

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S FAN FICTION  
AS LITERACY PRACTICE AND  
ONLINE COMMUNITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, awareness and acceptance of fan fiction as a legitimate literacy practice—an activity involving reading and/or writing—has grown. Fan fiction refers to new narratives fans write about media properties, including books, movies, television shows, and video games, and it is a genre primarily authored by girls and women.

The aim of this study is to determine the literacy practices professional women engage when reading and writing fan fiction, and to investigate whether they use these same literacy practices while reading and writing for work. The study also asks how the participants define being part of an online fan community and what literacy practices they engage within their communities.

The researcher conducted oral interviews with five adult American women in professional careers, transcribed the interviews, and analyzed them with a mixture of narrative research and discourse analysis methodology. Results of this analysis indicate that each participant engages different literacy practices from all other participants, both while reading and writing fan fiction and while participating in online communities. Most participants do use at least some of their fan-related practices to accomplish literacy tasks at work, and they use work-related practices while composing fan fiction, as well.

Based upon these findings about the participants' productive blending of literacy practices, further research could uncover ways others may adapt literacy skills they already possess to read and write more effectively at work. Additional research also remains to be done on a wider demographic of fan fiction authors, particularly fans of color.

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## CHAPTER ONE

As Karen Hellekson and Kristen Busse write in the introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, “Anyone who has ever fantasized about an alternate ending to a favorite book or imagined the back story of a minor character in a favorite film has engaged in creating a form of fan fiction” (1). In general, the term “fan fiction” refers to new narratives written by fans<sup>1</sup> of any previously-existing media property which the fans do not own, including books, movies, television shows, and video games; in some cases, fan fiction even includes fictionalized narratives about real people such as actors or musicians. With the past decade’s rise of nerd culture—now that it’s cool, rather than unpopular, to be a fan of comics, science fiction, and fantasy—the awareness and acceptance of fan fiction as a form of audience participation has grown.<sup>2</sup> However, audience participation is not a new concept. As Heather Urbanski notes in her introduction to *Writing and the Digital Generation: Essays in New Media Rhetoric*, “The idea of audience participation in texts is at least as old as Aristotle” (3). From Plato’s reconstructed and fictionalized dialogues of Socrates, to Milton’s reimagining of Biblical figures

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, I consider a fan to be someone who not only consumes a media property but also plays an active role by writing fan fiction, creating fan art, or otherwise participating in an interpretation of the property. For an in-depth exploration of who fans are, and how non-fans often portray them, I recommend *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Jenkins described this phenomenon as early as 2002 in his essay “Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans” (later revised and updated for inclusion in his 2006 anthology *Convergence Culture*): “As fandom diversifies, it moves from cult status toward the cultural mainstream, with more Internet users engaged in some form of fan activity. This increased visibility and cultural centrality has been a mixed blessing for a community used to speaking from the margins” (*Convergence Culture* 142).

in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, audiences have been participating in, remixing, and authoring new interpretations of revered texts for millennia.

I began my own acts of audience participation at the age of eight, when I made up stories about my favorite cartoon characters and wrote them down in my diary. At fifteen, I went public with my fan fiction because I gained access to the internet at home and could share my stories online with other fans. Once I entered graduate school as an adult, my interest in fans' compositions took an academic turn. I began to wonder why I and other fan fiction authors invest so much time, energy, and effort in researching and composing stories which would almost certainly never offer us any return in financial, academic, or professional capital. For my master's thesis research, I studied the fan fiction of a young woman in high school and discovered that she garnered other benefits instead: she made feminist moves in her fan writing which increased her rhetorical agency as an author and fan, and she gained literacy skills which she transferred to the tasks required of her in school. My research convinced me that as students compose fan fiction, they can hone literacy practices which may make academic writing easier for them. Yet as I worked toward my doctoral degree, I had still more questions: can skills gained during fan composing also transfer to *professional* writing? And on a more personal note, am I the only adult woman who still loves writing fan fiction? Being a fan always has been, and always will be, a key facet of my identity which permeates almost every area of my life. Am I alone?

My dissertation research answered this last question with a resounding *no*. Twenty-seven respondents qualified for my study of American female fan fiction authors working in professional fields. In the following qualitative study, I conduct interviews with five of these respondents to discuss their fan literacy practices and their interactions within online fan

communities. Using a blend of narrative research and discourse analysis, I analyze the data from these interviews to answer the following questions:

- Which literacy practices<sup>3</sup> do the participants engage when reading and/or writing fan fiction? Where do their literacy practices align and diverge with those of other participants?
- What does it mean to be part of a fan community? How do community members work together to produce fan fiction? How do features and drawbacks of different digital platforms influence community participation? Why do communities become inactive?
- Which, if any, literacy practices do the participants use in both their fan and their professional writing? Does any transfer exist between the participants' literate lives as fans and as professionals—publishers, librarians, and educators?

A call for research from the National Council of Teachers of English precipitated my decision to study extracurricular writing. In 2009, the NCTE produced a policy research brief declaring that “[y]oung people learn to write outside of school as well as in it” (12) and recommending that council policymakers “[s]upport research that will provide further information on how extracurricular writing can support school-based writing” (13). While I agree with the NCTE’s position and recommendation, I believe not only young people but also adults benefit from the writing they do outside of *any* official capacity, whether academic or professional. As Deborah Brandt describes, a “deep hybridity of literacy practices in many settings” exists in which readers and writers blend skills gained in different capacities. Brandt calls for “models of literacy that more astutely account for these kinds of multiple contacts, both in and out of school and *across a lifetime*” (568, emphasis added). Yet little existing research investigates the literacy practices of adult fans or draws connections between their professional

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term “literacy practices” to refer to any practices involving reading and/or writing.

and fan writing. Although some of Henry Jenkins's cultural studies include adult as well as adolescent fans, most composition and rhetoric research on fan fiction focuses on female teenagers rather than adult women. With my qualitative case studies, I investigate the fan literacy practices of this overlooked demographic, as well as explore whether women use such practices while reading and writing for their jobs, just as students may use fan literacy practices in school. I believe that, in addition to filling a gap in the existing literature, my research can increase knowledge about the literacy practices women engage outside of work, as well as knowledge about how these practices inform the writing women do *for* work. I chose to focus only on women for several reasons, not least of which is that I am an American professional woman interested in the literacy practices of others like me. Other reasons include that in my experience, many more women than men write fan fiction, and that since most existing studies examine the practices of adolescent females, researching the subsequent age range felt like the logical next step.

Critics of fan composition research might argue that fan fiction is a lowbrow form of literacy—in short that it does not matter and is not worthy of study. However, Hellekson and Busse explain that fan fiction and other fan-created artifacts “are important traces of a culture where the producer has learned to use freely available tools to rip, record, and disseminate derivate creative artworks based on another media source. Studying them, and even creating them, can tell us much about our culture, and such study is worth our time” (*The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* 1). More specific to the field of composition, Anne Ruggles Gere indicates that academic research has “neglected composition’s extracurriculum,” the self-sponsored reading and writing people do outside of school (278). For Gere, “the extracurriculum includes the present as well as the past; it extends beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in

which persons seek to improve their own writing” (279). Thus writing in *any* context is worthy of study if it “is constructed by desire, by the imaginations and aspirations of its participants” (Gere 279)—a quality of construction which fan fiction certainly embodies. Gere calls for writing researchers to “acknowledge the extracurriculum as a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects” (284). Since Gere’s observations in 1994, the growth of the internet has led to an even larger extracurriculum as it encourages more people to write outside of their academic and professional lives.

In defending the importance of their research on online instant messaging, Christina Haas, Pamela Takayoshi, and Brandon Carr point out that investigations of everyday reading and writing can help researchers understand how people practice literacy in their nonacademic lives. The authors also speak of the benefits teachers of writing can gain by studying extracurricular literacy: “Understanding everyday literacy practices can, in turn, suggest ways that academic practices and writing instruction could be modified in order to better teach students the composition and communicative skills needed in an increasingly digital world” (Haas, Takayoshi, and Carr 53). As an “everyday literacy practice” such as those the authors describe, fan fiction can offer researchers an understanding of how people outside of the academy read and write.

