out, "Over the last two decades, feminist writing within the field of STS (Science and Technology Studies) has theorised the relationship between gender and technology as one of mutual shaping. A shared idea in this tradition is that technological innovation

[6] A collaborative project of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the nongovernmental organization, Ankur (http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla), that focuses on alternative education. Nayar informs us that "Cybermohalla is a network of five labs across New Delhi – locality labs in LNJP (an informal settlement in Central Delhi), Dakshinpuri (a Resettlement Colony in South Delhi) and Nangla Maachhi (a Research and Development Lab in the Ankur office) and the Sarai Media Lab. It has its own mailing lists and blogs. It publishes its own Cybermohalla Diaries. The computer hardware is situated in spaces called 'compughars'. Each locality lab is a room with three computers, portable audio recorders (dictaphones) and cameras (digital and bromide print); and fifteen to twenty practitioners from the locality, between 15 and 24 years of age. The labs are self-regulated. Each practitioner spends five days a week at the lab. They record their responses to events, incidents in the street, conversations in the form of animations, sound, photostories and text." (*Cybermohalla* 3)

is itself shaped by the social circumstances within which it takes place. Crucially, the notion that technology is simply the product of rational technical imperatives has been dislodged. Objects and artefacts are no longer seen as separate from society, but as part of the social fabric that holds society together; they are never merely technical or social. Rather, the broad social shaping or constructivist approach treats technology as a sociotechnical product – a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organisations, cultural meanings and knowledge (Bijker et al., 1987; Hackett et al., 2008; Law and Hassard, 1999; MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). It follows that technological change is a contingent and heterogeneous process in which technology and society are mutually constituted." (149)

Stone deploys a useful neologism to sum up her view of the phenomenon, calling it the dawn of the technosocial age. She explains the term saying, "The predominant mode of those emergent forms is what I have called the technosocial, in playful appreciation of Paul Rabinow's theory of the biosocial[7].... When I look for new social forms in cyberspace, it is with this process in mind. I am seeking social structures in circumstances in which the technological is the natural, in which social space is computer code, consensual and hallucinatory. I am suggesting a venture not into the heart of nature to seek redemption but rather into the heart of 'technology' in search of nature. And not nature as object, place or originary situation, but rather in Haraway's sense nature as Coyote, the Native American trickster-spirit animal – that is, as diversity, flexibility, irruption, playfulness or put briefly, nature as actant, as process, continual reinvention and encounter, that actively resists, disrupts – in sum (in Haraway's words), queers representation. When I speak of life in the nets as technosocial, I am pointing to what both Rabinow and Haraway imply, with a hopeful eye on the future not of technology but of the social forms within technology-viewed-as-nature..." (38). In a technosocial age then it is accepted that technology is not the alien intruding "other" to be feared (as some Radical feminists did argue at one point), but neither is it a completely utopian environment (Stone points out the numerous pitfalls of this notion in her work), but something rather that is a part of the social networks that we navigate and are controlled by in turn. The power structures that

[7] Paul Rabinow's formulation of biosociality describes the gradual implosion of the categories of nature and culture, exemplified in research into genetics as an extension of the structures of civilization over areas formerly considered natural.

have always operated in these networks still exist and operate in multitudinous ways but our entrance into cyberculture does open up interesting new sites of interruption.

For example, even though the first networks that held the seed for what the world wide web would become (ARPANET[8] etc) were created as purely functional, they were quickly adapted to suit their users "non-serious" needs. As Stone argues, "Most computer-human relations were first studied as a kind of work, and that work is the quintessential defining human capacity. This too, I think, misses some of the most important qualities of human computer interaction just as it does when applied to broader elements of human experience. By this I mean that a significant part of the time that humans spend in developing interactional skills is devoted not to work but to what by common understanding would be called play ... Both work and play have culture specific meanings and purposes, and I am conducting a quite culture-specific discussion when I talk about the primacy of play in Human-Computer Interaction.(HCI)" (9) Stone was pretty ahead of her time (she argued this in 1995) but her analysis was prophetic about both the direction in which actual computer usage would move in the next fifteen years, and the ways in which cyberculture theorists would come to view that relationship. Her case study of a young group of hackers is an interesting snapshot of how materials that were intended for one purpose, were co-opted and used quite subversively for another (this will also be a running theme in my work).

> The production and insertion of a play ethic like a mutation into the corporate genome is a specifically situated activity, one that is only possible for workers of a certain type and at a certain job level. In specific, it is only possible to the young communities who are perhaps best described as hackers – mostly young (although the demographic changes as the first- and second-generation hackers age), mostly educated ... mostly white ... mostly male (though a truly egregious exception is part of this study). They create and use a broad variety of technological prosthetics to manifest a different view of the purpose of communication technology, and their continual and casual association with the cutting edge of that technology has molded them and their machines – separately and jointly – in novel and promising ways. In particular because

[8] Advanced Research Project Agency Network: the precursor to the internet as it is known today. Created by a research team from MIT and the US Department of Defense.

> they are thoroughly accustomed to engaging in non trivial social interactions through the use of their computers – social interactions in which they change and are changed, in which commitments are made, kept, and borne, in which they may engage in intellectual discussions, arguments, and even sex – they view computers not only as tools but also *arenas for social experience.* (15)

What Stone concentrates on here, and what I am also interested in, is that almost from the beginning, when the nascent internet began to move away from centralized mainframes with only a few consoles, to what we see it as today, the primary urge that motivated users was the urge to communicate. In the course of her study Stone examines various start-up cyber businesses and research organizations, among them CompuServe, who in 1980 began as a catch-all site – retail, weather reports, plane reservations etc – but discovered that what people were really interested in was "online conferencing and chat – that is connectivity." (66) This is interesting to me because the impulse towards connectivity is intimately bound up with the impulse towards community-building, the latter of which I feel is very important when examining the ways in which women specifically navigated the internet, which as I will explain in a moment is my primary research interest.

Lets get specific : Sex/Age/Location[9]

If then our online interactions have become an integral part of our lived reality (social, political and economic) we must examine the differing ways these interactions are controlled by us in terms of fashioning and negotiating notions of "identity" and "community" on the internet.

Of course to suggest that only a single type of identity construction goes on in cyberspace would be entirely erroneous. For example, the level of tinkering and "play" with identity including cross-gender "performances" that go on in MUDs (Multi User Domains) is quite different (Turkle 1995) from relatively more "stable" and "sustained" self-projections (seen as a kind of narrative performance: Chandler, Lindemann) on homepages, blogging and journal sites and even online discussion boards. For example MPG (Multi Player Game) sites like Second Life allow the construction of "avatars" and the possibility of living "parallel lives" (sometimes

[9] Usually the first question that pops up on IRC chats.

completely divorced from RL existence[10]). The recent popularity of the game (though being touted as revolutionary) however is not unprecedented, nor do I think it points to a radical change in the way people interact online. In line with Clay Shirky, I would propose that these types of "virtual worlds" while constantly touted as the "next big thing" rarely deliver. He points out, "If, in 1993, you'd studied mailing lists, or USENET, or IRC, you'd have a better grasp of online community today than if you'd spent a lot of time in LambdaMOO or Cyberion City."[11] I am therefore interested in the more "conventional" orderings of social communication and identity construction that cyberspace has produced, as seen on sites such as LiveJournal.com.

Since both the categories I am attempting to interrogate are both enormous and highly complicated, I have chosen to focus on the particular ways women have charted their paths through cyberspace. This is a particularly interesting story to explore as it is one of both high theory and "low" culture, with both currents mingling frequently to produce a diverse and exceedingly rich terrain to explore. The ways theories of cyberfeminism and the actual practices of women online have converged and diverged are fascinating to follow and I hope I will be able to chart this particular trajectory adequately.

That I can talk blithely of the presence of women on the internet is of course a product of my own experiences as living through the technological explosion that came with liberalisation in India after 1991. But that Haraway launched her cyborg manifesto that very year shows how very recent the feminist engagement with cyberculture is in reality. Her warning that "If feminists and allied cultural radicals are to have any chance to set the terms for the politics of technoscience, I believe we must transform the despised metaphors of both organic and technological vision to foreground specific positioning, multiple mediation, partial perspective and therefore a possible allegory for antiracist feminist science and political knowledge"(308), was issued in response to a hostility against technology in the rhetoric of essentialist feminism (which finds echoes in ecofeminism till today) that threatened to turn women away from the doors of cyberspace before they had even entered. Six years later, Wakeford could point with hope to a perceptible, if still marginal, presence of

[10] I refer to the case in America where a Second Life user's marriage broke up due to his online "affair" with another user. For more details see Daily Mail article "Revealed: The 'other woman' in Second Life divorce"

[11] See glossary

women on the internet despite it still being seen as "male territory" (Wiley 1995) based on claims that firstly women "as a proportion of all users" were in a minority, and secondly that there was "a cultural dominance of masculinity in on-line spaces ... particularly in linguistic styles and conventions" (Spender 1995: 351). Tracing the attempts of these self styled "networked women", "geekgirls", "NerdGrrls" and "grrrls"[12] to create a distinctly feminist presence on the internet, Wakeford highlights the characteristic that I will also stress on – the importance of network building and community as an integral part of women's activity online. Haraway's assertion that "Networking is both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy – weaving is for oppositional strategy" (307) is further proof that women's online identities are inextricably mixed up in their community building efforts, which is why the two categories have been and will continue to be, repeatedly mentioned in almost the same breath through this analysis.

The grrrls on the web were avowedly feminist, hoping to resist a predicted "corporate intensification of initiatives toward a 'woman's Internet market'" (357). Unfortunately they did not quite succeed, and in 2000, Janelle Brown, had to ask "What happened to the women's Web?" Tracking the disappearance of the sites that had filled Wakeford with such optimism, she pointed out that while "Now women make up 50.4 percent of the Web's population[13]", the sad truth was that "Five years into the evolution of the 'Woman's Web', most of these original sites are suffering. Candice Carpenter, the most visible face of women's online publishing, has departed her seat as CEO of iVillage; Women.com has lost much of its original editorial team and is being kept aloft primarily because of a savvy merger with the Hearst women's magazine empire ... Cybergrrl is mostly forgotten..." Tragically even for those that did survive, "In the face of these departures and an increasing emphasis on the bottom line, the content on the sites is consequently becoming more and more mainstream."

So did women decide to use their new presence on the internet to surf horoscope advice and diet plans? Such a judgement on the basis of the popularity of seventeen.com would be highly unfortunate and indeed Brown acknowledges that perhaps the problem lay in trying to create "catch-all" sites for women. She points out

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[12] The reason for the terms is (not numerology!) based in practical considerations as a strategy for not showing up as "hits" on search engines when the keyword "girl" is used. I will focus on the retrieval and refashioning of terms such as "geek" and "nerd" at a later point in this paper.

[13] Based this on a report brought out by Jupiter Communications and Media Metrix in August 2000.

"Those looking for smart content should not, perhaps, be looking at general interest women's sites to find it – just as men would never look to GQ or TheMan.com to stimulate their own intellectual hungers." However, even this rather depressing narrative has a thread of hope running through it. In answer to the all important question "So what have these sites accomplished, then?" The answer was, once again, "community". According to Carpenter "The Web has changed things for a lot of women – I think a lot of the strongest online communities that I know of are run by, and are the ideas of, women ...That's a huge, huge contribution to the Web." In my opinion then, Brown was looking in the wrong place for the "women's web". If the "strongest online communities" were built and run by women, then one of the most important revolutions that would mediate both the creation of online identities and networks of communication with other women, for a very significant number of those who would truly embrace their cyborg identities, had already happened. In fact a facet of this is already in evidence in Brown's analysis. That she misses it is strange as she self-identifies as an ex-editor of a zine. While she approves of what she terms "alternative" sites under the umbrella of ChickClick.com – "Scarleteen.com, a no-holds-barred sex advice site for teenage girls; Technodyke.com for young lesbians; and WomenCount.com, a feminist political site that encouraged women to vote" – she is dismissive of the second most popular site on the network, one called MightyBigTV.com which was an "unapologetic daily synopsis of the trashiest TV on the planet". Online media fandom then had already "arrived" and was making its presence felt. It just was not "respectable" enough for mainstream feminism yet.

Let me at this point define the second prism that I will be using throughout my work, i.e. media fandom. Media Fandom is a term that was coined in the 1970's and is an umbrella reference to the creative and communicative actions around certain popular cultural texts[14] undertaken by fans in order to extend their experience and enjoyment of them. The term encompasses creative and communicative actions (that take place within fan communities) that take many forms, including the writing of fanfiction (in which fans extend or subvert canonical narratives through their own writing) and fan videos (which allow visual reinterpretations of source materials to showcase alternative readings of a particular scene or narrative). Media fandom has also been a space which has been traditionally dominated by women, which also lends

[14] By texts here I refer not only to books but also TV show and movies.

a further nuance to its functioning. It is at this time an overwhelmingly internet based phenomenon. Though it was established well before the advent of the world wide web, this communication technology has been a significant factor in shaping its character today, as well as allowing it to become a truly global community. The story of media fandom is largely anecdotal as it is only from fan accounts of early activity that we can trace the history of this phenomenon. "Official" histories for subcultures are indeed always tricky and open to sanitization and revision; so even as recent interest in fan culture has prompted a flurry of archiving, most fans are reluctant to solidify any one strand of the story as *fact*[15]. This is, in my opinion, only fitting, as media fandom is indeed nothing but the stories that fans tell each other.

Let me clarify that I am certainly not trying to claim that online media fandom is either a "women only" space, nor elevating it above all other forms of women's online activity. Women who are involved in online media fandom are certainly not limited to that particular sphere of cyberspace. But it is important to note that one of the most common mobilizing factors that have prompted a lot of women (including myself) to "get online" and "get active" seems to have been their involvement in some kind of "fannish" activity. In a cyberspace still often seen as constructed around a patriarchal consumer culture – the complaint about the results of a google search with "girl" or "woman" as the keyword still holds for example – it has evolved to become both a "space" and a "site" generative of an explosion of creative and communicative (the two seem to be constantly interlinked) activity by women that is in my opinion, quite unprecedented. Numerous studies (Jenkins, Costello and Moore) have identified it as a subculture with a strong presence of women, and I feel that it needs to be acknowledged, celebrated and interrogated further.

Origin stories are the best stories

In order to substantiate my claims of fandom mediating a lot of women's online experiences and identities, I will be undertaking a study of two early fandoms that

[15] The OTW (Organization of Transformtive Works) is a fan-led endeavour to protect fans and fanworks from attack. Part of their endeavour has been to archive and record fan experiences and histories through www.fanlore.org. However it is an open-source project and any fan can expand a narrative thread or add their experiences to the archive.

formed around the television shows *Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-68) and *Star Trek*[16] (1966-69). Both fandoms overlap in terms of timing and fan activity development, though *Star Trek* has received more critical attention because its fandom exploded in a truly remarkable fashion and also garnered a lot of media interest. *Star Trek* was a science fiction, action-adventure series created by Gene Roddenberry, which was first telecast in 1966. It followed the lives of the crew of a spaceship called The Enterprise headed by a dashing Captain Kirk (played by William Shatner) and a varied cast of characters. The spirit of the series can be summed up by the introductory narration that played before each episode which declared, "Space ... the Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no man has gone before." These lines have a certain fitting resonance with the phenomenon of media fandom that the show helped launch, as fans have charted a uniquely productive path through the intricacies of popular culture and in a particularly ironic rendering, the women fans who comprise most of this community have chosen to do so on their own terms, in ways that the male-demographic-targeting marketers of that series and others after it, never conceived of as possible.

Fan activity was extremely active around the original series with conventions attracting thousands of fans and indeed it is also at this time that cultural conceptions about popular cultural fans began to form. It was perhaps inevitable that the image of the "crazed" fan became synonymous with the name "Trekkie" (a term coined to identify a super-fan of the series) which has led to a lot of media fandom activity remaining hidden for fear of being stereotyped. Christina Walker, who specialises in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* fandom, observes that there was a distinct split from older Science Fiction fandoms and what formed around *Star Trek*, even though ostensibly they were the same genre. The "new" fans were seen to be careless of tradition, of coming to the genre from a television series rather than the written word, and were

[16] The *Star Trek* fandom of course includes all the subsequent television series and movies, but the genesis of the fandom was the original television series.

The *Star Trek* TV series consists of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969), *Star Trek: The Animated Series* (1973-1974), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005).

The movies in the franchise are *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989), *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991), *Star Trek Generations* (1994), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1999), *Star Trek Nemesis* (2002) and *Star Trek* (2009).

pretty unwelcome in general science fiction conventions. This was also the time of the shift from "hard" Science Fiction, that was more concerned with mechanics, to the "New Wave", which was more psychological in nature (noted by Klein among others). Walker draws on Lichtenberg and Gerrold when she notes that Star Trek fans (of whom a large proportion were women) were not interested in the mechanics of the starship Enterprise, but were much more invested in the connections and interactions between the crew itself. "*Star Trek* was the first inkling many people had that science fiction could be about people rather than technology, and about ideas, rather than gadgets ... what it added to science fiction was an absolutely startling new element: it did not keep its distance form human emotion; did not deny close, warm human relationships, even among males; did not call for a stiff upper lip; did not deny the existence and importance of sex; did not ban psychological action as a plot-moving force; did not deny the possibility of women who might be more than damsels." (Lichtenberg et al 223, 225 qtd by Walker in journal entry) This split in Science Fiction fandom then begins to have a rather gendered character.

Both these fandoms are also particularly interesting to me because they led the charge, as it were, when fandom moved from offline modes of interaction (conventions, zines etc) to online modes (USENET and later the internet as it developed further). Their story is one of adaptability and flexibility, two things that have remained at the core of media fandom, allowing it to expand and grow even as the circumstances around it change.

It is surprising to note that the original *Star Trek* television series only lasted 3 seasons (and had to be saved by a letter writing campaign before its second season), but nevertheless has spawned a fandom that exists to this day. The entire franchise now consists of multiple action series, an animated series, and a mind-boggling eleven movies, each instalment bringing with it a fresh burst of fandom activity, with both new fans discovering it for the first time and older fans getting eager for fresh material. Fan activity that would come to define media fandom started almost immediately but these were usually isolated forays for the creator's sole enjoyment, perhaps shared with a few close friends. The discovery that this "trivial" pursuit (usually hidden from the rest of the world) could be shared by others is recounted in joyous terms. The OTW's archive at fanlore.org records this recounting of those first days of exploration and discovery by Nancy Kippax.

My sister, Bev Volker, and I slid into Star Trek fandom, like so many fans of the day, on the coattails of *Star Trek Lives!* Previously, David Gerrold had written two illuminating non-fiction paperbacks on the budding Star Trek phenomenon – *The World of Star Trek* and *The Making of Star Trek.* Many isolated fans found these books in their local stores and suddenly realized that they were not alone. Nor were they crazy, as some of their family members and friends thought. But yes, there was still a stigma attached to being a "Trekkie".

Then along came another book, *Star Trek Lives!* by three ladies who were already known to many of the earliest fans who were connecting by mail, by phone, and probably even by Pony Express [these were Jacqueline Lichtenburg, Joan Winston and Sondra Marshak, all of whom would remain involved in the trek fandom for a considerable period] Clearly, this was "the" book which defined so much of what fandom was and what it could be.

Our personal involvement in Star Trek fandom followed a rather circuitous route. Bev was a suburban housewife and mother of three who discovered Trek in local re-runs in 1973. As a single working girl, I had faithfully watched the show in its first run and now, with Bev catching up, I watched again, this time in glorious color.

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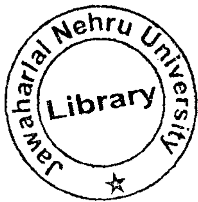
Sharing fantasies was nothing new to us, as was obsession. Despite the somewhat large gap in our ages, Bev and I had grown up closer than most sisters and had played "make-believe" about TV characters since childhood. We shared a love for male-male relationship before it ever had a name! Hurt-comfort was our specialty in the stories we made up and told each other; we loved it when our characters had an excuse to touch. Whenever we watched something that was pleasing in this category, we said that it gave us "flip-flops", or "The Feeling", our elementary terms to describe what we felt. We always thought this was unique to us alone.

But the difference with our Trek obsession was that, thanks to that ubiquitous *Star Trek Lives!* (1975) and its chapter on fan fiction, we were actually writing down our made-up stories. We figured we would be able to write as well as those other people. We completed two stories, with a third well on the way to being finished, plus the first chapter of our very long soap opera, and decided that we might as well print them ourselves.


Jawaharlal Nehru University Library

The book *Star Trek Lives!* seems to have been a kind of watershed moment for many fans. When I interviewed her about he first fandom experiences, 46 year old Debra Baker also recounted what follows:

> It all revolves around *Star Trek*. While I did not attend conventions (I wanted to, but I was young and had no money), I devoured books ABOUT Star Trek including *Star Trek Lives!*, which had chapters about both conventions AND fanfic, as well as metadiscussion. This would be around junior high school – the mid-seventies. I began writing fanfic at that point.
>
> My first encounter with convention fandom happened at random at a bookstore, where I met several people *who spoke a language I understood.* I also worked with someone (both substitute teachers) who wrote fanfic and attended *Blake's 7*[17] conventions. I went with her to my first convention after meeting with that group. (my emphasis)

A further significant part of Debra Baker's experience is that reading the chapter on fanfiction was *the* point when she discovered that her interpretation of Kirk and Spock's relationship as possibly romantic (I will expand more on slash fanfiction in my third chapter) was not a one off fluke or personal quirk, but one shared by others. I think it is obvious then that the validation that this *sharing of experience* and also importantly *interpretation* brought (and indeed continues to bring to new fans) is at the core of why media fandom exists and why it remains so bound up in the concept of community.

Numerous theorists (Strauss 1986, Sahlins 1976, Goffman 1963, Wever 1947, Lacan 1977, Derrida 1978, Heidegger 1976 to name a few) have argued that when a group forms around a common symbolic structure it comes to constitute a "culture area" of its own, which is not limited by anything other than the limits of communication. Stone also draws on Strauss' formulation, deeming it to apply particularly well to virtual systems when he says that "We may say that every group develops its own system of significant symbols which are held in common by its members and around which group activities are organized. Insofar as the members act toward and with reference to each other, they take each other's perspectives toward their own actions and thus interpret and assess that activity in communal terms. Group

[17] *Blake's 7* (1978-81) was a popular British Science Fiction television series which also had large community of media fans form around it.

membership is thus a symbolic, not a physical, matter, and the symbols which arise during the life of the group are, in turn, internalized by the members and affect their individual acts" (Strauss, qtd in Stone 87). Stone extends and underlines the significance of this argument when talking about cyberspace, saying "The constitution and evolution of special worlds, the form and structure of community as expressed spatially in architecture and proxemics, need not be dependent on distribution in a physical space the arrangement of which acquires ontic status, but instead could as validly be based upon symbolic exchanges of which proximity is merely a secondary effect." (87). Media fandom is a particularly fascinating example of a community based around symbolic exchange, as community members are bound by a certain central interest, but adopt different signifiers to concentrate their creative and fannish energies around. Fandom as a community also functions with regard to certain conventions regarding "acceptable" behaviour. These are of course informal and enforced by group consent rather than through penalties. These norms have of course changed as fandom has grown and diversified and more marginalized groups have made their presence and concerns felt[18], but largely interaction has remained based on the same joy of discovering that others too "spoke the same language" of fandom, that both Baker and Kippax recount.

The second show that I have picked up to examine is the spy drama, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (1964-68) which followed the exploits of two international men of mystery, Napoleon Solo (played by Robert Vaughn), and the Russian Illya Kuryakin (played by David McCallum). Though it did not make quite the impact that *Star Trek* did on the general consciousness of the pop culture scene, as Cynthia Walker (an original fan of the series and a specialist in *U.N.C.L.E* fandom) shares from her own conversations with other fandom participants recounts, the series in many ways paved the way for *Star Trek*, using many of the same tropes (international unity in the face of a shared danger, use of futuristic devices) and had a very active fandom around it, one that continues to exist to this day. Walker also notes something that I find very interesting about Roddenberry's attitude to fanworks.

[18] Early fandom was almost wholly made of white, heterosexual women (and there is still a dominance of these demographic). With the advent of the internet however it has grown to include a much more diverse range of participants (though still heavily skewed to females) with both the queer and fans of colour speaking up to correct representations of marginalized groups in fanworks. I will be expanding on an example of consciousness raising by fans of colour in my third chapter.

> The cancellation of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* in November, 1967, came as a surprise to almost everyone (Heitland, 1987a; "Life and Death", 1968). *Star Trek*, however, had been in trouble with the network for most of its run. Roddenberry's strategy to keep his television show alive was to forge an unusual (for the time) alliance with the fans (Engel, 1994; Solow & Justman, 1996). Not only did he provide resources and encouragement for the famous "Save Star Trek" campaign, which featured millions of letters and fan protests outside NBC offices in Burbank and in New York City, but he turned a blind eye to fans producing Star Trek fan art and Star Trek fan fiction. This policy of benign neglect would have enormous consequences, not only for *Star Trek*, but for cult shows like *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* It would empower fan audiences to become more active, creative and contributory; it would redefine the relationship between Hollywood producers and their audiences in the future, and it would eventually make possible the existence of the entire quasi-underground fan culture called "media fandom."

This is significant I feel because this "benign neglect" as she terms it was certainly a factor in deciding whether or not a particular series had an active fandom around it (at least in its fledgling days). In contrast, the *Star Wars* (1977, directed by George Lucas) franchise had an uneasy relationship with its fans (particularly women who wished to create adult fanworks) and seemed to want to exercise a high degree of control as to the fanworks created[19]. This was not taken kindly as Catherine Siebert in 1982 asserted, in the multi-fandom zine SLAYSU (So Like And Yet So Unlike), "Lucasfilm is saying 'you must enjoy the characters of the Star Wars universe for male reasons. Your sexuality must be correct and proper by my (male) definition', I am not male. I do not want to be. I refuse to be a poor imitation, or worse, someone's idiotic ideal of femininity. Lucasfilm has said in essence, 'this is what we see in the *Star Wars* films and we are telling you this is what you will see'." (44). While the franchise has certainly attained cult status it has failed to gather a fandom of similar scope. It is interesting to note however that JK Rowling's expressed distaste about fans' erotic reimagining's of her universe (communicated to several fanfiction archiving sites through legal notices[20]) had very little effect on fans' attitudes towards

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[19] For a more detailed look at Lucasfilm's relationship with media fandom see http://fanlore.org/wiki/Star_Wars

[20] http://www.chillingeffects.org/fanfic/notice.cgi?NoticeID=522

continuing to indulge in such activities. Indeed the *Harry Potter* series of books has spawned one of the largest online communities in media fandom to date. This I believe has a lot to do with the fact that, far from being isolated groups of fans connected only through zine circulation or convention meet-ups, media fandom's move and quick adaptation to the internet has enabled fans to recognise that their community of "freaks" is incredibly diverse and widespread, giving rise to organizations like the OTW (Organization of Transformative Works[21]) to fight for their rights to engage in interpretative acts on popular cultural texts.

To return to *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* fandom, it is interesting to note that though many fans (including Walker) recount having written fanfiction around the show even before *Star Trek* started being televised, it was only when fans who had already learnt the "tricks of the trade" as it were from the latter fandom decided to expand their horizons that these efforts became anything more than individual essays into the unknown. Walker quotes another fan, Paula Smith's contention in a zine article, "When the *Star Trek* media fans took up U.N.C.L.E. fandom, they changed its character. Before 1975, the only U.N.C.L.E. fan who wrote U.N.C.L.E. fiction was David McDaniel; everyone else collected facts and props as if they were postage stamps. Afterwards, the new fans, mostly women who thought of fandom in terms of the characters they could write stories about, developed the U.N.C.L.E. universe with new adventures for Napoleon and particularly Illya." (39, qtd in Walker's journal). This shift is vital because it is indicative of two things, firstly the fact that women fans were necessary for the "work" of media fandom community building and their entrance into the fandom significantly changed its character and that the *Star Trek* phenomenon was certainly not a fluke. Once *made aware* of a community revolving around symbolic exchanges (as discussed earlier) fans were eager to continue the process and used the skills learnt by their earlier experiences to expand the range and scope of their activities. This desire to reach out to like-minded individuals and more importantly the flexibility demonstrated by this shift continues to be one of the defining characteristics of media fandom. Most importantly this flexibility extended

[21] The OTW is a non-profit venture formed in 2007 with its stated mission being to be an organisation, "established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms. We believe that fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate. The OTW represents a practice of transformative fanwork historically rooted in a primarily female culture. The OTW will preserve the record of that history as we pursue our mission while encouraging new and non-mainstream expressions of cultural identity within fandom." (http://transformativeworks.org/about/believe)

not only to the subject matter (i.e. the willingness to explore different fandoms) but also the medium by which media fandom activity was to be carried out. A brand new final frontier, was about to open up and media fandom's reaction to that would define its future, and more importantly mediate cyberspace for a significant percentage of women.

Cyberspace, the Final Frontier

Susan Clerc traces the beginnings of the phenomenon of fandom as I do by charting its move from offline activities – letterzines, newsletters, zines – to its current online form. What I am trying to establish is that as Clerc puts it, "Media fandom wouldn't exist without women because more women than men do the communication work necessary to forge and sustain community. The public impression that males dominate fan activities is largely a result of outsiders' emphasis of *Star Trek* fandom, which does seem to consist of more males than females."(218) Though I have disputed her claim about *Star Trek*, I will move past that to agree with her main point about the gendered origins of fandom. The article is particularly helpful to my analysis because it presents a snapshot of the transition from smaller communities necessarily limited by issues of distance and logistics, concerning actually exchanging material like zines, to fandom's current form. When Clerc says, "fan women, though mechanically proficient and technologically savvy compare to the mainstream population, suffer from the same societal attitudes about gender and technology as everyone else. Women are also at an economic disadvantage: with less disposable income, they are not as likely as men to experiment with modems and software they aren't familiar with. [For] Fan women ... there is very little benefit to Net access unless their friends have it. When that critical mass is reached and it becomes beneficial to go online, fan women will likely turn to go other female fans as an informal support network" (219), she validates my earlier point about women (even those who were already positioned to make greater use of the internet's resources due to their comfort with technology) getting motivated to establish a presence online due to their fannish interests. This presence has been in many formats. In the early days when the number of women active online was still low there seems to have been a bias towards mailing lists as opposed to "high-profile Usenet newsgroups" where interaction was less oriented towards status generation and more towards communication. "Although some

newsgroups manage to gain to attain a sense of community, mailing lists are more likely to do so because of the way they are set up ... Perhaps more importantly you have to *come out of the fan closet* to join a mailing list: you can't pretend you are only casually interested in The X Files when there are fifty messages about in your mailbox every morning." (Clerc 221, my emphasis) When interviewed about her move to online modes of fandom activity, Debra Baker talks about first using USENET[22] newsgroups which were organized into "hierarchies" subjectwise (for example sci.biology and sci.physcis would be grouped under the same broad heading sci) by recalling, "I dated a computer programmer starting in 1989 (married him in 1991.) By '93, I accessed them through various "gateways". And by the end of that year, I was accessing them directly. Fandom groups were EVERYWHERE, in both the rec.arts hierarchy, and the alt. hierarchy. Some were for discussion of the media (rec.arts.sf.written, rec.arts.startrek and spin-offs) some were for community – rec.arts.sf.fandom, for example. Others, usually in the alt.hierarchy, were for fanfiction – alt.startrek.creative, alt.startrek.creative.adult, alt.startrek.creative.adult. moderated among others." She recalls the shift from newsgroups to mailing-lists and when queried on why, cites both convenience and security explaining, "Mailing lists were more direct, and posting was easier, especially with the moderated groups. Usenets were vulnerable to trolls." This experience does mirror Clerc's analysis and it is interesting to track fandom's eagerness to find a platform most suited to its needs. When asked about her personal motivation to seek online modes of interaction, Baker simply states, "I was not very tech savvy at first, but husband helped. *Fandom was always on Usenet*, you understand." (my emphasis). This last statement is very interesting to me as it expresses the idea that the move and adaptation of media fandom to online modes of communication was a step taken with alacrity (at least its initial move) and that women, after getting over their hesitation with newer technology, did participate in newsgroups and then in mailing lists in large numbers. Walker records the first *Man from U.N.C.L.E* list as coming into existence in 1995. It

[22] One of the oldest computer network communication systems, it was invented in 1979 in Duke University by Jim Ellis and Tom Truscott, ten years before the advent of the world wide web. It could be accessed by a certain number of gateways and newsgroups were formed around various topics of interest including science fiction. Discussions took place in response threads to a discussion post of interest. (Lueg, Danyel & Springer , 2003)

was originally housed at uncle.org and then moved to Onelist (which eventually became yahoogroups.com) (cited in Walker's journal[23]).