For James Paul Gee, everyday literacy is plural: there exist multiple ways of being literate within multimodal literacies. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, Gee writes,

There are many different ways of reading and writing. We don’t read or write newspapers, legal tracts, essays, poetry, rap songs, and so on through a nearly endless list, in the same way. Each of these domains has its own rules and requirements. The legal literacy needed for reading law books is not the same as the literacy needed for reading physics texts or superhero comic books. And, indeed, we should not be too quick to dismiss the latter form of literacy. (18)

Gee claims that extracurricular literacies—the rap songs and comic books—can have as much value as curricular literacies—the law books and physics texts. In *What Video Games Can Teach Us*, Gee examines the extracurricular, multimodal “domain” of video games, which carries with it its own specific forms of literacy and learning. Gee argues that well-designed games employ theories of learning similar to those postulated by the field of cognitive science. Specifically, a good game encourages the player to learn skills she can apply in other situations, even outside of the current game, which Gee describes as “deep learning” (7). In addition, games often employ “just in time”/“on demand” methods of disseminating information, which teach the player new skills only when she needs or asks for them (Gee 217-218). As complex and difficult as deep learning may be, video game players engage in it voluntarily, for entertainment rather than as a requirement of education (215). As Gee asks in the opening pages of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, “Wouldn’t it be great if kids were willing to put in this much time on task on challenging material in school and enjoy it so much?” (2). I have often asked this question of the learning and research involved in writing fan fiction, and in fact, Gee does not limit the sources of deep learning to video games: “when young people are interacting with video games—and other popular culture practices—they are learning, and learning in deep ways” (215, emphasis added).

Gee offers a set of questions which can help researchers determine whether something is “worth learning” or is instead “a waste of time.” These questions include an evaluation of the semiotic domain (the meaning-making system) entered through the activity under investigation, and whether the participant is learning only to read meanings or is also learning to *produce* meanings within the domain (Gee 23). When the participant is learning to produce meanings, she learns new ways of being in the world, joins communities of others who are also producing

meanings, and attains new resources which can help her learn more in the future, both in her current semiotic domain (composing fan fiction) and in related domains (composing other texts, such as those for work) (Gee 24). Gee defines learning to produce meanings as “active learning.” Based upon this definition, I argue that my research participants are active learners, for when they write fan fiction, they learn not only to read meanings but also to produce them. Gee’s qualities of active learning align with the three areas of the participants’ lives my study examines. As the participants attained new fan-based literacy practices, they learned new ways of being in the world; they joined online fan communities comprised of other fans engaged in similar literacy practices; and they gained assets for future learning both in the current semiotic domain of fan fiction and in the related domain of composing other texts, which includes texts for work.

Popular culture scholar Henry Jenkins has explored many concepts specific to fan writing and culture in his prolific work on fans and fan fiction. Although Jenkins views fan fiction through the lens of cultural studies, his work provides a strong foundation for my research, as Jenkins lays out what may be unfamiliar concepts to the non-fan. In “*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,” Jenkins notes that as of 1988, an estimated ninety percent of “fan writers” were women. In exploring why women are the primary producers of fan fiction, Jenkins cites David Bleich’s study on the response of female and male college students to canonical literature. Bleich concluded “that women were more willing to enjoy free play with the story content, making inferences about character relationships that took them well beyond the information explicitly contained within the text” (qtd. in Jenkins, *Fans* 43). Jenkins views this finding as proof that fan fiction relies more upon a feminine method of interpretation—speculating on and making inferences about characters—that upon a masculine method, which

focuses on interpreting the author's intent (*Fans* 43-44). By constructing fan fiction "countertexts" to the texts of which they are fans, women claim these texts for their own and become what Jenkins terms "textual producers." In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, his book expanded from "Star Trek Rerun," Jenkins examines a variety of television fan works by adult women, including fan fiction, music videos, and songs. Jenkins offers additional reasons for authors' involvement in the genre of fan production; he speculates that for female authors, writing fan fiction is a social activity which "function[s] simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a source of collective identity" (*Poachers* 154). Female fans also read fan fiction for similar purposes, to explore how other fans interpret and remix their shared fandoms<sup>4</sup> (Jenkins, *Poachers* 177).

Like *Textual Poachers*, editor Heather Urbanski's collection *Writing and the Digital Generation* explores the blurring of rhetorical borders. Urbanski argues that fan fiction and other fan compositions, particularly those created and disseminated online, "[call] into question the traditional Rhetorical Triangle that separates sender, receiver, and message" (3). Online, fans are not merely audiences and the "passive receivers of messages," but also producers of messages. Urbanski writes, "A key assumption of this collection is that, contrary to fashionable crisis rhetoric that 'no one reads anymore,' the Digital Generation actually engages in more rhetorical activity—creating, writing, analyzing, etc.—than perhaps any before" (4). Urbanski defines reading as encompassing all such rhetorical activity, and so *Writing and the Digital Generation* gathers texts on the composition of fan products that "don't fit into traditional print-based definitions of literacy and rhetoric" (4) and that "may be outside the margins of more traditional

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense, "fandom" refers to the media property of which a person is a fan. Fandom may also refer to the collective fans of a particular media property. The word is a portmanteau of "fan" and "kingdom."

academic scholarship in rhetoric or Cultural Studies” (7). Paul Booth also explores the concept of textual producers in *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*.

However, Booth describes a reciprocal relationship between fans and media property owners.

He argues that while fans play with their favorite media properties, owners also “play” the fans:

“Our [fans’] creative work is used to sell products and services. Our clicks become capital. We are commoditized from and marketed to” (Booth 1). Booth claims that as being a fan becomes

more popular and mainstream, property owners can more easily commoditize fandom and make

larger profits from fans. He also argues that “both media fans and the media industries must

continually negotiate, navigate, and adjust to the presence of each other in tandem with changing paradigms of technological discourse in our society” (1). According to Booth, this constant

renegotiation leads to two types of fan works which blur the boundaries between fans and

owners: pastiche, “the deliberate imitation of an act or text,” and parody, “the appropriation of an

activity with intent.” Pastiche is a fan’s mimicry of a media property’s original form meant to

glorify rather than critique, while parody is an industry’s deliberate imitation of fan practices to

encourage emotional investment in the fandom (Booth 2). Thus, media fans perform pastiche by

recreating their favorite texts, and media industries perform parody by deliberately ramping up

the pathos to entangle fans in those texts even more deeply so that they will buy more fandom-

related products. Booth concludes, “Fandom and the media industry must exist together: one

necessitates the other” (172). Without the media industry, fans would have few texts to inspire

their work; yet without fans, the industry would lack an audience for its products.

Jenkins, Urbanski, and Booth describe fan producers whose compositions can be described as “remixes”—blends of existing elements rearranged and built upon by new authors.

Attorney Lawrence Lessig’s book *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid*

*Economy* discusses remix from a legal and business perspective, particularly in regards to copyright law and the legality of remixing existing media properties such as music and film into new compositions. Lessig argues that digital technology allows and encourages remix, and both copyright law and business models must evolve to incorporate what he sees as a new literacy. The evolution of copyright law is of particular importance to fan fiction authors, who may face prosecution from the copyright holders whose works they remix in their fan fiction. According to Lessig, prosecuting remixers is “corrupting a whole generation of our kids” and “wag[ing] war against our children” because remix is those children’s primary mode of communication and creativity (Lessig 291-293). Lessig emphasizes that participants in the remix culture not only *consume* popular media but also *produce* it. He specifically mentions fan fiction authors as remixers because they place existing characters and other elements in new situations within their stories (Lessig 304, note 27).

Filmmaker Kirby Ferguson takes Lessig’s claims a step further: while Lessig argues that remix is the Millennial generations’ primary means of communicating, Ferguson’s popular web video series declares that *Everything Is a Remix*. Ferguson demonstrates how some of Western culture’s most beloved films, music, and other artifacts incorporate elements gleaned from previously existing texts. While Ferguson’s point is well taken, my use of “remix” is somewhat narrower, referring to more overt and recognizable references to others’ works. My usage is closer to that of Kyle D. Stedman in his article “Remix Literacy and Fan Compositions,” where he defines remix as “an overarching term that includes any act of composition that involves deliberate manipulation of previous passages, clips, or samples throughout a majority of the work” (108). In *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, Adam Banks addresses remix as he draws a metaphor between griots, the storytellers and oral historians of

West Africa, and African American DJs, whom he terms “digital griots.” Banks traces the origins of remix to African and African American culture, and he notes that “many compositionists have identified the mix and remix as tropes for digital writing practices” (2). The writing-research version of remix “values a sense of play with texts and various nontextual elements” and can include various types of media (Banks 88). Abigail T. Derecho also explores the issue of race and ethnicity in remix with her dissertation *Illegitimate Media: Race, Gender, and Censorship in Digital Remix Culture*. Like Banks, Derecho reached the conclusion that digital remix had its origins in the practices of African American DJs, but she also links remix’s roots to fan practices:

This dissertation argues that digital remix was invented primarily by African American men, who, in the mid-1980s, began using digital samplers to cobble together pieces (or “samples”) of existing recordings to form new sonic compositions, and by white American women, who, in the early 1990s, formed online communities on Usenet groups to share fan fiction (fanfic)—stories based on their favorite characters from television and film texts. In other words, digital remix culture was pioneered largely by communities that had long been (and continue to be) marginalized by mainstream mass media industries. (2)

Despite remix’s connections to African and African American culture, few scholars have explored the activities of fans of color. Hellekson and Busse point out the diversity of fans when they observe, “Gay, lesbian, bi, and trans fans, fans of color, queer fans—all are now vocal and visible, and fan fiction, particularly slash,<sup>5</sup> can no longer be considered the aegis of straight white women” (80). Nevertheless, only a small amount of research focuses on fans of other ethnicities. In 2011, the peer-reviewed online journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* ventured into this territory by presenting a double issue with two themes: “Race and Ethnicity in Fandom” and “Textual Echoes.” In their editorial to the race and ethnicity portion of the issue, Robin Anne

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<sup>5</sup> “Slash” is gay romantic and/or erotic fan fiction. The term almost always refers to stories featuring gay male characters, with the term “femslash” used for stories featuring lesbian characters. As the above quotation from Hellekson and Busse suggests, slash authors are stereotyped as being heterosexual, white women.