Certain forms did gain popularity over others and another corollary to this is the fact that unlike the MUDs discussed earlier, relatively more stable identities are formed in such asynchronous communication-based formats. While mailing lists have declined in use, online journals which incorporate a lot of the same features, have become the new home for a lot of fan activity. Since these journal pages are particularly crucial to the ways in which women[24] fans construct their identities and interact with larger communities, I will be examining some aspects of narrative performance (Lindemann) of identity that is seen on journals hosted on sites like LiveJournal. I will also attempt to show how women have established their online identities around a "nucleus" as it were, of their fannish activities, become internet "celebrities", and translated that celebrity-status into economic/commercial success. I will then move on to a specific enquiry into the journal format and try to examine *why* it has become a preferred format for media fandom activity and how its elision fits into a larger dismissal of media fandom's accomplishments over the last forty years.

While it is entirely possible for people to maintain multiple journals projecting completely different "versions" of themselves, as Chandler has pointed out, "Despite the deliberate manipulation of identity by some people in such synchronous communication systems and, to a much lesser extent, in e-mail (which is a potential rapid response system but not synchronous), the consensus amongst researchers in the field is that in the asynchronous presentational medium of personal home pages on the Web people generally seem to be comparatively honest about themselves (Kelly 1995)". Journal pages function in much the same way and so self presentation and identity construction in these environments, while highly self conscious and subject to considerable "editing", is not usually wilfully deceptive.

The phrase I want to pick up before moving on to that part of my analysis however is Clerc's terming of acknowledging oneself as a fan, as akin to "coming out". The hidden, almost furtive, nature of media fandom has been remarked upon in

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[23] Walker's fannish journal, which she has requested be kept separate from her professional identity.

[24] According to LiveJournal statistics accessed on 28/10/09 an overwhelming 66% of users were women. The amount of fannish activity that occurs on LiveJournal can be measured by the numerous communities that have been created around specific fandoms which are highly active and popular. These fandoms also figure prominently on the "interests" that are listed in the case of many individual users.

almost every analysis of fan culture, with terms such as "poachers" (Jenkins) and "cultural outlaws" (Costello and Moore) being used to describe their activities. This has been both a product of mainstream conception of fans as socially inept, slightly crazed and sometimes dangerous "fanatics" and a tenuous legal status concerning issues of the ownership of the original source material. "To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities" (Jenkins 23). This position is a little dated (he wrote *Textual Poachers* in 1992) and I would like to point that this "acceptance" of a "subordinated position" has been complicated by the very self conscious retrieval of certain terms, one example being of course the term "geek". As reflected in my anecdote at the start of this chapter, the connotations of the term have changed significantly. The appropriation of the term by the Geekgirls is also an interesting intervention "Geeks are usually the hardcore of the nets. They are usually self-taught, determined individuals who simply love computers – machines are not just their friends but their conduits into the world of art, politics, fun, magic and mayhem. Being a girl I am viola – geekgirl." (DeLoach, quoted in Wakeford 356). To self-identify as a fan in today's context is still to risk being perceived through the lens of assumptions of "over-investment" in something that is "not real", but a significant shift in those categories is taking place. This has also occurred due to the growing activities of aca-fans (academics who identify as fans and see themselves as very much *within* these communities). Within the larger context of my work, this point is significant because the retrieval has occurred because women fans, enriched by their experience of online community and recognising that they were a pretty global one at that, embraced that part of their identities in fairly affirmative ways. While some fans still are wary of being "outed", their participation in online fandom and indeed their creation of identities centred around fannish activities remains unaffected. The establishment of the OTW (Organisation of Transformative Works), as an effort to fight for the "legitimacy" of fanworks, last year points to how far these efforts have come, and how much individuals have invested in these communities.

You are *who* you write

The evolution of LiveJournal as a hotspot for fannish activity can be attributed to a number of factors. The fact that anyone can create a journal (the basic service is free,

though one can upgrade to a paid account with more features) is a crucial aspect, as is its easy interface for both individual journals (allowing non tech-savvy users to create journals) as well as communities (a crucial part of fandom), and both have been crucial to its success. Instead of creating entire homepages, individual fans have found it much easier to set up an account and begin to publish and network. The easy navigability of the site, which allowed users to link from one journal to another, is also crucial to fan activity.[25] That journal writing has also emerged as a particularly attractive format for women in a more general sense is also a felicitous development but the correspondence between the two phenomena surely cannot be put down to mere coincidence. Indeed due to features that allow the "locking" of certain entries as "friends-only", the individual is able to use the same journal for multiple tasks. I think it would be productive at this point to examine this format in greater detail, taking Lindemann's idea of narrative performance to explore how it configures ideas of online identity, community and audience (particularly in the context of LiveJournal), crucial to any discussion of women and fandom.

Drawing on Bauman's notion of "verbal art" where he identifies skilful performances as involving the use of figurative language and parallelism, special codes and formulae, and appeals to tradition, as complicated by the relationship between technology and orality, (Langellier and Peterson) Lindeman proposes that "we can view online journals as texts constructed for audiences through the communicatively competent and skilful use of language. Online journal entries employ special codes and shorthand for emotional expression (i.e., emoticons, 'LOL' for 'laugh out loud') and figurative language that keys audiences to read entries as performances. Online journals can be artistic in so far as they are communicatively competent, and this competence and artistry is often gauged on community-based rules regarding how one handles the technology." (356) The notion of identity as performance on the internet has been deployed before of course (Chandler, Langellier and Peterson) but Lindemann's stress on the *linguistic* and *artistic* competence as essential to "popular" journals has special resonance when talking of online fandom,

[25] The vulnerability of fanworks, especially in subcultures such as slash, was highlighted however when SixApart (who acquired LiveJournal from the original owners) caved under pressure from some radical religious groups and purged a lot of such "objectionable" material, in 2007. This of course caused enormous controversy and prompted somewhat of an exodus to other journal sites such as InsaneJournal. For an in depth discussion see http://www.yatpundit.com/2007/06/the-great-livej.html

with its high levels of overtly creative activity. While LiveJournal is driven by the relationships members forge ("not just an online journal; it's an interactive community" (LiveJournal "FAQ"), the importance of "interpretive frames" is also stressed here as any idea of "virtual community" is "inextricably linked to the existence of common understandings, or interpretive frames, and the communicatively competent practices that establish those interpretive frames." (360)

Individuals become "Big Name Fans" (BNFs)[26] due to their competence in showcasing their fanworks and encouraging other fans to respond to them (the feedback each post receives becomes crucial here). The work is usually within the "interpretive boundaries" of the larger fannish community but must remain engaging in order to appeal the wide spectrum of readers that browse through the site. Again these performances are important not just when talking of becoming "influential" within the community but often affect their RL in crucial ways.

A brief case study would perhaps be useful at this point. The case of Sarah Rees Brennan (or "mistful", which is her LiveJournal identity) is a good illustration of the ways in which women become active online due to their specific involvement in fandom but use that particular presence to further larger interests. A fan active in the Harry Potter fandom and seen as one of the most "popular" (as judged by her regular listing on multiple "recommendation lists" of fanfiction compiled by different fans and the high number of views and responses her posts attract), Brennan's posts however range over a large number of topics – book and movie reviews, real life incidents, occasionally politics – employing wit and humour very skilfully. Her introduction or "Bio", for example, reads "Sarah has a piece of paper saying she is sane, giving a dark and dreadful meaning to the term 'don't believe everything you read'. She carries on a turbulent relationship with her pillow and has read the dictionary." That she has received about 47,000 comments in her six years of activity on LiveJournal gives us an idea of her popularity. This popularity however is about to be mobilized in a different way as Brennan is about to become an original published author herself (a fantasy trilogy, *The Demon's Lexicon* 2009). Her journal still addresses her personal life and views but also now functions to promote her books. The case of Cassandra Clare, another fan whose popularity within the fan community

[26] A term coined to refer to fans who are particularly well known and celebrated within their fandoms. They are usually opinion formers and can have considerable influence on the ways in which fandom reacts to certain developments, for example the OTW has several long time BNFs on its board.

translated into a bestseller book (*City of Bones* 2007), is a further example of this phenomenon.

Lindemann's observations that "Skill and competence in the narrative performances in online journals appear to be the primary way a sense of community is created and maintained" and "While many people presumably maintain online journals to keep in touch with family and friends, online journals offer the opportunity to communicate with others across the globe. To get others to read one's entry, though, one must display artistry and competence in one's narrative" then seem to have special resonance in the case of fandom.

In conclusion then I hope I have established the important role involvement in media fandom has played in mediating the relationship a significant number of women have had with notions like online identity and community. Again I stress that it is not my intention to establish that it is *the* definitive medium through which "all" or even "most" women come to participate in online activities, but it certainly has been a significant enough path and merits critical attention. More importantly, it has been one that has been characterised by a remarkable level of creativity and community building, and is in my opinion a very vital component to any conceptions we may form about a "woman's web". Haraway envisioned the place of women in "an integrated circuit" touching multiple sites Home, Market, Paid Work Place etc, where there was no "'place' for women within these networks, only geometrics of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities." She maintained that it was only if women learnt to "read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions ...The task is to survive in the diaspora" (308). I would suggest that it was in their engagement with popular cultural texts, and their creation of a dynamic and multiple community of the like minded that women as media fans discovered one such strategy to survive and, further, to flourish. While I have briefly tried to examine the usage of the journal format and effective performance in my concluding section, I will now move onto a more nuanced examination of the form in my next chapter and try to show how media fandom has used both diverse methods and diverse platforms in order to interrogate popular cultural texts in significant ways and try to highlight the importance of focussing more of our attention to both the message and the medium.

BUT WHERE ARE ALL THE WOMEN BLOGGERS?

THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

This diary writing does not really count as writing since I have just reread my year's diary and am much struck by the rapid and haphazard gallop at which it swings, sometimes indeed jerking almost intolerably over the cobbles.

Virginia Woolf, diary entry dated 20 January, 1919

While it may seem a bit of a stretch to start a chapter which will focus on online journals with a passage written in 1919, as I worked my way through this part of my theorization, I kept coming back to it, as it encapsulates so many of the issues central to my discussion. Questions of what "real writing is", where it can be found, how it can be written, indeed whether it cannot be written in a "rapid and haphazard gallop" are all something that I hope to deal with in the coming pages.

When I started my exploration of what seemed to be the preferred platform for my larger research interest, i.e. the ways in which media fans interact with each other, form communities and engage in fannish pursuits such as writing fanfiction, making fan-videos etc, I did not think that I would encounter much the same debates about the medium as I had about the message. The politics of classifying what "real writing" is, is central to any discussion on fanfiction and it is remarkable that so much of the commentary on online journals or diaries centres around the same issues, issues of "seriousness", "validity", of what "deserves" to be read and respected and why. I have already expanded on why I feel that fandom has mediated the experience of a lot of women online, and now wish to move on to a specific inquiry into the online journal, exploring it as a form of online identity formation, communication and community formation that intersects with that of the blog, but is significantly different from it in several ways. I hope to show through such an analysis why the journal format has been particularly conducive to fan activity and how the mechanisms of organisation work themselves out in this context.

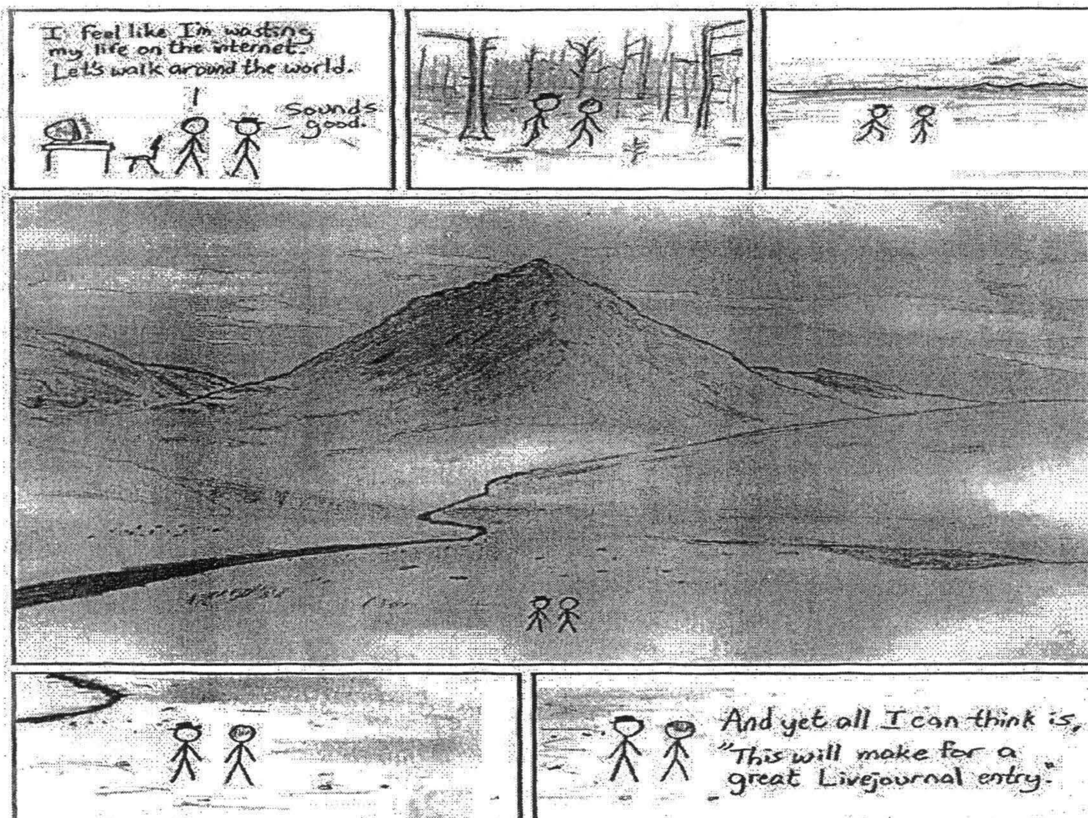
Do you Blog?

Perhaps I am getting slightly ahead of myself here and will pause to give a brief history of the blog, before going further. Blogs, which were originally called weblogs, are defined "as web sites that are updated frequently, most often with links to other sites and commentary on the other sites' content. The content of blogs combine musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays, though we would argue that it is not the nature of the content that defines it. Blogs can be devoted to only one topic, or they can reflect what the author is interested in at any given time. They can have one author, authors of blogs are known as bloggers, or multiple authors. What characterizes blogs are their form and function: all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty." (Gurak et al 2004)

The first blogs were launched between 1994 and 1998. In 1997, Jorn Barger started using the term weblog to refer to his online journal, and other authors of sites similar to his followed suit. Justin Hall's blog, *Links from the Underground*, dates back to 1994 (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002, p. 9 qtd in Gurak et al 2004). Dave Winer is also credited with creating one of the first blogs in 1996. Rebecca Bloods' frequently cited article on the history of blogs describes the move from people who set up their own blogs, using their knowledge of hypertext markup language or html coding (at this point blogs were necessarily limited to those with a computer background and is seen as a time when the geek-blogger – blogs in which the main topics of discussion ranged around scientific topics – held sway) to an explosion of blogging activity in July 1999, sparked off by the release of several no-cost, easy-to-use weblog content management tools like Pitas, Blogger, and Groksoup. This new system meant that blogging became a "one-click" procedure, similar to email. Millions logged on and the blogosphere (which refers to the entire "universe of blogs" on the internet) gradually began to be theorised as a new genre of social communication and commentary. In most analysis, blogs are championed for their offering of alternative spaces for expressing non-normative view points which may be suppressed by news corporations, forming global communities where individuals would be able to respond to each other's posts and engage in debate, leading to the establishment of a truly "democratic" cyberspace. As noted by Gurak et al, "While this idealist egalitarian model of the Internet has often been criticized, we

find value in the power of blogs to forego the institutionalization of communicative practices and offer spaces for writing that are more collaboratively constructed than other online spaces... Blogs allow for the possibility of developing new cultural practices of online communication in relation to previously established modes of ownership, authorship, and legitimacy of content and access to information." (2004)

Blogging however cannot be limited to a single impulse and the use of blog as a personal journal has caused theorists to posit various explanations, but perhaps the illustration below puts the primary impulse best.



The above cartoon typifies one of the most defining characteristics of the blogosphere as it exists today – the impulse to narrate, to validate ones own experiences/ perceptions of the world by sharing it with the larger web community. In today's "twitter-mad"[1] world, one possible answer to that old riddle – If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a noise? – is that on the blogosphere at least, someone is always around. The paradoxical complementarity of the voyeuristic and exhibitionist impulses in our times is seen by some commentators as one of the major motivating factors for the blog to arise as a recognisable genre in the 1990s.

[1] Twitter is a recent development in microblogging where users can update people on their network to their minute-by-minute activities in mini-posts of a 140 characters.

Miller and Shepherd in their analysis of the blog as a "social action" maintain, "A Darwinian approach to genre requires an understanding of what makes a rhetorical action 'fitting' within its cultural environment. In other words, we must see genre in relation to *kairos*, or socially perceived space-time. What Bitzer called a 'fitting' response will survive to become recurrent and thus generic if the *kairos* also recurs, or persists (1978, p. 168). *Kairos* describes both the sense in which discourse is understood as fitting and timely, the way it observes propriety or decorum, and the way in which it can seize on the unique opportunity of a fleeting moment to create new rhetorical possibility (Miller, 2002) ... If the blog is an evolutionary product, arising from a dynamic, adaptive relationship between discourse and *kairos*, then if we wish to understand the rhetorical qualities of the blog as genre, we should examine the late 1990s, when the blog originated, as a cultural moment."

Referencing the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the popularity of "reality television" and "tell-all" memoirs, they point to "the weakening boundary between the public and the private and the expansion of celebrity culture to politics and beyond. American culture became obsessed with both making celebrities into regular people and making regular people into celebrities." They also take into account Clay Calvert's linkage of the destablisation of the public and the private to our continual surrender of information: "as people relinquish control over increasing amounts of personal information, they expect increasing access to information in return... Calvert also discusses the social forces that support mediated voyeurism's counterpart, mediated exhibitionism. Central to exhibitionism is the social psychology of self-disclosure, which serves four purposes: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control, and we can see all of these at work in blogs." The impact of technology on how we experience the "real" seems all pervasive and this mediation of the "real" by technology is troubling to several theorists including Baudrillard who discusses his notion of the simulacra where the image replaces the real. Sherry Turkle has also noted that our immersion in a "culture of simulation" ultimately devalues direct experience, making it seem less compelling and ultimately less real (1997, pp. 235-38, qtd in Miller and Shepherd 2004)

Miller and Shepherd's analysis, while cogent, does not take into account the gendered use of the blog as journal; a form their analysis seems to focus on, and one that I will examine more closely in the next section. And when they examine the

statistics thrown up by the Perseus survey and one by Herring et al (2005), a particular bias, one that colours most of the commentary on blogs, can be seen. "Though popular perception has bloggers linking frequently to news outlets, Perseus found fewer than 10% of external links were to such sites and Herring et al. found 8.2% of links in blog entries were to news sites. Interestingly, blogs are updated much less frequently than generally supposed. The Perseus survey found that active blogs were updated on average every 14 days. This misconception is probably attributable to the fact that celebrity bloggers, people whose blogs are read by tens of thousands of visitors each day, almost without fail update their sites at least once a day and sometimes more frequently. The Perseus report concludes that these widely read and frequently updated blogs are 'the tip of a very deep iceberg' and are not characteristic of the iceberg as a whole."

They conclude, "Thus, we must ask whether we should define a genre by an ideal or by the mean, by expectation or by experience... We should not define a genre by its failed examples, even if they are a majority, but at the same time we must be open to the possibility that there may be multiple forms of success. Perhaps the blog is already evolving into multiple genres, meeting different exigences for different rhetors." Though they do allow for the possibility of a multiplicity of genres and definitions of a "successful" blog, their analysis clearly shows the generally accepted parameters for a successful blog – one that focuses primarily on the filtering function of the blog (where readers are directed to sites of interest they might otherwise miss) news, political events, writing or other interests that are not explicitly personal. For example, in their examination of the antecedents of the blog they identify web directories, and other such genres relating to information dissemination such as the news clipping service and the anthology, along with the political pamphlet. The personal diary or journal is mentioned last and as part of a "separate branch of the blog family tree." What the Perseus data shows then is interesting, as the most visible of the blog sites in the mainstream, do not fulfil the proposed "ideal" functions of the blog, especially in the areas of self clarification and relationship development. Indeed it is only when we looker deeper and examine the submerged part of the "iceberg" that we uncover a potentially more fruitful network, even though Miller and Shepherd would probably deem its constituents as "failed examples" as well.

What do you blog?

The above analysis already shows a split in the theorization of blogs as their more celebratory aspects are linked to their informational value and their ability to intervene in "serious" debates. Most commentators (Blood 2002, Herring et al 2004, Gurak et al 2004) do make a further division in the genre of the blog in terms of content – the filter blog (in which content usually centres around events external to the blogger's own life, for instance, business/political/sports news), the personal journal (in which content usually centres around the blogger's own life and thoughts) and one study has also made note of a third category the k(knowledge)-logs or klogs which are typically a storehouse for technological information and observations (Herring et al 2004). Of these the first two are especially important to my analysis.

In most theorization on blogs there has been an overwhelming focus on the filter blog, as the personal journal is deemed not "serious" enough to merit attention. When we take into consideration that the majority of blogs in existence are of the personal journal genre this focus seems to be rather skewed. Herring et al, in their analysis of media coverage and academic scholarship on blogging have documented some telling trends in both. In their analysis of media mentions of blogging, "The preference to mention adult males is consistent across the articles, regardless of their topical focus. The one exception is an article focused on female weblog authors (Guernsey, 2002), published in the *New York Times*. With the exception of the *New York Times* article, none of the articles in the sample mentions the gender or age of the blog authors – rather, adult male bloggers are presented as if they are 'typical'....Although they constitute a minority (13%) of blogs... filters and k-logs receive the majority of media attention." In blogging scholarship they note a similar bias both in terms of the structures of conferences organised to examine blogging practices (where papers focussed on male bloggers are read to primarily male audiences) and published material. "In choosing to focus on filter blogs, Internet scholars are not necessarily intending to privilege adult male blog authors. Rather, such blogs are deemed interesting for their 'democratizing', 'socially transformative' potential as alternative news sources (Delwiche, 2003; Krishnamurthy, 2002; cf. Lasica, 2001), whereby individuals with something to say can attract and potentially influence a mass audience. Sometimes, as in the case of the blogs studied by Park (2003), their sheer popularity makes them interesting. In this sense, scholars, like

journalists, are mirroring what they observe within the blogosphere itself." According to the Perseus survey, in 2003, of 4.12 million hosted blogs, 56% were created by females and 52.8% by people under the age of 20, with an additional 39.6% being created by young adults between the ages of 20 and 29. (Herring et al).

To summarise then, personal journals, despite being the dominant mode of blogging, have been routinely dismissed as "valid" forms of blogging because they allegedly focus on personal experience as opposed to opinion formation. There is also an implicit gendered judgement here as women tend to use the journal format more widely than men. The phenomenon of "A-list blogs" also contributes to the perception that there are only a few female bloggers. An A-list is usually compiled by websites such as Technorati.com, which track the "popularity" of various blogs in terms of the number of inbound links. These lists are usually filter-blog dominated and again give the impression that the blogosphere is a male dominated space.

To quote one typical response to questions of gender and blogging – "Women on the whole are less interested in politics than men, therefore less women create blogs, thus the female talent pool in the blogosphere is smaller than the male pool, which leads to the dearth of 'A-List' female bloggers... In other words, there aren't as many really successful female bloggers because percentage wise, there aren't as many women who are interested in doing political blogging. It's just that simple." (Hawkins, 'Why There's A Dearth of A-List Female Bloggers', 2005 qtd in Gregg, 6). A hierarchy of content is thus clearly established.

The construction of the history of blogs is also telling. I would like to complicate my own earlier recounting of the history of the blog, by pointing out that Carolyn Burke is the first person to be credited for establishing a personal journal in 1995, but neither Winer nor Blood take this into account in their history of blogging. The exclusion of the online journal from the overall discourse on blogging then fits into an overall impulse to devalue practices seen as feminine as non-serious and thus interesting to no one but a select circle of close friends. "Discourse practices that construct weblogs as externally-focused, substantive, intellectual, authoritative, and potent (in the sense of both 'influential' and 'socially transformative') map readily on to Western cultural notions of white collar masculinity (Connell, 1995), in contrast to the personal, trivial, emotional, and ultimately less important communicative activities associated with women (cf. 'gossip'). Such practices work to relegate the

participation of women and other groups to a lower status in the technologically-mediated communication environment that is the blogosphere, and more generally, to reinforce the societal status quo." (Herring et al 2004)

In context of the above conclusions it is even more interesting to examine why the preferred platform for media fandom members to interact has been the online journal. I will now move on to examine this form in greater detail and propose some reasons why this format has been particularly conducive to fan activity. I would also like to point out the ways in which fannish practices on such platforms disrupt certain preconceptions about online journal practices. I will be focusing primarily on Livejournal.com as it has been particularly favoured by fans for their endeavours.

Where do you Blog?

The online journal then is mostly structurally the same as a blog, with time-stamped entries appearing in reverse chronological order from the present date. However there are some features that are different – Livejournal for example allows users to record their particular mood while writing an entry through emoticons, allowing the creation of specific icons (picture and caption combinations that can reflect particular interests and are attached to posts about that interest). Most importantly, users can "friend" others who share their interests and so keep up with their posts and discussions, users are also actively encouraged to build communities around their interests. In terms of content, online journal entries range across the entire gamut of human experience, from personal confessions about a trying workday, to recipe exchanges, gardening advice and discussions on everything from creative writing to feminist theory. The lumping of such a diverse range of content into the column marked "personal" and somehow therefore not political (this is of course a complete reversal of the assertion by second wave feminists that the personal is political) seems to be a generalisation of the highest order. In a passage quoted earlier in this paper, Miller and Shepherd's proposal that blogs draw particularly on the "social psychology of self-disclosure, which serves four purposes: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control," seems to be particularly fruitful when looking at the genre of the online journal and it is remarkable that they do not make this connection and focus once again on the filter-blog.

As Gregg points out, "The adage 'Blogs are for boys, journals are for girls' summarised early observations that online diaries such as LiveJournal (LJ) served as natural extensions of the highly personal and intimate practice of teenage girls keeping a diary. With LJ in particular, the emphasis on interaction, conversation and communities of friends enabled by the software has been argued to facilitate girls' 'naturally' chatty disposition. LJ reflects a different relation to readers than blogs tend to allow because a journal page is often simply a means of entering and keeping tabs on a community of friends. In contrast to this, blogs appear to be more of an opportunity to espouse one's singular opinion." (8)

An analysis of the gender of bloggers on various platforms shows that the overt characterisation of a particular platform by its creators has an effect on membership. For example blog hosting sites like Blogger.com has 53% male users, while Wordpress.com has 55% male users. This is indicative of general blogging practices with a roughly equal gender distribution. However, if we examine sites that declare themselves as overtly journal hosting sites, we see a much more heavily marked difference. Livejournal.com for instance has a 66% female user base, while Diaryland.com has a 60% female user base.[2]

If one goes deeper into the, in my opinion rather specious, personal vs political divide, it is remarkably easy to note that many of the activities of journal writers parallel those that are considered to be essential for a "productive" blogosphere to exist. One of the main characteristics of "good" blogging practices has been its conversational aspect. Blood maintains, "I would go so far as to say that if you are not linking to your primary material when you refer to it—especially when in disagreement—[...] you are not keeping a weblog" (2002). However numerous surveys have found that conversations in the blogosphere are far from the norm. In one particular survey Herring, et al examined a randomly generated sample of blogs and found that "The social network analysis results point to the centrality and influence of A-list blogs in the network, although they tend to be linked to other blogs by weak (one-way) ties. The visualisation identified other, more strongly linked clusters, notably those comprised of blogs about Catholicism and homeschooling". This is a rather interesting observation as it reveals that those shining examples of blogging practices, the A-listers, are not really committed to building dialogic

[2] As estimated by the statistical website quantcast.com on 29/04/09

communities. The survey shows then that it is in communities based around interests that may well be categorised as "personal" (in this case religion and homeschooling) that the most conversations and reciprocal linking take place. Another commentator Graham Lampa maintains that "A clearer answer to the community conundrum lies somewhere between the hype of a new and revolutionary online community and the sobering statistical reality. In the absence of strong interpersonal links among members of the blogosphere, an alternative explanation for the persistence of community is needed. At the core of the blogosphere lies a minority of active and engaged bloggers who post, comment, and link frequently, creating a kernel of conversational community based on personal networks facilitated by blogging tools and associated technologies." (2004)

Here I would like to focus on the activity of one such transnational online "conversational" community that is actively involved in various community based endeavours and engaged in near constant dialogue and debate on a variety of issues. The members while located in various parts of the world often form close personal relationships based on shared interests and in the process accrue significant amounts of social capital.[3] I am talking of course, of media fandom. The preferred platform of fandom, has been the journal format (which replaced the older mailing list platform that I have discussed in my first chapter). The first of these (and the most popular to date and my focus in the chapter) was livejournal.com. Created initially by Brad Fitzpatrick on 15 April, 1999, as a social networking platform, it quickly grew to incorporate both journal blogging and social networking and was quickly adopted by fan communities. The format allowed for both individual personal journals and communities geared around specific interests, and so was ideally suited to the needs of the fannish community. Its growth from that point has been impressive. As of May 2010, 26,076,807 accounts existed on the site, with a demographic that skewed towards women in the age range of 17 to 25 years old.[4] Fannish journals typically[5] consist of entries dealing with both personal communications and fanworks (including fanfiction, fanart and vids).

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[3] Social Capital broadly refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu and Wacquant define social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1992, 14)

[4] Retrieved from http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml on 2nd May, 2010

[5] Users may also maintain fandom-only journals to showcase their creative efforts, or alternately lock down certain entries that they share with only an approved list of friends.

"This is just yet another stupid Live Journal wank fest[6] brought to us by the Live Journal brats. Now go play."

Comment on the Racefail debate by user Teddypig

The above comment has a slightly complicated context but through it I hope to show some of the most pervasive attitudes about the online journal and by extension the online fannish journal – that it is the domain of non-serious discussion on trivial topics. As Gregg points out, "within blogging culture, the phenomenon of 'Live-Journal bashing' (O'Neil 2005) – joking about online journal writers – arises from the assumption that the personal chat of young people is trivial in comparison to the weighty political content discussed on pundit-style blogs. An implicit power dynamic enables this distinction which deems some issues to be trivial while others are more significant. ... Such a distinction also follows a long tradition of philosophical thought which places women's culture in the domain of emotion and affect as opposed to the rationality and reason of which men are capable." (Gregg, 5).