Reid and Sarah N. Gatson claim that popular culture has “co-opted, whitewashed (and, conversely, hyperracialized), and historically monetized for the benefit of white producers and consumers.” However, Reid and Gatson argue, fans of color have been performing anti-racist work for more than a decade, “confronting racism in science fiction/fantasy fandom online and off” and addressing anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic behavior. Reid and Gatson also interrogate the roles race and ethnicity play in fan identity: “Not to speak about race, gender, class, sexuality—or being pressured not to speak—in a fandom space ends up creating the image of a ‘generic’ or ‘normalized’ fan. Such a fan identity is not free of race, class, gender, or sexuality but rather is assumed to be the default.” Thus, Reid and Gatson emphasize the necessity of seeing fans not only in terms of what they are fans of, but also in terms of who they are as human beings in the real, diverse world. Of the participants who qualified for my own study, all five who responded to my request for an interview identify as white women. While their ethnicity does affect their identities as fans, as Reid and Gatson explain, my participants can still perform anti-racist and anti-bigoted work in their fan fiction. However, the need for further research and representation of fans of color persists.

Besides issues of ethnicity and representation, the practices of remixing and composing fan texts raise another ethical question: is remix only a form of plagiarism? In “Teaching Plagiarism: Remix as Composing,” Martine Courant Rife and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss emphasize explore the answer as they take a position similar to that of Kirby Ferguson, emphasizing that all writing could be considered a form of remix. Rife and DeVoss argue that Western culture, academia in particular, still values the idea of a single author working in solitude over the concept of compositions developing under the influence of many previous authors and their works, in which authors perform “acts of appropriation” (78-79). Rife and

DeVoss divide these acts of appropriation into two types: remix and plagiarism. Remix, a benign form of appropriation, is performed “in a spirit of sharing and within an environment where this use is expected” (Rife and DeVoss 70). In contrast, plagiarism “run[s] counter to the initial intent of the original authors (or the companies representing them)” (Rife and DeVoss 79). In other words, plagiarism is a malicious act designed to benefit only the plagiarist at the expense of the legitimate authors, whereas remix benefits the community as a whole. Although they do question its ethical implications, Rife and DeVoss cite fan fiction as an example of remix and generally positive appropriation:

Personally, we are both writing teachers and composition scholars, and we’re thrilled to see the level of engagement writers have with different media, and their inspiration and abilities in taking, remixing and re-presenting the storylines, character developments, and myriad aspects of the media they’re working with. (87)

Like parody, fan fiction could not exist without some reliance on existing texts, and explicit citation of these texts would disrupt its form and flow. Instead, attribution is implied by fan fiction’s rhetorical features, in particular the perspective of the community in which it is distributed. As Rife and DeVoss put it, “we know these shows, and we know that this is fan fiction” (91). When a reader seeks out fan fiction, she does not need a citation to know that she is not reading an official text based upon the media property, just as a *Saturday Night Live* viewer does not need to be reminded that she is not watching a real episode of the television show they are parodying. Rife and DeVoss conclude that unlike plagiarism, fan fiction and other forms of remix *can* be the ethical and “Fair Use” appropriation of others’ works, as long as remixers remain aware of “the interplay of copyright and plagiarism” (93). Following Rife and DeVoss’s recommendations, I differentiate between fan fiction and plagiarism according to the intent of the fan author and the plagiarist. The fan author is explicit about her remixing: she acknowledges the fandoms on which she bases her stories, and she makes clear that, while she is

creating a new text, she is not the sole author of its composite parts. However, the plagiarist attempts to pass off the entirety of her composition as her own, without acknowledging her debt to existing texts and authors. In short, plagiarists intend to deceive their audiences, while remixers, including fan authors, do not.

Another issue which fan fiction highlights is the tension between two types of writing most people compose: writing for official purposes such as work or school, and writing for unofficial purposes in the context of their day-to-day lives. Multiple writing research studies have investigated the writing people do for school compared with their extracurricular writing, the category into which fan fiction most often falls. For instance, Margaret J. Finders's study *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* looks at the "hidden" or extracurricular literacy practices of two groups of adolescent girls. Finders views the girls' practices through the lens of literacy events as described by Shirley Brice Heath, which become "an integral part of [the] socialization process" affected by social norms and customs (Finders 10). Finders's study "carves out how early adolescent girls use literacy in multiple contexts and, in turn, examines how social roles are shaped and mediated by diverse literate practices" (14). Thus, she establishes the importance of literacy practices, particularly "hidden" extracurricular practices such as writing notes to one another, in the social development of female adolescents. Finders argues that literacy events serve as a rite of passage for girls maturing to women: girls "use literacy to control, moderate, and measure their growth into adulthood" (19). Literacy also helps the girls establish their identities in what Finders terms "a means of self-presentation" used to delineate friendships and social circles, such as in the unspoken rules the girls followed about who could write notes to whom, about which topics (23). Hidden literacy is crucial to the social development and identity formation of adolescent girls because it allows them to "refute official

expectations” and negotiate both rules and roles for themselves, whereas in their curricular writing, they must follow the rules of the classroom and conform to the roles their teachers expect them to fill (Finders 25-26). While Finders’s study examined notes as one of its participants’ “hidden literacies,” fan fiction is another literacy practice which “challenges and disrupts” the curricular production and consumption of texts. Like the girls writing their notes, fan fiction authors often must negotiate rules and identities within online communities and fandoms as they compose and share their work. In “Adolescents’ *Anime*-Inspired ‘Fanfictions’: An Exploration of Multiliteracies,” Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar conduct case studies on two adolescent girls who write and share fan fiction during school. Although their participants use few fan literacy practices within their curricular assignments, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar believe that help from curricular figures such as teachers or classmates could have improved the girls’ fan fiction (561). Yet the study authors also hope to enhance curricular literacy practices by studying the writing students do for fun: “We hope that insights about out-of-school literacy practices that deeply absorb adolescents may help us devise new ways to make school literacy more meaningful and engaging” (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 557). They suggest that exploring the differences between curricular and extracurricular compositions can help make students aware of the importance of rhetorical context. In addition, teachers might use fan fiction composed by their students as diagnostic texts to learn more about the students’ writing abilities and recast the students as “capable literacy learners” (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 564-565).

While many studies of the dichotomy between curricular and extracurricular writing focus on adolescents, some researchers have broadened their scope to include students of other ages. Anne Haas Dyson details the literacy practices of young children, both male and female, in

her study “Coach Bombay’s Kids Learn to Write: Children’s Appropriation of Media Material for School Literacy.” Although Dyson does not use the terminology “fan fiction” or “fan art,” she describes how first-grade students sometimes incorporate characters and situations from popular media into their school assignments. Dyson explores how the students’ “comfortable maneuvering” within such media properties helps them navigate the unfamiliar requirements of school-based literacy. Dyson concludes that the students’ appropriation allows them to construct a framework which lets them maintain agency and better negotiate the “ever-new social, ideological, and textual spaces” they encounter in school. Like the girls in Finders’s study, the children use extracurricular literacy practices to help establish both individual identities and social relationships with others (Dyson 327-328). In my own research for my master’s thesis, I also explored the curricular and extracurricular writing of a student outside of adolescence. I eventually published my research as “Making Our Voices Heard: Young Adult Females Writing Participatory Fan Fiction” in the collection *Writing and the Digital Generation*, edited by Heather Urbanski. I conducted a case study of a 17-year-old female fan fiction author, in which I interview the participant and perform literary/rhetorical analysis upon two fan fiction stories: one she composed for a high school English assignment and one she wrote for her own enjoyment. I discover that the participant conducted extensive research while writing her fan fiction, even for the extracurricular story, and I conclude that students’ curricular research skills may benefit from fan fiction-based assignments (Coleman 103-104).