The confusion with "how" to deal with the online journal has been a feature of most critical discussion of it. The practice of women to use their journals for a number of pursuits that are easily deemed non-serious, fan activity being a good example, has managed to elide the significant commentary on the most serious issues that goes on between members of online communities such as media fandom through the journal format. A "typical" fannish journal is not tied down to expectations of what are "appropriate" issues to blog about and cheerfully slips between boundaries that an analyst tries to keep separate. For example, would a discussion on gender issues in the TV series *Supernatural*, slipped in between one post about a pet cat and one about job worries be termed "serious" and "political"? Somehow I think not.

Not many commentators have dealt with the online journal as a separate genre of blogging, but where they have, they show the same confusion with categories of what is "appropriate". Laurie McNeill recounts her difficulties in dealing with the genre: "Certainly, literary and aesthetic snobbery informs my dismay at many online diaries. They have not been properly 'vetted', properly shaped for a reading audience, before being made public. But Web diarists do not need to prove the marketability of

[6] Fandom wank is a term coined within fandom to characterise a heated debate on any issue within the community. It has negative connotations and is generally seen to characterise dramatic overreactions over relatively small issues by certain groups of fans. To characterise a discussion of racism as fan wank is therefore seen as highly problematic by most commentators.

their lives and stories in order to be 'published', and Web diaries, though the contemporary equivalent of the vanity press, nevertheless have a potential readership of millions." (25) It is interesting to note that the same reactions of "dismay" have also been noted in the reactions to fanfiction.

One commentator, who blogs under the username Waxbanks, says "It horrifies me not merely from the standpoint of someone who idiosyncratically, even meanly, values writerly originality and integrity – such that pasted-in sexualities and alternate justifications for actions in hopefully well-wrought narratives strike me as artificial, arbitrary, and therefore inauthentic. Centrally, I find much fanfic ... horrifying because of what it says about reading practices: the privileging of the reader's self-centered longing over the writer's coherent work." The above critique reflects many of the problems faced when approaching fanfiction studies along the lines of valuing "writerly originality" and "authenticity" over a "reader's self centered longing". That it is precisely fanfiction's disruptions of the author(ity) of the writer that is most interesting about it is somehow entirely missed. It is not difficult to see how "literary and aesthetic snobbery" informs the judgement on fanworks and fan activities, or how much their "un-vetted" status troubles some critics. It is also interesting that though charges of being the ultimate "vanity press" are routinely made against the online journal, blogs which are platforms for opinion pieces (also surely a type of self-promotion) are seen as serving an informative purpose.

McNeil continues that, "In their immediacy and accessibility, in their seemingly unmediated state, Web diaries blur the distinction between online and offline lives, 'virtual reality' and 'real life', 'public' and 'private', and most intriguingly for auto/biography studies, between the life and the text." (26) I would propose that it is this blurring of boundaries that is particularly suited to fannish journals as multiple modes of expression and interest can be accommodated within them. Lastly the financial possibilities of the blog has also received some attention with sites such as Problogger.com, being set up specifically to advise bloggers on how to make money from their blogging practices. It is also feared that because of the low visibility of women on the A-list blogs, they are at a disadvantage in this area as well. I have already reflected on how effective fandom performances can translate into RL (real life) benefits in my first chapter, so I will now attempt to interrogate the other assumptions that have been made about the personal journal.

The degree of focus on filter-blogs has certainly not helped women gain visibility on the blogosphere, but I would like to propose that this focus has also been extremely narrow in its interpretation of how, and on which platforms, critical and effective social commentary can take place. I would like to now take up the particular event of Racefail as a case study in order to show how media fandom activity is very concerned with interrogating and critiquing the popular cultural material.

I propose that by its adoption of the personal/political divide, academic study of the blogosphere has overlooked some of its most interesting aspects. I would also like to complicate somewhat the notion that personal journals are not/cannot be used for making critical interventions that serve to highlight and discuss contentious issues such a racism, sexism, homophobia etc in highly effective ways, and that fannish activities may be dismissed as "mindless wank". I will undertake this study through the lens of fandom, specifically through an examination of the ongoing conversation in the fannish blogosphere that I referred to in the opening quote of this section, i.e Racefail. Science fiction as a genre has always had a troubled relationship with race, but my aim here is not to so much to interrogate that history, as it is to examine how this colour-blindness that has plagued mainstream science-fiction for decades, is being confronted by distinctly non-normative ways in the domain of the new media, specifically in this case, the domain of media fandom. I also hope to underline the fact that this critical discussion has been largely overlooked by commentators precisely because of the medium: both the platform used (the journal blog) and the fact that it was led by fans. This theme of elision and undercutting seems to be a continual one when dealing with fanworks and fan activity, and I hope to show valued insights in pop cultural reception and interrogation that are missed, due to such categorizations.

To backtrack a little and give context to my argument, I would like to expand on why I feel that cyberculture is a vital field for postcolonial enquiry. When recalling more than four decades of subversive scholarship, one would expect a robust tone in Neil Lazarus' *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, but instead it seems to reflect a sense of what Lily Cho terms as a "disenchantment and weariness which undercuts the collection" (2005: 177). This melancholia, as analysed by Sheshadri, Crooks and Spivak among others, seems to arise partly because it is a victim of its own success (and thus has become mired in its own reifications and assumptions) and partly because there seems to be a narrowness in its critical ambit.

In his paper "New Media, Digitextuality and Public Space: Reading 'Cybermohalla'" (2008), Nayar posits the question that has also preoccupied me through much of my own engagement with cyberculture – "How do cyberculture and cyberspace get 'postcolonialized', appropriated for specific, politically useful and significant purposes?" In his analysis of the Cybermohalla Project[7], Nayar identifies it as a possible "move towards a postcolonial appropriation of cyberspace, a move facilitated by and through the digitextual nature of the new media of information and communications technology (ICT)." (Cybermohalla 1). As he clarifies further, "I expand the semantic scope of the term 'postcolonial' to mean a set of contrapuntal, counter-cultural and resistant practices that examines, questions and re-appropriates locally and in the vernacular not only English, as Ashcroft et al[8], but also techno-cultural artifacts developed by corporate houses, industries and monopoly capitalism in 'First World' nations." (Cybermohalla 3) From my own location, both geographically and politically, the colonial nature of the language of the proponents of cyberspace (as pointed out by Sardar, the frequent allusions to "frontiers" and "new territories" is indicative of how cyberspace is conceptualised by those who seek to control it. (183)) is troubling. Nayar's call to "postcolonialise cyberspace" (*Postcolonializing Cyberculture*, 3) is crucially predicated on the fact that we must engage with the technologies that dominate our world, on our own terms.

Racefail is a particular instance where the blogosphere has emerged as a vital and highly charged platform where persons on the "wrong" racial/cultural/economic side of the "digital divide" have engaged in a powerful critique of a hegemonic discourse in a fashion which ordinarily would have been unavailable to them. It is essentially a conversation about racism in Science Fiction and Fantasy, a conversation

[7] A collaborative project of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the non-governmental organization, Ankur (http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla), that focuses on alternative education. Nayar informs that "Cybermohalla is a network of five labs across New Delhi – locality labs in LNJP (an informal settlement in Central Delhi), Dakshinpuri (a Resettlement Colony in South Delhi) and Nangla Maachhi (a Research and Development Lab in the Ankur office) and the Sarai Media Lab. It has its own mailing lists and blogs. It publishes its own Cybermohalla Diaries. The computer hardware is situated in spaces called 'compughars'. Each locality lab is a room with three computers, portable audio recorders (dictaphones) and cameras (digital and bromide print); and fifteen to twenty practitioners from the locality, between 15 and 24 years of age. The labs are self-regulated. Each practitioner spends five days a week at the lab. They record their responses to events, incidents in the street, conversations in the form of animations, sound, photostories and text." (2008: 3)

[8] Nayar has expanded on the discussions of postcolonial adaptations of the English language by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, who refer to " The abrogation of the received English which speaks from the center, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language" (1998 39)

quite frankly long overdue, about how mainstream SF/F remains distressingly coded as white, imperialist fantasy, where characters of colour and non-Caucasian ethnicity are represented in stereotypical and hackneyed ways, where their accomplishments and contributions to historical narratives are either disregarded or elided.

To all intents and purposes it may seem that this conversation already happened, and to look at it from an academic viewpoint, it has. The postcolonial critique of SF/F has been undertaken by critics such as Kerslake (though I think that her critique is particularly ineffective[9]), Uppinder and many others. They have discussed at length SF/Fs troubled engagement with the portrayal of characters of colour and themes of race and ethnicity juxtaposed with its incredible potential to function as a subversive genre. But this discussion has done little to change mainstream SF/F publishing practices which have remained dominated by white authors and editors. Some attempts at introducing diversity have been attempted – notably, *So Long Been Dreaming*, a Canadian collection of short stories, published in 2004, edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan but these remain isolated efforts. The attempt to bring diversity into the genre by encouraging writers of colour to make their own interjections into its narrative is very necessary, but I feel it is equally important for white authors to be made aware of the racist tropes they (seemingly) thoughtlessly disseminate. The direction this necessary intervention would come from however was one entirely unanticipated by either SF/F's authors and publishers or its academic critics.

This brings me to the "other" half the story. As a long time avid reader of SF, I have often been troubled by this failure in the genre but foundered when it came to thinking of a way forward. Academic critique seemed to exist in a scholarly bubble, not being able to engage with authors, editors and journals in any kind of constructive fashion. In January of 2009 however, something quite extraordinary happened. A popular S/F author, Elizabeth Bear wrote a blog entry on her livejournal on the subject of "writing the other" – she was lauded by her readers and peers for tackling the issue

[9] In *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007) Kerslake identifies an imperialist impulse in several SF classics including H.G. Wells and Asimov's and Wyndham's work, but she dehistrorizes the idea of empire and frames it in broader ethical terms, saying, "The best way to understand empire as it has been treated in SF is to consider that it does not describe a Western cultural bias, as has often been assumed, but that it stems from a many-sided impulse to which any of us might be prone" (191). This is to me a significant failing as it depoliticizes the entire discussion, allowing it to trade in largely abstract conclusions and therefore making it an ineffective critique.

in a sensitive manner. However, one reader's response was slightly different, taking off from Bear's own novel *Blood and Iron.* (I will be using the pseudonyms used by the various posters on livejournal and other blogging platforms). Avalon Willow's "Open Letter to Elizabeth Bear" is a brutal juxtaposition of what Bear advocates in her post, and how she has actually chosen to write the other in her work. Avalon tries to articulate her sense of betrayal about the depiction of the black character, saying

> It's about my personal confusion that an author so highly spoken of by people I respect, would write about a magical negro who gets bridled by a white woman after trying to kill or eat another white woman and, to my horror, becoming some sort of beast of burden/big buck protector; my horror at watching the humiliation of yet another black man so that a white woman can be empowered in front of her peers.
>
> It's about the fact that you and writers like you *don't have to think about this stuff.* That you have the ready made excuse that it all *'serves the story'* and that said character was written intelligently and as a well rounded individual with wants and needs of his own; with plots even. It's about the fact that I couldn't finish reading your book because I threw it across the room in disgust.

She then lists instance after instance of characters of colour being misrepresented in SF narratives and finally concludes

> It's about being fed up with all of that and not in the mood to pamper or pet someone who has far more privilege than they seem willing to admit to in the realms of fantasy and science fiction. And not wanting to watch them parade in a hairshirt when there are others who are actually hurting from a true lack of something.
>
> I'm not calling you a monster. I'm not calling you a racist. But I am calling you clueless and ill worded and more than a touch thoughtless. Your ability to think about things, *sometimes*, does not erase my pain or lack. And only thinking of how things come across, *sometimes*, is not enough to make me like you. In fact, I don't think there's anything that *could* make me like you, other than you somehow earning my respect. And that's never going to happen if you keep checking in with me (metaphorical me, the larger culture and audience of PoC me) to see how you're going. Cause then it looks like so much brownie points, so much patting yourself on the back, so much excuses and dissembling; so much *pride*.

Another entry of interest was written by an Indian reader deepa_d, titled "I didn't dream of dragons" where she articulates many of the same struggles faced by readers like myself,

> When I was around thirteen years old, I tried to write a fantasy novel. It was going to be an epic adventure with a cross-dressing princess on the run, a snarky hero, and dragons. I got stuck when I had to figure out what they would do after they left the city. Logically, there would be a tavern. But there were no taverns in India

She continues to tackle the arguments that are inevitably thrown up against readers of colour who protest the unthinking appropriation of their cultures – arguments about accessibility, about simply "writing the SF you want yourself" by firstly pointing out the effects of language and translatability of experience, saying

> *I grew up with half a tongue.*
> Do not tell me, or the people like me who have grown up hearing Arabic around them, or singing in Swahili, or dreaming in Bengali—but reading only (or even mostly) in English (or French, or Dutch)—that this colonial rape of our language has not infected our ability to narrate, has not crippled our imagination. When I was in class 7, our English teacher gave us the rare creative writing assignment, and three of my classmates wrote adventure stories about characters named Julian and Peggy and Tom. Do not tell me that this cultural fracture does not affect the odds required to produce enough healthy imaginations that can chrysalis into writers. When we call ourselves Oreos or Coconuts or Bananas (Black/Brown/Yellow on the outside, White on the inside)—understand the ruptures and bafflement that accompanies our consumption of your media while we resent and critique it.

Elizabeth Bear initially responded to Avalon Willow accepting her critique, but soon some of her other fans implied that is was merely a "failure to read correctly" (a familiar tactic used to suppress such readings) and this marked a flashpoint that marks the beginning of what has been termed within the SF fandom as Racefail and which encompasses hundreds of posts by both fans of colour and allies, as well as those who are resistant to the ideas put forth by them (and this included discouragingly a large number of SF writers and publishers). This is vitally important for a myriad reasons,

but primarily because this marks the first time in online fandom's history when S/F racist and imperialist characterisations have been debated in a forum where authors and editors of SF magazines and journals *had* to engage with those questions. This was facilitated by the internet and indeed cyberspace was the only milieu in which the debate could have been conducted in the fashion it was. This was an active attempt to bring postcolonial perspectives and critiques not only to S/F fandom but to cyberculture itself. The questions posed were hard ones, and many authors lost the respect of fandom through their defensiveness and their unwillingness to listen to critique, but what is most significant to me, is that for once the debate could not be silenced or held only among academics in a seminar. It was carried out in that most public of forums, the internet, and while a lot of it degenerated into petty and hurtful behaviour, the issues that were raised could not be dismissed. Fandom has in fact continued to be sensitive to the portrayals of race in popular culture, the most recent being the outrage about the "whitewashing" of the originally multiethnic characters in the film adaptation of the animated series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*[10].

It is particularly interesting in the light of my earlier examination of the accepted characterisations of journal activity that these exchanges could be characterised as "non political". However that Teddypig uses the precise phraseology he does to critique the debate shows how endemic the culture of "Live-Journal bashing" has become to blog commentary. A fan's opinions are dismissed on the grounds that she is firstly a journal user, and someone who is involved in media fandom and so not qualified to comment on such weighty issues. The gendered nature of both judgements is also quite explicit in terms of how both journals and fandom have been characterised as female dominated spaces (and what has in part contributed to their dismissal). I hope I have complicated several assumptions about online journal use here – the notion of them being non-political, un-connected and so not following appropriate blogging practices of community-building and being narrow in their focus. Through the particular example of Racefail, I hope I have also underlined how media fandom can and has functioned as an effective platform for both critique and consciousness raising with regards to popular culture.

[10] For a more detailed analysis of arguments and actions pertaining to this episode please see the following entry, http://glockgal.livejournal.com/375625.html

I have already remarked on the characterisation of media fandom activity as hidden and even furtive, by critics such as Jenkins and Hills and while the desire to escape being labelled as "overinvested" in activities easily labelled as "trivial" by fandom participants has contributed to this, so have the assumptions of academics when examining this subculture. In my first chapter I have attempted to show that while media fandom activity has been a particularly productive site for the creation of online identities and communities for women, it has remained a largely unexplored field in feminist cyberstudies due to its overt characterisation as "non serious". In quite the same fashion, the platform of choice for media fandom, the journal, has been effectively erased from academic inquiry, due to the application of rather arbitrary judgements about what qualifies as "valid" fields of inquiry and research.

Popular cultural texts have always played a vital role in the construction of normative ideas of power, relationship formation, the "ideal" body, sex/gender systems and imaginings thereof (the latter issues I will take up in my next chapter). These texts have been considered, particularly by critics such as Adorno, as products of the "culture industry" and as epitomes of "mass culture", reinforcing hegemonic structures. As Christopher Pawling points out however that, "texts have been examined as direct bearers of ideology – and this ignores the fact that popular fiction both reflects social mores and intervenes in the life of a society by interpreting experiences which have not been reflected upon adequately – therefore is also a form of cultural production and meaning creation offering a particular way of thinking and feeling about one's relation to oneself, to others and to society as a whole." (6) Pawling goes on to focus his critique on the "modes of production" of popular literature in his analysis, and declares that he does so in order to avoid collapsing into an analysis of the "moments of its reception." It is here that I must deviate from him as I feel that it is precisely in this dismissal of these modes and moments of reception that a huge lack in the study of popular culture is seen. My argument is that it is very often in the way popular cultural texts are received and interpreted and indeed in this case resisted by fans that the most exciting possibilities of subversion exist. The dismissal of the recipients of popular culture as easily ideogolised masses is troubling, because it elevates the critic and his intellectual audience, and ignores the fact that the point of interpretation of popular cultural texts, as it were, by fan communities is as critical a moment as the analysis of the text itself and the modes of its production.

It is precisely this moment of reception that became so highly charged for writers like Elizabeth Bear, as numerous fans of colour and their allies used the platform that the internet gave them to make their voices on the issue heard. Because it is a highly connected and vocal community, media fandom was eminently suited to make sure that the debate did not peter out, but indeed grew to proportions that the SF establishment had to take note of it. The editor of the British SF journal *Vector*, Niall Harrison, was one of the first of the establishment to "break the silence" that was frustrating many S/F fans, by summarising the debate, in an entry titled "Reasons to Care about Racefail" and adding that he too had been disappointed by his peers, "By and large, I count myself with the hundreds of fans who are disappointed and/or offended by the behaviour of professionals they previously respected." He continued with the hope that the episode will lead to an opening up of discussion, saying "What I *do* want is for the science fiction and fantasy field, and for science fiction and fantasy fandom, to be welcoming to and accepting of diversity in all its aspects; and in the meantime for both the field and fandom to be more aware of their limitations and shortcomings in this area, and less defensive when discussing issues relevant to this topic." While Racefail has not been a happy episode for fandom (indeed the sense of frustration is palpable among many fans) what is heartening is that what could and would have been dismissed as mere "complaining" by un-educated fans is being acknowledged as a significant marker in the evolution of SF as a genre.

Media fandom then has shown significant potential to function as a platform for marginalized voices to make themselves heard, and that is why it is both logical and indeed imperative that academics, whether interested in online identity creation, the nature of the blogosphere, cyberspace as a postcolonial project or indeed feminist cyberstudies, try to include it in their analyses as its effects are already being felt.

THE (RE)WRITE CHOICE :
AN EXAMINATION OF HOW SLASH FANFICTION MOBILIZES NARRATIVES OF THE "BODY" IN A CYBERCULTURAL CONTEXT

> Don't pander to me kid. One tiny crack in the hull and our blood boils in thirteen seconds... See if you're still so relaxed when your eyeballs bleed! Space is disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence.
>
> Dr. Leonard (Bones) McCoy *Star Trek XI*

At the outset I hasten to reassure the reader that the fact that I start off with a quote from the newest edition of one of my most enduring popular culture obsessions is not just for the gratuitous enjoyment I receive from the scathing commentary of Dr. Leonard (Bones) McCoy, but because it provides, in one witty nutshell, some of the main ideas I would like to expand on in this chapter. The good doctor's fear of "space" and what it can to do to the human body – seen here as vulnerable and at the mercy of the vagaries of technology – can quite easily be transposed into a discussion of the paranoia surrounding the potential for "disembodiment" effected by the technologies of cyberspace. Even in the early, heady days of theorization about cyberculture, when there seemed to be an urge towards welcoming "transcendence", there has always been an undercurrent of worry about what happens to the "meat" of the lived body, when talking about how we may "negotiate" cyberspace. Theorists seem to have alternated between those who embrace the possibility of a "cyborg" future (in all its contested meanings) wholeheartedly and those who accuse the former of being fundamentally escapist in their desire to get rid of as it were, the "fury and mire of human veins" (Yeats, *Byzantium*). With our entrance into cybercultural discourse we are also confronted by the breakdown of the notion of the "natural" body. This debate is not confined only to cybercultural studies as Virginia Eubanks, in her examination of Modern Primitivism, also opens with the declaration that "The postmodern/cybernetic period of communications and visualization technology we find ourselves in has made permeable the boundaries of old systems and the marins of our culture, resulting in an intense concern with defining the boundaries of the physical body and the body social. Contemporary boundary paranoia marks and interesting and politically important crossroads; boundary flux is a state imbued with power, and witin it lies the potential for a change of the social order... As our society

is reshuffled to adjust to the rise of technocracy, there is a unique opportunity to start breaking down old binaries such as mind/body, culture/body and culture/nature. But are modernist definitions of the self and the other beginning to break down as the boundaries of the physical and the social body are breached, or are these boundaries simply being redrawn in order to accommodate a new permeability?" (74) But it is in cyberculture where the debates have seemed to be the most fraught, as perhaps it is there as in few other fields of discourse that theorists have been confronted by the idea of this "permeability" of the body in its most extreme form. This has alternately excited and horrified cyberculture theorists, but in both cases has re-energized debate around the notion of the "body" itself, forcing us to look at it as an active agent, rather than passive "given".

As Stone comments on Haraway's work, much of it is concerned with "the collapse of categories and of the boundaries of the body. The boundaries between the subject, if not the body, and the 'rest of the world' are undergoing a radical refiguration, brought about in part through the mediation of technology." (517) There are of course a myriad ways to approach the category of the "cyberbody," but here I have chosen to do so through the specific trajectory of cybercultural discourse which has looked at the "body", not as any kind of natural "given" but as a "site" of generative debate that is open to (re)imagination. I will however be doing this through the context of online media fandom and particularly through the lens of Slash Fanfiction, on both of which I will expand on in just a moment.

The second thread that my opening quote allows me to make reference to is the role that popular culture itself has played in shaping the narratives of cybercultural discourse. I think that this is an interesting thread to explore because for a medium whose conception and development has been influenced to an extraordinarily large degree by popular cultural texts[1] (William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) seems to have been the default starting point for most early essays on cyberculture), apart from a focus on the development of cyberpunk and lately hypertext, there has been a lack of attention to the way other forms of popular culture have adapted themselves to new media forms, especially the way the internet has allowed fans of these texts, from diverse backgrounds/locations/demographics, to interact, network and engage with

[1] By texts here I am referring not just to books, but also to television shows and movies that have garnered mainstream success.

them in diverse fashions, creating fanworks that share a creative and critical relationship with their source material. Because media fandom has traditionally been seen as a female dominated space (Jenkins, Hills), I feel this process is of particular interest to feminist scholars, especially in the context of developing discourses around women and technology, like ecofeminism for example, that sometimes see them in opposition. That the transition to using such computer mediated communication technologies was harder for women, has been commented on numerous times, and even today questions like "where are all the female bloggers?" are heard frequently. I have already questioned this (in)visibility of women on the internet in my previous chapters, through the particular lens of media fandom. My focus here will be on a particular a subset of fanwork, i.e. Slash Fanfiction, and in this chapter I hope to explore how women fans, while establishing creative and communicative communities online, have accomplished a series of interruptions of the "canon" that popular cultural texts seemingly impose on their audiences and have thus prised open certain "spaces" conducive to subversive practices. I will emphasize here that I find the idea of "interruption" very useful to my theorization.

As I have already expanded upon earlier, popular cultural texts have always played a vital role in the construction of normative ideas of the "ideal" body, sex/gender systems and imaginings thereof. I continue to insist on the importance of the "moments of reception" (dismissed by Pawling in his theorisation on the importance of pop cultural texts). I maintain throughout my argument that it is very often in the way popular cultural texts are received and interpreted by fans that the most exciting possibilities of subversion exist. Indeed fan studies seem to fit into the idea of the interruption particularly well as it is by paying attention to how these texts' ostensible formation and circulation of normative social perceptions/actions/ interactions is received by the intended audience in ways that are distinctly unintended by their authors, that opens up quite a dynamic space for subversion. David Bell's conviction that it is the "symbolic stories ... provided by journalism, by advertising, by fiction, by academia, by politics" that in turn through "endless circulation and reiteration... give shape to the stories we in turn tell ourselves about our own place in cyberculture" (6) is pertinent here, as fanfiction is all about the stories we (re)tell ourselves and how those allow us to "own" a "place in cyberculture."

But I am getting a little ahead of myself here, and, perhaps fittingly, an interruption is called for, as in order to contextualise my discussion, a brief idea of both fanfiction and the particular subset I wish to focus on, slash fanfiction, and its place within fan, cyberculture and feminist literary studies is necessary at this point. Fan studies have been a legitimate avenue of enquiry for some years now with writers like Henry Jenkins (1992) and Matt Hills (2002) critiquing commonly held beliefs that see fan communities as slightly crazed, unquestioning consumers of mass produced, "popular" (and therefore immediately labelled non-intellectual) material. I contest this practice as the hierarchisation present in such judgement is troubling, as it places "authority" in the hands of a select few who get to decide what constitutes "value".

Far from being blindly adoring mobs, fan communities are highly aware groups who actively critique and comment on the books/movie/shows they love. Fanfiction is an extension of this process, whereby areas of a text which were left unexplored or dealt with in an unsatisfactory fashion "officially" are reworked. Kristina Busse and Kate Hellekson (2006) pick up on this same aspect and expand it to cover the entire process of engaging with the text and the production of a piece of fanfiction using the fan acronym of a WIP:

> [WIP] is a term used in the fan fiction world to describe a piece of fiction still in the process of being written but not yet complete. This notion intersects with the intertextuality of fannish discourse, with the ultimate erasure of a single author as it combines to create a shared space, fandom, which we might refer to as a community. The appeal of works in progress lies in part in the way fans can engage with an open text: it invites responses, permits shared authorship, and enjoins a sense of community... It invites the viewer to enter, interpret, and expand the text. In so doing, open-source text in particular invites fan fiction as an expansion to the source universe and as interpretive fan engagement where the fan not only analyzes the text but must constantly renegotiate her analyses (6)

This is exactly the point I am also trying to make, that fanfiction often engages with aspects of the text which are extremely troubling. In the recently concluded *Harry Potter* series, for example, a lot of fans were uncomfortable with the almost complete

demonisation of the Slytherin House in the narrative of the last novel. The negative implications of the valorisation of "strength" as characterised by Gryffindor over Slytherin "cunning", Hagrid's almost never contested judgement that "there never was a witch or wizard gone bad that wasn't Slytherin", have all been explored in great detail in fanfiction. Fans then are not blind to authorial prejudice and at the end of the day are probably the only people to query whether, as one writer put it, "the only good Slytherin is a dead Slytherin" (referring of course to the "redemption-through-sacrifice" of Severus Snape).[2]

What makes fanfiction doubly interesting is that it is a gendered space where it is primarily women who "fill in the gaps". The dismissal of fanfiction, then, begins to fit into a larger tendency to dismiss literary production by women. The more things change it seems, the more they remain the same. Fan communities are as open to sexism as any other area of society and women fans are consistently marginalized in a lot of them. The concentration on the activities of fanboys over those of fangirls in research on popular culture follows a depressingly familiar pattern. Women started writing fanfiction initially as an affirmation of their "claim" to a text and their ability to engage with it in fandoms where they were marginalized, but the project has diversified and now functions on all the levels described earlier by Hellekson and Busse, i.e. as critique, commentary and extension.

That fanfiction began to be written in the form it is recognised today with the advent of the Star Trek television series in the 1970s is not surprising. The show was a phenomenon that kicked off an intense level of fan activity across America. An action oriented and science fiction based show, it was calculated to appeal to a male audience. The large number of women it attracted were apparently not informed that they were not supposed to be interested. In a brilliant act of subversion however, female fans of the series decided to carve out their own form of interaction with the "text". They created the first examples of fanfiction that dealt with areas not explored to their satisfaction, including, but not only, issues of intimacy and love. They also took the shows tagline to heart and indeed boldly went where no fan had gone before, writing the first example of Slash fanfiction.

[2] I am not claiming that Rowling does not destabilize some problematic equations, for example her casting of Peter Pettigrew as a Gryffindor and traitor does point towards her efforts to trouble simplistic reductions. But the elision of Slytherin House is still a point of contention as no character apart from Severus Snape is seen to oppose Voldemort through the series.

So what is slash? "Slash fanfiction" is broadly defined as fanfiction describing romantic and/or erotic same-sex relationships between male fictional characters. This is material written primarily (but not solely) by heterosexual women, not constrained by factors such as age and nationality, for an audience of their peers. Female fans pick up on perceived homoerotic subtext in fictional works and spin out their own narratives based on such relationships. The term "slash" comes from the "/" symbol used to denote the pairing each story deals with as opposed to the word "and" which signifies non-sexual interaction. The first slash fanfiction was written around the pairing of Captain Kirk and his second in command, Dr. Spock, from the Star Trek series and was originally circulated in fan-produced magazines or "Zines". The phenomenon has grown and advanced in recent years, facilitated by the advent of the Internet which allowed "slashers" to network and share their work more easily. The explosion of slash writing has indeed been phenomenal as fans spanning an incredible demographic range regarding age, nationality and even language have formed creative communities around their common fannish interests. I have of course elaborated on the rise and spread of media fandom (of which slash fanfiction has always been a part) and the effect the internet has had on its growth, more expansively in my first chapter.

All the specific fandoms that I have elaborated on in this dissertation have had significant portions devoted to the creation of fanworks (fanfiction, fanvids etc) that focus on slash pairings. This phenomenon has only grown in popularity since the 1970s and indeed it is a good bet that any popular show or cult movie or book or even television show, since then, which features men in the leading role (not too rare an occurrence, you will agree), will have had slash fandoms form around them. Slash fanfiction intrigues me for a number of reasons (questions about how erotics and subversion and female sexuality interact to form unexpected new patterns being primary), but my attention was caught because it was the first time that my conception of what *could* be seen as desirable for me (a heterosexual young girl of about seventeen) was interrupted, and that pause was filled with delightful cacophony. In *Between Men* Eve Sedgwick talks about the "continuum between homosocial and homosexual" and argues that male homosocial networks are supported by the repression of homosexual erotic possibility and enacted through the exchange of women. Slash then offers women a chance to expose these homosexual potentialities in seemingly overtly heterosexual situations. Thus women readers no longer remain

passive conduits. Sedgwick analysed homo-erotic subtext from Shakespeare to Whitman to Melville. As a slasher, I extend her viewpoint far beyond literature and escape societal dictates regarding what I am meant to see.

Slash fanfiction, then, has huge implications for our understanding of female sexuality, especially heterosexuality[3] and has the potential for re-energising the discourse on that elusive thing, a feminist heterosexual politics.