Kevin Roozen also explores the curricular use of fan fiction in “‘Fan Fic-ing’ English Studies: A Case Study Exploring the Interplay of Vernacular Literacies and Disciplinary Engagement.” However, his case study focuses on an adult female student enrolled in an English graduate studies program. Roozen’s participant uses fan literacy practices to negotiate

assignments and tasks for her graduate studies, while also composing extracurricular fan fiction and art for entertainment. Roozen calls for further research into the blending of “vernacular” and curricular literacies in order to learn more about “the networks in which literate tools and practices circulate,” but he concludes that case studies like his can inform researchers about the teaching of writing as well (163-164). In “Remix Literacy and Fan Compositions,” Kyle D. Stedman presents case studies of one male and two female fans, all of whom employ remix in their compositions of fan-made music videos, rearranged video game music tracks, or rewritten versions of others’ fan fiction stories. Successful remixes depend upon the composer’s rhetorical skills, such as the ability to negotiate concerns of authorship in determining who owns the content being remixed, and concerns of audience when the remix’s viewers may have strong, preformed opinions about the fandoms from which the composer is taking her source material (Stedman 108). Stedman concludes that because they are “fundamentally rhetorical,” remixed fan products can offer composition instructors a way to teach critical literacy skills, blending the practice of official and unofficial literacies (116).

Three other writing studies explore how fan literacy practices contribute to participation in online communities. In “Just Don’t Call Them Cartoons: The New Literacy Spaces of Anime, Manga, and Fanfiction,” Rebecca Ward Black presents an in-depth literature review of research on Japanese cartoons (anime), Japanese comics (manga), and fan fiction from the perspective of these genres’ contributions to the formation of online communities—what Black terms “literary spaces”—where adolescent fans gather. Participation in these fan-based online literary spaces depends upon the community members’ shared familiarity with the media property of which they are fans, as well as the discourse fans use when discussing this property (Black, “Just Don’t” 584). Black frames fan participation in terms of Gee’s concept of the social practice paradigm,

in which participants use forms of literacy which reflect the discourses important to other aspects of their lives (Black, “Just Don’t” 585). Thus, according to Black, adolescents engage in fan literacy practices because of the importance of media texts in their offline, as well as their online, lives. Black identifies the vast terrains left unexplored by scholars when she calls for more research on how adolescent fans incorporate their popular culture interests into their literacy practices. In particular, Black emphasizes the need to explore how these practices can inform current models of learning. Black herself conducts such research in “Online Fan Fiction, Global Identities, and Imagination” with case studies of three English language learners who write online, English-language fan fiction for their favorite anime series. Black’s findings suggest that her participants’ fan activities help them establish identities and social connections, as well as experiment with genres and literacy practices. Like Black, Angela Thomas offers a case study of adolescent, female fan fiction authors in “Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, Critical Response and Affective Play through Writing.” When the study participants could not find a *Lord of the Rings* fan community to suit their needs, they founded *Middle Earth Insanity* to offer fans what they felt other online spaces lacked. Thomas argues that when the girls created their own community, they gained agency in their fandom (234-235). Although Black and Thomas’s studies focus on adolescent fans, I speculate that adult women also empower themselves via their participation in online fan communities.

I have chosen to describe the literacy practices of my participants as falling into two categories: *sanctioned* and *unsanctioned*. I use the term “sanctioned” to refer to practices the participants use as part of their jobs and/or education.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, I use the term “unsanctioned”

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<sup>6</sup> Other writing researchers have referred to these practices as official, curricular, academic, or professional literacy.

to refer to practices the participants use when writing fan fiction, participating in their online communities, and/or otherwise composing texts outside of their jobs or education.<sup>7</sup> A productive tension exists between sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices: although the literacy skills gained in sanctioned practices are transferable to unsanctioned practices and vice versa, many audiences—including those in academia—tend to value sanctioned practices over unsanctioned. Despite decades spent as a fan engaging in unsanctioned literacy practices, I am also a member of the academic community and thus biased toward valuing sanctioned literacy practices. While the present study focuses on transfer between fan and professional literacy practices, and whether the skills learned from each have value within the other, I remind myself that all unsanctioned literacies have as much inherent value as sanctioned literacies.

In choosing and defining the terms “sanctioned” and “unsanctioned” to refer to my participants’ literacy practices, I draw upon several literacy terms established and defined by previous scholarship: Heath’s “literacy event,” Finders’s “literate underlife” and “hidden literacy,” Brandt’s “sponsors of literacy,” and Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street’s five metaphors for identity as it relates to literacy. Shirley Brice Heath, in “Protean Shapes in Literacy Events: Ever-Shifting Oral and Literate Traditions,” presents the literacy event as a concept for understanding reading and writing practices within communities. Heath defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (350). Within fan communities, literacy events may include reading and writing fan fiction, as well as writing, reading, and responding to posts online. In *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*, Margaret J. Finders investigates a

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<sup>7</sup> Other writing researchers have referred to these practices as unofficial, extracurricular, vernacular, everyday, or ordinary literacy.

particular type of literacy event, the “hidden literacy.” Her study focuses on the “literate underlife” of adolescent girls, which Finders defines as the literacy practices “that refuse in some way to accept the official view, practices designed and enacted to challenge and disrupt the official expectations” (24). Finders calls these practices hidden literacies, and they include any literacy events unsanctioned by academic or other authorities, such as passing notes in school. Yet even though hidden literacies are unsanctioned they may still be bound by rules. As described above, Finders observes how the girls in her study follow unspoken rules when they write notes to one another, even though they themselves claim to be unaware that any such rules exist (23). Therefore, when I use the term “unsanctioned,” I mean to imply only that the practice is not performed for work or school and thus sanctioned by the participant’s employer or instructor. The practice may be “sanctioned,” so to speak, by other fans or the participant’s online community in that it follows certain standards or rules, but it remains unsanctioned in the sense that the participant is not compelled to perform it to maintain her livelihood.

Fan fiction is often a hidden literacy, read and written as a challenge to the “official expectations” of media property owners. Yet despite their unsanctioned quality, fan fiction and other hidden literacies still function under what Deborah Brandt terms “sponsors of literacy,” an economic model of the ways individuals develop their literacy skills. Brandt defines sponsors of literacy as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (556). In other words, a literacy sponsor might enable an individual to write, when the individual would otherwise be unable to. However, at the same time, the sponsor might also maintain control over *what* and *how* the individual writes, as well as profit from the individual’s work. Thus, sponsors both enable and constrain an individual’s literacy practices, while at the

same time benefitting from the literate work the individual performs. Among other “commercial references” noted in twentieth-century accounts of literacy learning, Brandt includes several products fans still consume today: magazines, television programs, toys, and fan clubs (557). Sponsorship by media property owners enables fan fiction to exist—without the owners’ properties, there would be no fan fiction—yet with the power of copyright and intellectual property laws, the owners also constrain fan fiction’s production. These corporate literacy sponsors benefit from fan fiction as well, since it functions as free advertising for their properties.

Membership and participation in online fan communities highlight the relationship between individuals’ literacy practices and the establishment of their identities. In order to define my use of the term *identity*, I refer to “Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research” in which Elizabeth Birr Moje, Allan Luke, Bronwyn Davies, and Brian Street survey five common metaphors for identity and the ways these metaphors can apply to the relationship between identity and literacy. The five metaphors include identity as difference, sense of self/subjectivity, mind/consciousness, narrative, and position. My work with the concept of identity also draws on Margaret C. Hagood’s literature review “Intersections of Popular Culture, Identities, and New Literacies Research,” in which Hagood traces research on areas where literacy studies, popular culture, and identity intersect. Hagood argues that existing literacy research has neglected some technological literacies and offers three questions for future research: “What texts do readers access in their day-to-day lives?”; “What media do readers employ in their uses of popular culture?”; and “How do readers read and use popular culture to form and to inform identities?” (544-546). My study touches upon all three of these questions, with my investigation of fan fiction as one text in readers’

“day-to-day lives” and my exploration of participants’ membership in online fan communities as a form of identity.

The concept of *online community* is also central to my research. In “Community, Culture, and Citizenship in Cyberspace,” Angela Thomas defines online community as embracing “[c]onnectivity with others and feeling a sense of belonging” (679). As in real-world communities, users join and participate in online communities to interact with people who share their interests. Thomas notes that some of the adolescent fans she studied are members of multiple online communities, each of which fulfills a different function in the fans’ lives. In addition, some communities span multiple sites and platforms such as message boards, websites, and email lists (Thomas, “Community” 679). In “Atheism, Sex, and Databases: The Net as a Social Technology,” Lee Sproull and Samar Faraj explore the type of common experience and meaning—the shared interests to which Thomas refers—online community members seek. Sproull and Faraj offer an alternative view to the common research finding that internet users are motivated only by their desire for information; instead, the authors argue, users “need affiliation as much as they need information” (36). Sproull and Faraj express this affiliation using the metaphor of a “gathering” of users: “People go to a gathering to find others with common interests and talk with or listen to them. When they find a gathering they like, they return to it again and again” (38). Online gatherings differ from those in the real world in that users may participate without being in the same physical location as other users; users may remain invisible to others unless they choose otherwise; and users may participate without great expenditures of time or money (Sproull and Faraj 38-40).

Despite its common usage, describing social interaction on the internet with the metaphor of community can be problematic, as Jan Fernback explores in “There Is a There There: Notes

Toward a Definition of Cybercommunity.” Fernback notes that the term “community” is mutable and can be arbitrary, thus evoking a *process* as opposed to a static *entity*; however, many studies on community ignore this quality of mutability (204-205). Fernback warns that by using the term “community” to describe any and all internet social interaction, researchers can assume communities are present where they in fact are not (215). Lester Faigley also problematizes the idea of online communities, arguing that although online community members may share “highly specialized interests” such as a specific fandom, online communities lack the “shared sense of place” that unites physical communities in the real world. Therefore, online communities may promote individual selfishness rather than concern for the group’s best interests (Faigley 258). From Thomas and Sproull and Faraj, I take my definition of an online community as a gathering of users with a shared interest. However, as Fernback cautions, these online communities are not static and may form, change, and dissolve according to the movements of their members and the interests they share. For instance, one of my participants related how she was part of an online *Star Trek* forum which she now describes as “dead” because the community members have become interested in other fandoms. Finally, as Faigley warns, online communities are not utopic and may serve members’ self-interests rather than function as a supportive group environment. Because my study focuses on how individual participants interact with their fan communities, and not on the communities themselves, I have chosen to let each participant delineate the boundaries of her community rather than attempt to define them myself. What one participant defines as a community may not constitute a community for a different participant, but I will capture what each feels is the current state of her ever-changing community.

In her chapter in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, narrative psychologist Ruthellen Josselson defines narrative research as having “a focus on narrated texts that represent either a whole life story or aspects of it,” which “aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form” (224, 225). Narrative research assumes that human beings constantly tell stories in order to make sense of and organize their lives into a series of events with definite beginnings, middles, and endings. Individuals find subjective, constructed “truths” within the stories they tell, rather than in objective, established facts. When investigators conduct narrative research, they construct a contextual framework upon which to analyze their participants’ narratives. While participants find meaning in their lives by linking together their various narratives, researchers add another layer of analysis by linking this meaning-making with interpretation which includes the participants’ intended audience, motives, and other aspects of context (Josselson in Wertz et al. 224-225). Josselson stresses that this method does add the researcher’s own subjectivity to the results, and that the researcher should take her biases into account: “Always we attempt to be aware of our own presuppositions—how the interviewer and the interpreter are shaping the text as a coconstructed situation” (Wertz 228). Below, in my exploration of Debra Journet’s critique of narrative analysis, I discuss my own biases of gender and occupation, and how I might recognize their influence on my research findings. As Josselson notes, “What is perhaps unique to narrative research is that it endeavors to explore the whole account rather than fragmenting it into discursive units or thematic categories. It is not the parts that are significant in human life, but how the parts are integrated to create a whole—which is meaning” (Wertz 226). Thus, I intend to explore my participants’ experiences with composing fan fiction as part of their professional lives, not only as part of their lives as fans. However, as I do focus only on certain aspects of my participants’ lives and not

their entire identities, I have chosen to employ what Josselson terms “categorical,” rather than “holistic,” narrative analysis. In categorical analysis, the researcher codes portions of the participants’ narratives within a particular category, then compares those portions with other narratives in the same category (Josselson in Wertz 226).

However, Debra Journet complicates composition researchers’ use of narrative analysis in “Narrative Turns in Writing Studies Research,” her chapter of Nickoson and Sheridan’s *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies*. Journet points out that “narrative is valorized as a way of paying attention to the local and specific characteristics of experience, particularly as they are situated within social and cultural contexts” (13). While many researchers may believe personal narratives are the most accurate form of qualitative research, Journet argues that the personal narrative has become a “conventionalized” genre dependent upon “tropes of authenticity.” In composition studies specifically, researchers tend to assume two things: that narratives are “first-person stories of significant individual actions and changes” and that they always reveal “personal experiences and commitments” (Journet 16). Yet Journet believes that not all narratives are personal and that alternative methods exist for communicating the participants’ experiences. The key argument Journet returns to again and again is that people tell their narratives relative to other stories they have heard, either conforming to or transgressing from these existing stories (13, 14, 16, 17, 19). Such existing stories feature tropes of authenticity, including “certain kinds of identifying biographical and autobiographical details about the researchers and their participants” (19). In my own research, one such “certain kind” of detail is gender: for feminist composition scholarship in particular, the narratives of female participants may be viewed as “more authentic” than those of males. I am also guilty of self-referential motives for research in that I am investigating the composition

practices of professional women who write fan fiction—in other words, people like myself. Journet points out that tropes of authenticity are not “inappropriate” or useless for research, only that composition researchers should not rely on these tropes as sole validation of a narrative’s authenticity (20) and that “[p]ersonal narratives in composition research are not inherently more authentic than other research modes” (17). Journet calls for a critical examination of the use of narratives in research, which is beyond the scope of my current project. However, by being aware of my own tropes of authenticity and finding methods in addition to personal narrative for interpreting my data, I can add veracity to my results. One such additional method of interpretation is discourse analysis.

Social psychologist Linda M. McMullen defines discourse analysis as “both a way of conceptualizing and analyzing language” which involves a wide range of strategies including linguistic, conversational, and critical language analysis (Wertz 205). Because it encompasses such diverse methods, discourse analysis allows researchers to use the methods which best suit the goals of their particular projects (McMullen in Wertz 206). This flexibility drew me to discourse analysis as a second methodology for my research, in addition to narrative analysis. McMullen describes one criticism of discourse analysis, particularly in the field of social psychology: it “restricts its focus to the texts that are being analyzed and, by doing so, overlooks the influence of who the speakers are and the broader social context in which the texts are produced” (Wertz 207). In other words, discourse analysis does not attend to issues of ethos and rhetorical situation, but both areas are central foci of narrative analysis. McMullen believes researchers can “attend both to the ways in which speakers deploy discursive resources in particular situations and to the broader social and institutional contexts that shape such deployment” (Wertz 207). To accomplish this, I use narrative analysis in combination with

discourse analysis to fill in the gaps of interpretation which could remain if I limited my analysis to a single method. Narrative analysis offers a way of learning about the participants and their rhetorical strategies, while discourse analysis can uncover the ways the participants use language in their speaking and writing. Discourse analysis also provides “an empirically based set of claims and interpretations which allows researchers to referenc[e] specific features and functions of the text” (McMullen in Wertz 208). McMullen notes that narrative researchers often use discourse analysis in their work, and that discursive researchers typically view narrative “as a discursive resource that participants use for particular purposes” (Wertz 311). Likewise, Ruthellen Josselson also discusses the coalescence of the two methodologies by pointing out that narrative analysis “aim[s] to understand the individual” while discourse analysis “stresses understanding the processes of social construction through discourse” (Wertz 319). I hope to do both by employing narrative and discourse analysis together as I interpret my interviews with the study participants.

For example, during our oral interview, study participant “Effie” (a pseudonym) told a brief narrative to describe her first experience with fan fiction; I coded this narrative as the first of seven episodes present in the interview. Effie explains that when she was fifteen years old in the 1970s, she wrote fan fiction about a popular band, the Bay City Rollers. Effie describes her writing process as follows: “And then um, yeah, and then, in those days, it was all print, so I would write stories and then I would pass them around to all my friends, and um, you know, basically that was my, my fandom was that little tiny circle of friends.” Here, Effie establishes her ethos as an author: she is part of a community (the fandom consisting of “all [her] friends”) who wants to read her work. She also explicitly discusses the rhetorical situation of her fan fiction composition when she identifies herself as author, her friends as audience, and even the methods of textual production

and distribution as stories written on paper and physically passed from reader to reader. As part of my categorical narrative analysis, I grouped this episode with others connected to Effie's early fan experiences, as well as with early fan experience episodes related by other participants.