> "Can I be a feminist and still like men?".... "Sure, just like you can be a vegetarian and like fried chicken." (Hollander 1980)

The place of heterosexuality in feminism has been a tremendously contested site, especially since the Radical Feminists sketched out their separatist agenda in the 1960s. That lesbianism was projected at one time as a political rather than sexual choice seems to have solidified the image of all feminists as "man-hating" in the public imagination, and this, in my view, has been denigrating to the movement as a whole. Let me clarify that I am certainly not regressing to Betty Friedan's denunciation of the lesbian movement as a "lavender menace" or claiming that feminism has been made somehow "weaker" by the work of lesbian activists. Lesbian women fight prejudice and face violence every day, paying a terrible price for their sexual rights. Their struggle is both valid and urgent but to collapse the two agendas together helps no one. Indeed, the idea of feminism as a monolithic movement that can hope to speak for "all women" has already been problematised by the interventions of women from differing ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds who see no "common cause" with the white woman. But feminism can speak for heterosexual women, and yet it has chosen to be largely silent on the issue, with Beatrix Campbell pointing out in 1980 that significant numbers of women felt "outcast", labelled as "the bad girls who smoke in the changing room and go with men." She continued to claim, as I do, that "Heterosexuality has to feature in our politics as more than a guilty secret; indeed, in order that women mobilize any political combativeness around it, it must be restored as a legitimate part of feminism's concern."(1) Fifteen years later, Jane Gaines (1995) laments that "Not

[3] I am in no way suggesting that slash fanfiction is written only or even primarily by heterosexual women (as anecdotal evidence within fandom has proven there to be a very high number or both lesbian and bisexual women participants) but I still maintain that focussing on heterosexual writers and readers is a fruitful and necessary exercise as it opens up a specific enquiry into why female heterosexual desire has been a site of largely conventional judgements about what constitutes desirability in that context and why it also allows it to be seen as a site of subversion.

only is heterosexuality politically suspect, it is also unthinkable within feminism in both senses of unthinkable – it cannot and it should not be thought. Why? First, feminism by definition takes as its political and philosophical project the comprehensive critique of male sexuality, its power and its privileges. ... An enormous body of feminist literature has called our attention to gender inequality and crimes against women. Given what she now knows, how can a feminist still like a man, let alone lust after one?" (384) Clearly the question was not really answered. A particular site of the heterosexual woman's "failure" is, of course, the erotica she consumes.

A lot of feminist scorn (Snitow 1979, Modleski 1991) has been poured on the politics enacted in popular "bodice rippers" marketed at women where the clichés are all present and accounted for – the man as the dominant figure, the process of "mastering" the wayward woman, both in a societal and sexual context, and finally the willing and indeed desired submission of the woman, usually to domestic bliss[4]. Though theorists like Radway (1984) have attempted to reclaim the "event of reading" the romance as one of agency and resistance against familial and societal pressures, we cannot discount the texts themselves reinforcing "appropriate" female behaviour. As Radway herself admits, "It is unfortunate, of course, that this temporary assertion of independence is made possible only because the manifest content of the novels holds out the promise of eventual satisfaction and fulfilment in the most conventional of terms."(45) If erotica, manufactured and consumed by women, is a measure of their sexual triggers and motivation, then any change in that genre becomes extremely significant. Ann Snitow posited as early as 1979 that "In a less sexist society, there might be a pornography that is exciting, expressive, interesting, even, perhaps, significant as a form of social rebellion"[5].(176) The women already slashing Star Trek would perhaps indicate that that moment of rebellion had already arrived.

[4] The common romantic trope that such novels utilise to "equalise" the relationship is the "bending" of the male protagonist at the end of the novel, who admits to his wrong-doing and begs the forgiveness of the heroine. This is often only cosmetic as it refocuses attention on him as it is *his* love that figures as a "prize" she "wins" only after being "tested" by adverse circumstances.

[5] Angela Carter's conception of the "moral pornographer" who would use the genre as a "critique of current relations between the sexes" as embodied in *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (1978) is also relevant here.

Slash fanfiction is a radical departure from any previous formulations of what women find sexual and cannot be dismissed by terming it faddish or even niche as the sheer number of women writing and reading it testify (a simple search on Google for "slash fanfiction" turns up 287,000 hits). The genre has gone through a process of maturation and change through its thirty-odd year history signalling its fluidity and self-awareness and, as such, demands that we accept it a valid expression of female desire. While there are men who write slash, as well as lesbian and bisexual women, I will be focussing on the majority of those writing it, that is, heterosexual women. I posit the phenomenon as a possible starting point to articulating a radical feminist (hetero)sexual politics (without that seeming a contradiction in terms!) Slash fanfiction is important because it delights in subverting traditional patriarchal norms about what women should want, implying the opposite of submission, as it takes control of an act that is wholly "other", to fulfil an intensely personal desire. It is a female rendering of an all-male dynamic, the role-playing no longer constrained by any "absolute" biological limits.

So why do heterosexual women write slash? This is not an easy question to answer as oversimplifications of the phenomenon can be dangerous. Though some theorists like Joanna Russ (1985) and Constance Penley (1986) have attempted to engage with this central question, their interpretations do not really answer the question in a definitive manner. I will now attempt to recapitulate some of the theories that have been offered and highlight areas that they overlook. I will be focussing on the most common tropes that characterise slash writing. It must be noted here that this is an area which spans a remarkable number of theoretical frameworks including queer, gender, masculinity and fan studies, all of which I myself have not explored, as research in this field is quite nascent. My aim is to lay out some possible trajectories for further enquiry, keeping in mind the ever-changing nature of the field itself.

Oh it's nothing like that... We're just good friends!!

One of the most common motivations that have been proposed by theorists of slash writing (Russ 1985, Lamb and Veith, Salmon and Symons 2005) is structured around the "buddy" dynamic that operates in many popular movies and television shows (*Starsky and Hutch*, *Due South* and more recently *House M.D.*) and also of course in

literature. This picks up from the "original" pairing of Kirk and Spock, of course, and follows the assumption that women read erotica to fulfil their need for intimacy and nurturing relationships (Radway 1984, Faust 1980), rather than enjoyment of explicit sexual acts that make up mainstream pornography aimed at men. In this paradigm, close friendship inevitably turns into something deeper with the sexual aspect of the relationship being seen as an acceptable progression of an already intimate bond. The structure of "buddy" shows also encourages female viewers to develop such relationships (not that the producers of the shows ever anticipated this) as women usually play very small parts in the overall plot. As Anne Kustritz (2003) points out, "Women in these narratives come and go in order to reinforce the main protagonists' heterosexual identities and to propel the plot, but they inevitably depart through a heroic, sacrificial death, or as femme fatales who ruthlessly use and then abandon the protagonist. This leaves the wounded, bitter and grieving protagonist to be comforted by his 'buddy', who is always available, constantly sympathetic, and may be the only person on the planet allowed to see the hero cry... While the hero spends inordinate amounts of time pursuing and wooing the woman of the week, they share their feelings, dreams and the bulk of their time with their buddy. The most intense relationships then are between men". (377)

Fanfiction authors pair buddies together in this framework because firstly, they have no female characters to work with (Jenkins 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992) and secondly, because they are attracted to the fact that the very masculine heroes (constructed by script writers to appeal to male viewers who are, after all, their primary audience) can show their vulnerability only to their sidekicks. In adrenaline-fuelled narratives, which most of these shows are, the protagonist is continually involved in high risk situations and relies principally on his buddy to back him up (the damsel in distress after all is not going to be of much help). Sidekicks often risk themselves in order to ensure the hero's survival, leading to highly charged emotional exchanges, which to female viewers signal something "more" than just friendship.

This also ties into the argument that slash is predicated on an "equality" that is simply not "available" in traditional scriptings of heterosexual interaction (Bacon-Smith 1992, Russ 1985, Kustritz 2003). This is not seen as an internalization of societal dictates of heterosexual hierarchy, where women supposedly resign themselves to the impossibility of ever managing to overturn those strictures, but a

circumvention of a whole gamut of gender based "expectations" that often trammel their relationships with men in real life.

"Buddy" slash is often characterised by humour and an honesty that comes from the two protagonists having already seen each other at their absolute worst. The hero, it is felt, would never "allow" himself to break down before a woman as he would be rather denying his moment of vulnerability. Penley theorises that women write slash in order to explore new formulations of masculinity. "Kirk and Spock are sensitive in the slash stories, as well as kind, strong, thoughtful, and humorous, but their being 'sensitive' carries with it none of the associations of wimpiness or smug self-congratulation it does in the present day. Only in the future, it seems, will it be possible to conceive that yielding phallic power does not result in psychical castration or a demand to be praised extravagantly for having yielded that power."(35)

While these formulations are quite useful in explaining some aspects of the attraction of slash, they are limited, primarily because they are dated and address only a particular moment in the history of slash writing (Penley 1986, Bacon-Smith 1992) and concentrate mainly on Star Trek fanfiction (which is understandable, considering it was the dominant fandom at the time). But the assumptions present here are problematic, to say the least, and also tend to utopian constructs.

Firstly, of course, the assumption of "equality" in homosexual relationships is in itself highly flawed. Both partners being of the same sex does not automatically purify sexual relations of power struggles, as questions of age, race, class and economic status will always be present. Indeed, Newton and Walton contend that "Power and sexual desire are deeply, perhaps intrinsically connected in ways we do not fully understand and just can't abolish" and this translates not only to real world homosexual relationships but also to slashers' depiction of them in fanfiction. Kustritz's judgement that slashers "tear down the traditional formula of romance novels and films that negotiate the submission of the heroine to a hero by instead negotiating the complicated power balance between two equally dominant, independent and masculine characters" seems to anticipate a resolution of the said complicated negotiation, in a relationship which is "completely equal in everything from love making to decision making". However, it is not quite that simple. Questions of dominance and submission are a huge undercurrent in slash stories with the actual consummation of the relationship itself carrying enormous significance. Who "tops"

is never incidental or unimportant in a slash narrative and power hierarchies tend to follow societal assumptions. The perceptions that penetration equals dominance and that "power" is dictated by physical and monetary markers, are reflected in these negotiations. While some writers do manage to attain "equality" in the sense Kustritz means, it is never a foregone conclusion. I would, however, want to deploy this notion of "equality" being the cornerstone of slash relationships in a slightly different (and not quite so comforting) manner, i.e. the opportunity and ability to achieve equal levels of physicality that allow for an expression of violence as erotic.

> Friends meet to part; Love laughs at faith;
> True foes, once met, are join'd till death!
>
> (*The Giaour*, Lord Byron)

The concentration on the buddy dynamic has neglected a significant area of slash fiction that concentrates on the interactions of bitter rivals or enemies, like Harry and Draco from the Harry Potter series (it is incidently the most popular slash pairing in the Potter fandom). An example of this kind of writing is the story *Masked* by Yahtzee where Harry and Draco enact their relationship in the midst of the very real politics of power and betrayal coloured by the looming threat of Voldemort.

> Was it still just the same battle between them? The same struggle for domination or control or vindication? Harry wondered that often enough when he had Draco's silky hair entwined in his fingers, or when their hipbones collided, sharp edges of bone pressing through the flat muscles of their bodies. When Draco spoke to him – they didn't do all that much talking, most nights – it sounded as though nothing had ever changed. "What's the matter, Potter?" he would pant in Harry's ear. "Can't last any longer?" The taunts might have been about Quidditch, about a wizard's duel, any of the countless battlegrounds they'd chosen for each other over the years
>
> (*Masked*, Yahtzee)

This ruptures to an extent the formulation that women read erotica for its possibility of nurturing, gentle relationships (Radway 1984, Faust 1980). The overt aggression that characterises the interaction of men who are enemies, is often interpreted as having a sexual charge which flares up in fanfiction as actual violence before, during and after sexual interaction. This leads me to believe that women and violence do not

always have to have a victim-threat relationship and that women often wish to participate in edgier dynamics than are "open" to them traditionally. The desire for a cathartic release of frustration or tension is not limited to men but the intense socialisation of women makes them deploy this desire in other, subtler ways. In certain types of slash, however, women revel in their ability to pit two "equal" protagonists against each other in a very physical fashion and enjoy the erotic possibilities of conflict. Before anyone gets the wrong idea, I would like to point out that the conflict-as-attraction model is a common theme in heterosexual romantic fiction, with the hero and heroine almost always locked in a battle for supremacy. There, of course, the battle is engaged in terms of "wit" rather than physical strength, but the impulse is present. In slash, women allow the trajectory to go to its logical conclusion without being personally threatened. That is not to say that slash concerning enemies is inevitably bloody and masochistic. Indeed, the most popular slash writers want to move the two characters to a point of reconciliation, but without losing the knife-edge that characterises their interaction. This is an aspect of slash that needs greater theorization as I believe that the feminist efforts to purify sexual relations of issues of power, control and aggression (Dworkin 1981, Mackinnon 1987) have been counterproductive. Alan Sinfield notes that in a Foucauldian framework "power is to be envisaged as pervading the entire social order, in positive as well as negative aspects." It "penetrates and controls everyday pleasure" all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the "polymorphous techniques of power." Slash, in my opinion, allows women to deploy power in a variety of ways – from taking control of the act of writing itself and so scripting pleasure in ways that are not "allowable", to exploring power games and conflict in ways ordinarily deemed too dangerous.

Another generalisation about slashers (Salmon and Symons 2002, Penley 1986) is that they are primarily science-fiction-loving-tomboy-geeks, mostly from western cultures. While it is true that the science fiction and fantasy genres seem particularly conducive to being "slashed", (*Star Trek, Man from U.N.C.L.E, Highlander,* the Harry Potter series, *Lord of the Rings, Pirates of the Caribbean*) this judgment must be qualified by the equal interest generated in shows based on more conventional narratives (*Starsky & Hutch*, *Due South*, *House M.D.*). The pigeonholing and marginalization of the phenomenon is also made invalid by the development of

Yaoi or "boys love" comics in Japan as a completely independent phenomenon. I do not have the time to go into the history of the genre as that would require a separate study but the common trope is the eroticisation of male same-sex relationships primarily by women for women. The current popularity of Yaoi in western cultures just underlines my point further that this dynamic is truly pan-cultural and thus an even more fruitful area for investigation.

Material Matters :

As I have maintained earlier, Slash fanfiction sees a series of interruptions of the "norm" – the interruption of the author(ity) of the primary text, the interruption of normative romantic and sexual relationship formation patterns, the writers' "performance" of a sexual act considered as wholly other for the fulfilment of a personal erotic desire, is in my opinion, a resistance to the sex/gender system which tries to constrain what can be experienced/imagined erotic possibilities to a pre-determined binary. As slash fanfiction is also often explicitly concerned with erotic acts, these authors are highly invested in "writing the body," and do so in ways that delight in blurring the boundaries that any canonical authority may have wanted to impose. The use of popular cultural texts by fanfiction authors in this way opens up the possibility of a multiplicity of resistances to the sex/gender system, using the very hetero-normative tropes usually mobilized by them, to what I see as a marvellously subversive effect. It delights in subverting traditional patriarchal norms about what women "should" want. It is a female rendering of an all-male dynamic; the role-playing no longer constrained by any "absolute" biological limits.[6]

It is here that I would like to introduce Judith Butler's concept of performativity into this discussion, as her ideas of how reified binary sex/gender systems may be open to disruption is crucial to it. Her ideas, worked through the discourse of cyberspace, make this investigation into slash fanfiction rather heavily layered, as cyberculture theorists have always been intensely engaged with the idea of identity-play within virtual environments. The theorization of how sex would "work" in cyberspace is hardly new, and indeed has been a driving force in both academic and cyberpunk writing. A brief digression on how the workings of even "conventional"

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[6] Not just erotic, though that is what I will be mostly concentrating on.

ideas about the erotic uses of cybersex have revolved around textuality is indicative of the primacy of this mode of interaction in the cybercultural domain.

Text-sex

The sexual potential of the world wide web has always been of particular fascination to the "storytellers" of the cybercultural domain, those whose "narratives", whether theoretical or fictional (and so much of cybercultural discourse first had to have been "imagined" before it ever solidified). It is therefore interesting that the textual medium is foregrounded in computer mediated communication, and becomes the focus of any enquiry into its erotic aspect. While terms like tinysex and teledildonics have been the focus of critical enquiry, I would like to examine how the primacy of "writing the body" in cybersexual discourse has been theorised. This has revolved primarily around the use of cyberspace either in terms of VR (virtual reality) technologies or chat rooms or alternatively MOO domains that were geared towards cybersex.