Narrative analysis thus allows me to view Effie's experience in the context of her (and others') fan identity as a whole, but discourse analysis provides a narrower, fine-grained approach which allows me to mark specific elements of Effie's narrative and examine how they help construct her identity. For example, Effie uses the time marker "in those days" in the above passage to help me, as Effie's audience, situate her experience within the timeline of her life, particularly since I am twenty years younger than Effie and may be unfamiliar with fan practices of four decades ago. The time marker also offers a defense of Effie's early methods of fan fiction production and distribution, which might seem strange in light of today's digital technology. Besides a close reading of this particular time marker, discourse analysis also allows me to code and quantify all of Effie's references to being active in fandom since the early days of fan fiction. The frequency of Effie's usage of past time markers can help support my assertion that her long history as a fan is a key part of her identity. Together, narrative and discourse analysis can provide a more complete picture of Effie as an individual while also describing the ways in which she constructs her identity as a fan and community member.

In order to recruit participants for this study, I created a qualification survey<sup>8</sup> and included the following message: "For my dissertation, I am conducting a study on women who write fan fiction. If you identify as a woman and you write fan fiction, please consider volunteering for the study! For more information and to see if you qualify, please visit the linked web page." Out of thirty-three total responses to the survey, twenty-eight met the initial study

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<sup>8</sup> See the appendix for a list of the qualification survey questions.

qualifications which included being an adult woman living in the United States. However, one of those responses was my own test of the survey, so after eliminating myself, I had twenty-seven qualifying responses. To confirm that these qualified respondents were still interested, I sent them an email asking them to reply if they wanted to participate. Of the twenty-seven qualifying participants, thirteen confirmed interest in the study. I emailed the study consent form to these thirteen respondents, and six returned signed consent forms. I digitally signed the returned forms and emailed them to the respondents. Five of the six participants who signed consent forms responded to my subsequent email asking to set up interview times. During June, 2016, I conducted five oral interviews, which I recorded and transcribed. In December, 2016, I conducted follow-up written interviews via email which asked the participants additional questions to clarify or provide additional information on particular areas we discussed in the oral interviews.

I modeled my methods of data collection, particularly my interview structure and types of texts collected, after the methods of Kevin Roozen in his case study “‘Fan Fic-ing’ English Studies,” where he “collected texts and a series of semi-structured and open-ended interviews [to serve] as key sources of data” (141). However, I collected less data from each participant than Roozen collected, in order to facilitate my research on a larger number of participants. I also referred to Lori Kendall’s “The Conduct of Qualitative Interviews” and Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher’s “Exceeding the Bounds of the Interview: Feminism, Mediation, Narrative, and Conversations about Digital Literacy” for best practices in conducting interviews based upon a participatory research model in which my participants and I share information and work together as partners in the research. For more general help in developing my interview guides and conducting interviews, I consulted Kathryn Roulston’s *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to*

*Theory and Practice*, Robert S. Weiss's *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, and the chapters on interviewing in Valerie Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

As described above, I chose to develop my method of data analysis based upon a combination of narrative and discourse research methodology. Both narrative and discourse analysis follow similar trajectories: a general reading of all materials, followed by a closer look at individual parts and the formation of research questions and findings based upon the contents of the texts, rather than the researcher's preconceived theses. The difference between the two methods of analysis lies in their foci. Narrative analysis prioritizes forming the disparate parts of materials into a unified whole, with particular attention paid to the voice(s) of the participant. Discourse analysis focuses on individual parts of the material that deal directly with the developed research questions, and uses repeated readings of those parts to refine the data uncovered. From discourse analysis, I take the close focus on only certain parts of the material, but as with narrative analysis, I also look at how the participants express their voices or "selves," and at how the parts I extracted from their texts work in conversation with one another. In addition to this conversation among the parts themselves, I also investigate how the narratives of the various participants speak to one another and to extant literature on female fans. Besides drawing upon narrative and discourse methodology, I also referred to several critiques of the writing research process to help me maintain an ethical approach to my research. One such critique is Heidi A. McKee and James K. Porter's "The Ethics of Conducting Writing Research on the Internet: How Heuristics Help" and their book-length expansion, *The Ethics of Internet Research: A Rhetorical, Case-Based Process*. McKee and Porter's heuristics and recommendations highlight their claim that research on internet writing involves ethical

questions that can differ from those involved in print-based writing research (“Conducting Writing Research” 245). McKee and Porter remind researchers like myself of our need for “a flexible *process* for ethical decision making” which we can adapt to the various unpredictable situations we may encounter (“Conducting Writing Research” 257, emphasis original).

Narrative and discourse analysis are especially well-suited to be part of such a flexible process, as both methods generate research questions from the texts themselves rather than adhering to inflexible themes predetermined by the researcher. In addition, discourse analysis encourages researchers to conduct multiple readings of the texts and refinements of the research questions, which can allow changes in response to the “unpredictable situations” that might occur during the research process.

In another critique of the writing research process, “Research as Rhetoric: Confronting the Methodological and Ethical Problems of Research on Writing in Nonacademic Settings,” Stephen Dohney-Farina reminds researchers that “all interpretation is manipulation” (261). All research is rhetorical, and the results of writing research studies are almost always dependent upon the researchers’ preexisting assumptions. To lessen the manipulative effects of their work, Dohney-Farina recommends that researchers consistently question their own assumptions and strike a balance between becoming too involved in and too detached from their participants. By recognizing and declaring our research methods to be rhetorical, Dohney-Farina argues, researchers can conduct more ethical studies. Drawing upon the recommendations of McKee and Porter and Dohney-Farina, I strove to make my own research more ethical by maintaining a flexible research process; by interrogating my existing assumptions about fan fiction, its readers, and its writers; and by making explicit my rhetorical moves in gathering and analyzing my data.

For the coding of the oral interviews, I referenced the qualitative coding procedures described by Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos in “Instant Messaging, Literacies, and Social Identities.” The authors divided their transcripts into “episodes,” with each episode focusing on a single topic; Lewis and Fabos then identified concepts and discussions of language features (in this case, related to instant messaging) they saw recurring in the interviews (1123-1124). Both narrative and discourse analysis methodologies involve separating texts into individual parts, so the episode method suggested itself to me as a useful way of thinking about my interview transcripts as a series of parts. Therefore, after isolating my transcripts into episodes, I coded the discursive and thematic elements I identified, and looked for trends to see which elements the participants’ narratives share. I also referred to Stuart Blythe’s recommendations in “Coding Digital Texts and Multimedia” for help in developing my own coding instruments, and to Mary Sue MacNealy’s *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing* for general assistance. After reviewing the above literature on both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods, I developed the following four steps to analyze the data I gathered:

1. Perform a complete reading of the interview transcripts to develop structure, overall themes, and research questions based upon their content.
2. Divide the transcripts into episodes and select those which are most pertinent to my research themes and questions.
3. Perform a close reading of these selected episodes and code the elements related to my research themes and questions.
4. Explore how each participant’s episodes speak to each other to form a whole; how the episodes of different participants speak to each other; and how the episodes speak to existing literature on unsanctioned literacy practices and on fan studies.

Chapters two, three, and four describe the results of my data interpretation using this blend of discourse and narrative analysis methodology.

In chapter five, I relate two personal narratives about my own fan literacy practices because they are what first led me to ask questions about the practices of other women. However, since they also influence how I understand and interpret others' practices, I thought it best to interrogate my behavior and to make direct comparisons between how the participants and I read and write. By comparing my practices to those of the participants, I can explore our shared experiences as female fans and professionals, as well as maintain self-awareness of how my fan practices have influenced my interpretation of the study data. As such, while I relate each of my two narratives and situate them alongside the experiences of the study participants, I reflect upon implications not only for myself and the participants, but also for other women who write fan fiction and for fan communities in general. The second half of chapter five concludes the study by suggesting areas for further research into fan literacy practices and community literacy, and by reiterating why such research matters.

## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter introduces the five study participants and describes the literacy practices they have engaged while reading and writing fan fiction. In particular, the participants relate how they discovered fan fiction, why they began to write their own fan fiction, and how they entered the fandoms in which they are currently active. After recording each participant's demographic information in her oral interview, I asked a series of questions about her first experiences as a fan fiction reader and writer, as well as her current unsanctioned<sup>9</sup> literacy practices and habits.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter, I analyze some of these literacy practices using narrative and discourse analysis methodology, then explore which literacy practices the participants share and which practices are unique to individual participants.

### EFFIE<sup>11</sup>

At 54, Effie is the oldest study participant. She is a white, middle-class woman from southern California who currently resides in an unincorporated mid-state area. Effie works as a librarian for a private high school, where she assists students with research and other support typically provided by librarians. Most of her writing tasks on the job involve composing documents to communicate with faculty and other librarians, such as emails, employee evaluations, and requests for budget changes. Effie writes fan fiction for a variety of fandoms, including the *Iron Man* movies, television shows *Star Trek* and *Firefly*, and a few lesser-known

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<sup>9</sup> As I explain in chapter one, I use the term “unsanctioned” to refer to practices the participants employ when writing fan fiction, participating in their online communities, and otherwise composing texts outside of their work or schooling.

<sup>10</sup> See the appendix for a complete list of interview questions.

<sup>11</sup> All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

fandoms, for which she writes short, single-chapter stories known as “one shots” within fan communities.

Effie discovered fan fiction in the 1970s, during what most researchers consider to be fan fiction’s early days—“like back when dinosaurs roamed the earth,” as Effie describes it. Effie’s older brother, now 55, ran a fan zine<sup>12</sup> for a war-themed board game called Diplomacy, which was played by mail. Effie explained the process of playing Diplomacy via zine, a literacy practice in itself: “It was very much a correspondence thing where you would make a move, and you would then send whatever zine you had on to the next person, or you would send it all in to a central place. That person would publish the zine once a month and tell everybody, ‘Okay, this is the move that was made.’” Through this zine, Effie came into contact with Diplomacy players who were also *Star Trek* fans, some of whom wrote fan fiction.

After this introduction to fan fiction, Effie started composing her own stories. Beginning when she was about fifteen and continuing through junior and senior high school, Effie wrote fan fiction about the Bay City Rollers, a Scottish “boy band” who were teen idols during the seventies. Effie describes the process of writing and distributing her stories, noting the difference between her fan literacy practices and those of today’s teenaged authors, most of whom work digitally: “In those days, it was all print, so I would write stories and then I would pass them around to all my friends. Basically, my fandom was that little tiny circle of friends.” Although she began her fan fiction authorship with stories about a band, Effie says that she no longer reads or writes “real people fiction” (RPF):

The thing that I think I would not do now is that I was writing real people fiction. I was not writing in a fictional universe. I was writing about people who were, you know, alive and kicking. And I’ve come around to the feeling that that’s really just not something I want to do.

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<sup>12</sup> A zine, short for “magazine,” is a fan-created magazine containing fiction, art, information, and/or other materials related to a media property.

There are people who love that stuff, but it puts me off now so I haven't done it since. I stay away from real people fiction. I just think that it's disrespectful, and it's weird for me to either write or read.

In expressing her thoughts and feelings about RPF, Effie establishes her criteria for being an ethical fan fiction author; she also demonstrates how she has matured into that sort of author from a teenager writing about her favorite band. She emphasizes her change in attitude by first restating the definition of "real people fiction" several times to establish her past behavior: "I was writing real people fiction," "I was not writing in a fictional universe," "I was writing about people who were. . . alive and kicking." She then describes the transition in her way of thinking as "I've come around," followed by three repetitions of how her current fan fiction differs from those early stories: "that's really just not something I want to do," "I haven't done it since," "I stay away from real people fiction." Effie also takes full ownership of her early work, and of her eventual change in perspective, by starting nearly every sentence with "I." In explaining *why* she turned away from reading and writing RPF, Effie emphasizes its qualities which she sees as unnatural. Her phrases "puts me off," "disrespectful," and "weird" all convey her current distaste for the genre, and she implies writing only about fictional characters is a more ethical approach to fan fiction than composing stories about celebrities. Finally, Effie remains aware of the community created by fandom and her place within it. This community consists not only of herself and celebrities but also other fan fiction authors. Effie acknowledges that other authors may not share her perspective on RPF; she points out that "there are people who love that stuff," and she allows that her opinions are hers alone when she says "*I just think*" and "*it's weird for me*" (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In his 2006 anthology *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins notes that fan fiction about real people is a relatively new phenomenon: "fandom has long maintained an ethical norm against producing erotica about real people rather than fictional characters. As newer fans have discovered fan fiction online, they have not always known or accepted this prohibition, and so

In college, Effie wrote fan fiction for the television series *Quantum Leap*; as with her Bay City Rollers stories, only her close friends read her work. One of them served as an editor who offered Effie advice on how to improve her writing. Effie says,

She's a journalist. And so she would kind of say, "Wow, this is great, but you might want to rethink this part." You know, that kind of thing. So just in terms of plotting, you know, I've always been good in terms of dialogue and setting and stuff like this, but in terms of plot, um, I was, that's always been my Achilles heel.

Effie establishes the ethos of her editor friend by noting that she is a journalist. However, Effie also establishes her own ethos by acknowledging both her strengths (dialogue and setting) and weaknesses (plot) as a writer. This passage is the first of several in which Effie quotes from other people who make up the communities in which she participates. In this case, the quoted person is both part of Effie's friend group and a fellow author. Although they are unlikely to be exact, word for word replications of acquaintances' words, quotations allow Effie to populate her anecdotes with other members of her communities, and to give those members their own voices. In this case, the quotation gives an example of the sort of feedback Effie received from her journalist friend, who exhibits the qualities of a good English composition instructor: she begins her feedback with praise ("Wow, this is great") before offering critique ("but you might want to rethink this part."). Therefore, the quotation strengthens the ethos of Effie's friend; she is not only a journalist but also provides feedback like an English instructor. Although Effie only shared her college fan fiction with a few friends, she chose those friends well.

Effie describes her foray into *Star Trek* fandom after years away from fan fiction as "a complete renaissance" because of the new resources available on the internet. In addition to

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there is a growing body of fan erotica dealing with celebrities. Such stories become a dividing point between older fans committed to traditional norms and the newer online fans who have asserted their rights to redefine fandom on their own terms" (142). Therefore, as an "older fan," Effie is more likely to feel it is unethical to write fan fiction about real people, according to Jenkins.

signing up for the fan fiction archive website fanfiction.net, where she could read others' stories and post her own, Effie joined a private message board for authors of *Star Trek* fiction. On this board, authors asked for and shared feedback on their work, brainstormed ideas for new stories, and "complained about things in the Star Trek universe." More recently, Effie has expanded her focus to write for the *Iron Man* movies and *Castle* television series. She especially enjoys writing *Iron Man* fan fiction without involving other Marvel movie franchises because of the niche created by the limited range of characters and the closer-knit nature of the community. Overall, Effie sums up that she has improved her writing over the years by "reading other people's stuff, and writing, and getting feedback from other fan fiction writers." She has become a better fan fiction writer in the same ways that most other writers become better at their craft.

However, Effie has moved away from sharing her works in progress with friends for editing, although she does discuss her *Castle* story ideas with her husband and daughter, who also watch the show. Effie says she no longer brainstorms with other fans online, in part because her online persona and identity have changed:

In the last few years, my online persona has changed and I've stopped writing in the *Star Trek* verse, and I have a new username and started writing in *Castle*. [. . .] The *Star Trek* stuff that I wrote, I would be embarrassed for some people I know to read that stuff, because it's either steamy or just crazy, and they'd be going, "Why would you write that about Spock?" It's mainly because this stuff comes out of my head. It isn't always the same as the person that I present in public. I want people to A, still like me and B, not commit me to an institution. But the *Castle* persona that I write under is very much me, and I'm kind of taking a few tentative steps into actually telling people more about myself online. Part of that is the fiction, so if somebody said to me, "Hey, I'd like to read some of your stuff," I would feel just fine sending them to my *Castle* stuff.

Thinking of how *Star Trek* fans have been stigmatized as nerds and "Trekkies," I asked Effie about the difference between the two fandoms, specifically what made *Castle* more socially acceptable to discuss with non-fans. Effie revealed that the kind of fan fiction she wrote for each fandom, not the fandoms themselves, determined with whom she discussed her work. She

explains, “Some of [my *Star Trek* fan fiction] is really dark, some of it’s fairly sexy, and people might not think the same way about me once they’ve read it. And I’m not saying they’d think badly of me, but I like to be in control of how I look online.” Although she mentions “dark” and “crazy” elements in her writing, Effie seems to worry most that the sexual content of her *Star Trek* stories will alienate her offline acquaintances.