Gareth Branwyn, in a short ethnographic article (now dated of course but an accurate snapshot of the time) captures the essence of what cybersex, or what he calls compu-sex was seen as, "Compu-sex enthusiasts say it is the ultimate safe sex for the 1990s, with no exchange of bodily fluids, no loud music filled clubs, and no morning after. Of course, there is no physical contact, either. Compu-sex brings new meaning to the phrase 'mental masturbation'." (396) What is especially interesting in his description is that he terms it as a form of "interactive and sexually explicit *storytelling*" (my emphasis, 396) While cyberpunk and science fiction narratives spun out in high detail the ways in which VR environments could affect what it meant to have cybersex, these technologies have not yet reached the sophistication or indeed penetration among ordinary internet users for it to affect my current research. What is interesting however is that in the words of an anonymous compu-sex enthusiast that Branwyn quotes, "In compu-sex, being able to type fast and write well is equivalent to having great legs or a tight butt in the real world." (398) It is felicity with language then that plays a vital role in a "successful" sexual "performance" online.

The primacy of strong narrative in these encounters is interesting as is the focus on performativity as Branwyn states, "Obviously this freedom to roleplay with little-world consequence is, in large part, why compu-sex flourishes... Making it up, making oneself up, is a crucial part of the turn on." (400) Freed from having to "do"

their own gender, as it were, participants seemed eager to experiment with different experiences, freely engaging in identity-play. "Almost everyone who answered the sex questionnaire said that different personalities and sexual orientations had been experimented with, at least on occasion... In the end all stated descriptions must be assumed to be in quotation marks." (401)

It is indeed fascinating to see quite how many common threads can be found between what has been recognized as cybersex and the workings of erotic fanfiction, especially slash fanfiction. The focus on textuality, on performance and narrative is pervasive and again brings us back to the ways in which the body is and must be thought through. There are differences of course. For instance, while Branwyn also discovered that more than half of the participants in his questionnaire did revert back to their "original" gender and sexual orientations in extended sessions of "play", slash fanfiction puts the focus firmly on performing the other, and also necessarily on the body of the imagined other. The specifics of its construction are also different, as writers of slash fanfiction must necessarily have a firmer, more extended grip on the narrative than is necessary for a chat session and slash stories will remain online as a coherent whole. It is also important to note the significance of the large community or fannish space that fanworks are created within, but the parallels are certainly intriguing and do point to a shared impulse towards performativity and experimentation, *worked through* in a primarily textual fashion.

> In cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body (Stone 1995)
>
> I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. (Butler, 2004b: 198)

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler maintains that gender is the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being... A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts."(44) If gender is a process, a repeated set of acts, there is a possibility of *interruption* in that repetition, of parodic disruptions of the norm. While it is not Butler's intention to posit a "doer" behind the deed, in fact performativity contests the very notion of a subject, and she states that, "the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat, and through

a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself". I would maintain that the vital crux in the process of "repeating" gender is the moment of interruption, whereby normative gender performances can be prised open.

The next question that pops up here of course is "how" to interrupt the "process of gender". Indeed multiple critics of Butler have pointed out that if indeed there is no "doer behind the deed" then performativity remains an empty promise, as we can never be "outside" gender. While performances like drag are cited by Butler as possible sites where there can be seen a "radical proliferation of genders," there has been remarkably little exploration of what other sites may be conducive to such acts. Another issue that critics have had with Butler is of course the perceived erasure of the body in her work, especially in *Gender Trouble.* If sex is "always already gender" then what happens to the body itself? Chambers offers an accurate summation of how Butler and her critics have tried to work through this particular conundrum, pointing out that, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), "Butler contends that the effort to describe matter is always just that: a writing *about* the body, a materialization *of* the body only in and through language. And in the preface to *Bodies*, ... Butler already emphasizes that in trying to fix her gaze on the 'materiality of the body' she always finds herself in 'other domains' (1993: ix). Butler refuses to fix the body as primary, as antecedent to discourse...We cannot have any access to the body except *through* discourse." (his emphasis, 48) He points out that Butler does not ignore the facticity of the material body, but instead tries to maintain that it cannot be an unproblematic given, that it must be *thought* through. I agree with Chambers that, "Far from either ignoring the issue of the body, or coming down on the side of a philosophical privileging of mind over body, Butler consistently rejects a mind/body dualism and repeatedly insists on taking the body as a site of theoretical and political problematizing" (53), as I feel that Butler's project, far from dismissing the body, revitalises it as an active participant in any discussion of sex/gender debate, rather than as "foundation".

This particular reading of Butler's project is also vital to my own argument in this chapter, as it is significant that the other discourse that is actively engaging with the "importance" of the body at this time is that of cyberculture. Indeed, it is interesting to frame both these debates in the context of the cyberculture discourse, as both the possibility of gender-bending and other subversive "performances" of

identity and the question of these technologies being those of "disembodiment" have greatly concerned theorists here as well. I will first discuss how the body has been theorized/imagined as operating in cyberspace, and then progress to looking at how slash fanfiction utilizes some of these tropes to enact its own performative interruption of the sex/gender system. While the writing of slash fanfiction predates the existence and widespread use of the internet, I would maintain that it is the advent of the world wide web that has been a vital impetus behind its present form, and that cybercultural debates on the nature of the body in cyberspace as well as gender and identity performance are crucial to any discussion about it at this time.

Because the nature of computer mediated communication over the internet today is primarily textual, we are again confronted by the reality of "knowing" or "thinking" the body through this discourse. In the context of cyberspace, Stone has mobilized Butler's idea of the "culturally intelligible body" to interesting effect. She expands Butler's idea that it is through, "the criteria and the textual productions (including writing on or in the body itself) that each society uses to produce physical bodies that it recognizes as members. It is useful to argue that most cultural production of intelligibility is about reading or writing and takes place through the mediation of texts. If we can apply textual analysis to the narrow bandwidth modes of computers and telephones, then we can examine the production of gendered bodies in cyberspace also as a set of tokens that code difference within a field of ideal types. I refer to this process as the production of the legible body." Stone also however recognizes that there is an "opposite production" at work here as well, one that produces the "illegible body" or the "boundary-subject", as "participants in electronic virtual communities of cyberspace live in the borderlands of both physical and virtual culture..." (524). Stone also articulates the body-anxiety that I have discussed earlier, pointing out that "much of the work of cyberspace researchers, reinforced and perhaps created by the soaring imagery of William Gibson's novels, assumes that the human body is meat – obsolete, as soon as consciousness itself can be uploaded into the network. The discourse of visionary virtual world builders is rife with images of imaginal bodies, freed from the constraints that flesh imposes. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical." (525) While Stone registers the need to take into account the materiality of the body, I

would like to point out that the very fact that we "return" to the body indicates the possibility of a movement towards understanding the body as a discursive "product".

I would therefore like to posit that far from fulfilling the anxieties about cyberspace effacing or erasing the body, our engagement with cyberculture puts a renewed spotlight on the body, not as any pre-given, "natural" essence but as a generative site inviting interpretation and reinterpretation. Bodies in cyberspace then are highly plastic, and in this milieu, as never before, can the workings of their "constructedness" be examined and hopefully prised open. We "do gender" all the time in RL but in cyberspace we are made aware as never before about *how* we do it, and how that process is open to interruption and hopefully disruption.

In fact it is her statement about communities constituting virtual bodies that I find especially significant for my own argument. Stone ends her essay with the assertion that, "Remember – discovering – that bodies and communities constitute each other surely suggests a set of questions and debates for the burgeoning electronic community." (525) The idea that virtual communities "produce" bodies discursively is an especially intriguing hypothesis as media fandom is intensely community driven. How the body and specifically the male body, within slash fiction is imagined within these communities then becomes quite intriguing. Fanworks – be they fanfiction, fanart, or vids – all work with images/characters sourced from popular cultural texts but frequently through repetition (in the Butlerian sense) revise and frequently produce (re)visions of those same images. An example sourced once again from *Star Trek* would be useful here. In the case of Spock we encounter an especially intriguing case study as it is an "alien" body that is being dealt with (the character Spock belongs to the Vulcan race). In the "canon" of the series, Spock is depicted as basically humanoid and we are never told of any specific physical characteristic (except for his pointed ears and green blood) that is unique to his species. When we leave the confines of the canon however and venture into "fanon," (a neologism that refers to the "unofficial" histories that fans have accumulated through discussion, debate and of course endless nitpicking) there is a wealth of speculation about Spock's physical form, delving into his particular imagined physiology.

> Spock is slowly growing to hate both his console and the data PADDs being brought to him on a constant basis. He loves his job – maybe loves it a little

> too much considering the hours he logs – but the equipment is slowly starting to take its toll.
>
> Starfleet, despite all its bluster about equality among races and acceptance of interspecies differences, designs their ships for humans. It's only logical; humans may make up only a small percentage of sentient creatures in the galaxy or, for that matter, in the universe as they know it, but they are a huge majority of the sentient creatures enlisted in Starfleet. As a result, normal operations objects such as chairs, consoles, data PADDs, and so on are designed to best accommodate human physiology. And no matter how closely other humanoid species outwardly resemble humans, they do not necessarily share that same physiology.
>
> Such is the case with Spock. Having a human mother has slightly altered his genetic makeup from most Vulcans – it takes longer for him to fully focus on his meditation, takes more energy to keep his emotions under control, makes his face softer and less severe than his father's – but he is otherwise overwhelmingly Vulcan in his construction. As such, he has decided he detests his console. (Corpus Ivictus, *An Unfair Wager*)

The speculation is in many cases (including the above example), and this of course is particularly interesting to me, geared around the possible construction of his erogenous zones. Vulcans, according to fandom, have especially sensitive hands:

> It was not traditional for Vulcans to kiss with their mouths, though Spock had occasionally indulged in the practice. It was that reason alone that the press of Kirk's mouth against his own made him catch his breath, he was certain, holding very still as the wet slide of a tongue traced the seam of his lips.
>
> He had come to his Captain's quarters to play chess and that alone, not for the cumulating weeks of their flirtation to crest, for Jim to smile at him with cocksure warmth, to take Spock's face in his hands to do … to do this …
>
> "What are you doing?" Spock tried to make his voice sharp, biting …
>
> "I know that isn't how Vulcan's kiss," Jim said ... "Here," he murmured. He took Spock's unresisting hand in both his own, fingertips resting lightly at Spock's wrist where his pulse leapt abruptly, a silvery throb that Jim could surely feel. "Maybe you'll like this."

> Spock closed his eyes, unable to watch and still retain his tenuous control. Moist breath against his palm first, humid heat that translated into the barest touch of lips against his first finger, the lightest trace of a wet, soft tongue against the tip. Spock drew in a sharp, helpless breath and lost it all again when Jim drew the length of his finger into the slick heat of his mouth.
>
> (Keelywolfe, *Fundamental Things*)

The passage just quoted brings together many of the threads I have tried to trace through this chapter, which I will try to tick off as it were, as I conclude. Firstly of course the depiction of the bodies of characters depicted distinctly "straight" in a homosexual union is subversive in itself, but further I must emphasize the erotic reimagining of the concerned bodies that is taking place. Plant's reworking of Pat Califa's notion of S&M sex in the context of cybersexuality, which looked at the possibility of a decoupling of sexual pleasure from the specificities of genitalia whereby a "dismantling of selves" (463) could be accomplished, is especially resonant within slash fanfiction. While slash is not written only as a form of erotica, I will contend that a significant part of it definitely qualifies as such. What is critical here is the continuous discursive production of which bodies and bodily acts can be seen as "legible" (as per Stone's formulation) and indeed desirable. In a society where the homosexual body, especially the desiring homosexual body, often operates as a "boundary subject", especially vulnerable to both state control (through obscenity laws) and physical harm from individuals, this reverse narrative becomes critical. The decoupling envisoned by Califa is almost complete.

CONCLUSION

> It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby, but these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. (Williams 5-6)

I did not initially intend to begin and end this dissertation with quotes from the *Velveteen Rabbit* but it seems a fitting full circle as I am still talking about what makes anything truly "real" and this seems a particularly incisive answer in the context of the arguments I have put forward through my work. While it is particularly fitting when talking about fanworks and their relationship to their "source" material, the quote also stresses the importance of looking past first impressions about what constitutes "value", about renegotiating our prejudices against "low culture" and adjusting our academic lenses to allow for multiple levels of analysis.

Stone was intrigued by the possible identity formations the internet would brings precisely because of the possibility of multiplicity, saying "the identities that emerge from these interactions – fragmented, complex, diffracted through the lens of technology, culture and new technocultural formations – seen to me to be, for better or worse, more visible as the critters we ourselves are in process of becoming, here at the close of the mechanical age. I see these identities engaged in a wonderful and awesome struggle, straining to make meaning and to make sense out of the very idea of culture as they know it, swimming for their lives in the powerful currents of high technology, power structures, and market forces beyond their imagination. In this struggle I find certain older structures stubbornly trying to reassert themselves in a techno-social milleu that to them seems to have gone berserk. These are the structures of individual caring, love, and perhaps most poignant, of desire" (36)

As in many other points in this dissertation, I find Stone's formulations almost eerily appropriate to my examination of the workings of media fandom as women fans have most certainly been locked in a struggle to make sense of the culture that surrounds them and are particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of market forces. In a direct manner, fanworks are extremely vulnerable to copyright laws (though the OTW

has been working towards formulating protection policies in recent times) and obscenity charges (as happened in the case of *Harry Potter* referenced in chapter one). Indirectly media fandom participants are sometimes seen as a blindly loyal base by producers and marketers, who try to mobilise and monetize their activity. In the latter case, fandom's inherent flexible nature and refusal to toe the party line (as seen in the response to Lucasfilms also referenced in chapter one) has served to keep its unofficial and subcultural status intact. The structures of love, individual caring and desire also all play a vital role in the construction and expansion of media fandom, with its focus on community building, as I hope I have explicated already.

While I have made several digressions throughout these chapters, I hope my main narrative threads have remained strong – the evolution of the concept of technoculture rather than functionality when talking about our relationship with technology and what implications that has for cybercultural formulations about what motivates people to enter the domain of cyberspace; the influence of popular culture on both the theorization and evolution of the internet and how this becomes particularly significant when examining media fandom's activities and shift to online platforms; the ways in which the larger dismissal of the consumers of popular culture ties into a hierarchical (and often gendered) notion of "validity" and "authority" of their online activity (in the context of media fandom) which leads to a devaluation and sometimes erasure of both their online presence and contributions to cultural debates.

I hope that I have been successful in complicating the history of women's usage of the internet as well as their motivations for getting online and active. While there is no question that men dominated the early development and use of the internet, I would like more attention paid to the non "normative" avenues that were being used by women to carve their own niches in cyberculture, as I feel that that is a particularly intriguing story, one that is too easily brushed aside by academia due to its particular history rooted both in the dreaded "non-intellectual" morass of popular culture and also because of its hidden, subcultural status. I hope that by outlining such events such as RaceFail, I have also managed to show how very specious the dependence on dated and simplistic ideas of "private and therefore not political" is when talking about blog genres and how academic blinders have led to the elision of an entire vibrant community within the blogosphere, one that fulfils its own self-formulated ideals in a much better fashion than those which are ironically held up as the ideal of the genre.

There is a real need for a more nuanced study of all the above categories and I hope that the forays that I have embarked on have shown how rich this vein of speculation can be for scholars interested in cyberculture, feminism, popular culture and postcolonial studies. Indeed as we move forward into a world that grows more "technocultural" by the day, it is very important for scholars to look at newer and more diverse theoretical frameworks in order to truly interrogate the myriad ways in which individuals choose to chart their trajectories through a cyberspace that is itself ever-evolving but still dominated by the need of those individuals to reach out and communicate, to build symbolic communities mediated by (as Stone once again identified a decade ago) both desire and technology.

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GLOSSARY

MOO: MUD [Multi User Domain] Object Oriented community. A text based online virtual reality system to which multiple users are connected at the same time

LambdaMOO: Online community of the MOO variety. Established in 1990 it is the oldest and one the most active of MOO communities on the web today.

Cyberion City: A virtual environment enabled by the MUD MicroMUSE

IRC: Internet Relay Chat. A form of real time internet chat or synchronous conferencing, mainly designed for group communication in discussion forums called channels

USENET/Newsgroup: Amalgam of "user" and "network". A world-wide distributed internet discussion system. Users read and post public messages (called articles or posts and collectively termed news) to one or more categories, known as newsgroups.