In discussing the changes she made to her online persona, Effie exhibits rhetorical awareness of both her audience and herself as an author; in fact, she explicitly states that her audiences and writing styles for *Star Trek* and *Castle* differ. Effie constructs the identity she wants to present by taking deliberate steps to change her online persona: she stopped writing *Star Trek* fan fiction, changed her pseudonym, started writing *Castle* fan fiction, and now has begun the process of integrating her persona in the real world with her online identity. Effie delineates the differences between her work in the two fandoms and aligns her constructed identities to these differences. While she does take ownership of her “steamy,” “crazy” *Star Trek* stories by noting, “This stuff comes out of my head,” Effie feels that some of her acquaintances in the real world would criticize her for writing such fan fiction. Her portrayal of others’ possible reactions indicates that she fears they would cease to like her, they would believe her to be insane, or at best they would disagree with her treatment of the *Star Trek* franchise. Even while she lays out the contrast between her two fandoms and personae, Effie distances herself from her past identity as a *Star Trek* fan author when she says, “It isn’t always the same as the person that I present in public.” In other words, her public, real world persona is not identical to the persona who wrote “steamy,” “crazy” stories about Mr. Spock. Yet Effie describes her *Castle* fan persona as “very much me.” Because she is more comfortable with this persona, Effie has begun to blend her online and real world identities to a small degree: she has revealed more about her online

activities to her real world acquaintances, and she would feel “fine” letting them read her *Castle* fan fiction. As in her reflection on her Bay City Rollers RPF, Effie remains concerned with the ethical implications of her fan fiction and how society views her work. Just as she is now “put off” by fictional stories of real people which might be seen as slanderous or libelous, Effie distances herself from her earlier *Star Trek* fan fiction which could be socially unacceptable due to its sexual content. Instead, Effie has found a fan identity she is comfortable sharing, as evidenced by her willingness to blend her online and offline personas, as well as the fact that she no longer feels the need to have a beta reader edit her stories.

As she has written fan fiction over the past forty years, many of Effie’s literacy practices have undergone transformation. The most obvious change has been the movement from print to digital technology. Effie began by writing about the Bay City Rollers on paper and passing a physical copy of her work around to her friends; today, she writes *Castle* fan fiction on a computer and posts it on fanfiction.net. However, Effie has effected other, equally transformative changes as well: from writing RPF to composing stories about fictional characters, from running all her work by editors to brainstorming with her family, from performing one identity as a *Star Trek* fan to enacting another as a *Castle* fan. My impression is that Effie’s identity as a fan over the years has moved toward continually becoming “very much me,” as she describes her *Castle* persona. Throughout her journey as a fan fiction author, Effie has remained concerned with issues of ethics and ethos. In particular, Effie continues to focus on respectfully representing characters, whether fictional or celebrity; aligning her offline and online personas as she shapes them into identities her acquaintances will admire; and honing her writing skills while remaining honest about her strengths and weaknesses as an author.

## MISSFISHERFAN

MissFisherFan is a 47-year-old white woman hailing from New England who currently resides in a Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area. She identifies as being middle class throughout her life and works as an instructional technology librarian at a private university's graduate law school. MissFisherFan works with both faculty and students in a wide variety of areas: creating video tutorials, assisting faculty with classroom technology, assisting students, teaching, performing reference librarian tasks, and, in general, doing "anything related to technology and pedagogy." She also composes a number of texts for her job, including technical documentation, scholarly articles, and newsletters. As her pseudonym suggests, she writes fan fiction for the television series *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*. In addition, MissFisherFan has written an ongoing series of novels based upon the works of Jane Austen placed in a modern setting.

Unlike Effie, who has been composing fan fiction since her mid-teens, MissFisherFan did not discover fan fiction until adulthood; in fact, she read a fan fiction story for the first time in 2015, less than a year before our oral interview. MissFisherFan explains,

I would never had said that I was part of a specific fandom in the past, and I actually kind of stayed away from fan fiction for a long time because I was very kind of wary of having to dredge through lots of slush. And then a friend of mine about a year—well not even a year ago. Maybe, probably only about a year ago, being a librarian I joked, "You know, we need a readers' advisory service for fan fiction to weed out [and] to bring the good stuff up to the surface." She knew that I was a big fan of the *Miss Fisher* mysteries television show [the Australian television series *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*], and she said, "Oh, you need to read this particular piece of fan fiction, and it's called 'The God Abandons Antony.'" It was like the best thing I had read in a long time. I mean, not like the best piece of short fiction, or the best piece of fan fiction. It was like the best thing I had read. And I just got blown away by it, and a friend of mine recently said, "Wait a minute, that was your first fan fiction?" And she's like, "What, I can't believe you actually kept reading after that." Because it's like, everything will be a letdown. Actually, the quality of the writing in that particular fandom is exceedingly high.

Like Effie, MissFisherFan uses quotations as a rhetorical tactic within her narrative. She quotes not only the friend who introduced her to *Miss Fisher* but also herself in order to provide her audience with a dialogue between the narrative's two participants. This dialogue conveys

background information necessary to appreciate the importance of the incident narrated: the setting of the situation, the fact that “The God Abandons Antony” was MissFisherFan’s first encounter with fan fiction, and the high quality of that story. By relaying key information via dialogue, MissFisherFan follows the classic rule of narrative, “show, don’t tell,” and brings her first experience with fan fiction to life as a dynamic event. Because she employs dialogue without the opportunity to construct her narrative in advance, MissFisherFan demonstrates her ability as a storyteller, even when relating incidents from her own life.

Another rhetorical strategy MissFisherFan uses is to establish when the event took place with time markers. She explains that she didn’t participate in fandom “in the past” and that she avoided fan fiction “for a long time.” MissFisherFan then states three times that her first experience with fan fiction occurred only about one year prior to the interview. Finally, she relates that “The God Abandons Antony” was the best piece of writing, of any kind, she had read “in a long time.” Her repetition of time markers emphasizes how new MissFisherFan is to fan fiction, and by extension, how quickly it has become important to her. In less than a year, she went from avoiding fan fiction to becoming a prolific fan author. Besides the speed with which she became ensnared in fandom, the factor that MissFisherFan emphasizes most is the importance of quality in what she reads. She avoided fan fiction in the past because she feared it consisted of “lots of slush” through which she must “dredge.” Her friend’s recommendation of “Antony” even came about as a response to MissFisherFan’s joke about fan fiction’s low quality and the need to “weed out” the bad stories to uncover the rare “good stuff,” despite her own unfamiliarity with fan fiction. Yet as much as she reiterates how bad she once thought fan fiction was, MissFisherFan is equally emphatic about how *good* some can be. She repeats twice that “Antony” was the “best thing [she’d] read in a long time” and emphasizes that she means

*everything* she had read, not only fan or short fiction. MissFisherFan goes on to express the high quality of “Antony” in other statements: she was “blown away,” and her friend feared that “everything [else] will be a letdown.” At the end of the narrative, though, MissFisherFan notes that most *Miss Fisher* fan fiction, not just “Antony,” is of “exceedingly high” quality. With this narrative, MissFisherFan strengthens her ethos as an author, as well as a reader and librarian, by demonstrating how important good writing is to her. She will not waste time reading poor writing, and the high quality of the first *Miss Fisher* fan fiction she read is what drew her in to the fandom.

In January of 2016, MissFisherFan began writing her own fan fiction stories, one of which mixes the fandoms of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* and Dorothy Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novel series. Such blending of two or more fandoms in a single story is known as a “crossover.” According to MissFisherFan, the third and possibly final season of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* ended with Miss Fisher leaving Australia for London. MissFisherFan says,

And I started thinking about who else she might meet in London, and given the fact that she’s a titled person, she would probably swim around in fairly high echelons in society. I suddenly had this image of her running into Lord Peter Wimsey. And so I wrote this little, short thing, and I didn’t even name him. I just wanted people who had read those stories to go, “Oh, I know who she’s talking about.” Made it pretty obvious. And I didn’t even go looking on, like, AO3 to see if anybody had done it before, because I didn’t want to get scared out of it. I just wanted to put it down and put it out there and then run away. And it turns out it was a first, I was the first person who did that, who actually thought—because it’s the same time period. And so I went from there.

Encouraged, MissFisherFan went on to write another story in which Miss Fisher meets Harriet Vane, also from Sayers’s novels, and Bertie Wooster from P. G. Wodehouse’s *Jeeves and Wooster* stories. MissFisherFan describes these crossovers as “kind of the niche I carved out for myself” since no other fan had written such stories before.

As in her narrative about reading fan fiction for the first time, MissFisherFan here describes the exigency of her decision to write fan fiction as well as read it: because there might not be further episodes of *Miss Fisher*, and because the heroine's future remains uncertain within the canon,<sup>14</sup> MissFisherFan decided to compose her own continuation of the series. Like most of the other study participants, MissFisherFan wrote what she wanted to see from her fandom. In particular, she wondered with whom Miss Fisher might interact in her new venue, and she explores the possibilities using other literary characters. MissFisherFan does not explicitly state why she took this route with her stories, only mentioning that the idea of Miss Fisher meeting Lord Peter came to her "suddenly." However, she decided to continue in a similar vein once she discovered that she was the first *Miss Fisher* author to write that sort of crossover, and she filled the "niche" she "carved out for [her]self" with further stories including other contemporary figures of British literature. MissFisherFan seems to enjoy being known within the fandom for a particular genre of story, which affords her the ethos and recognition of being an author with a memorable ploy. In addition, MissFisherFan demonstrates awareness of her audience in her desire to make Lord Peter recognizable only to those readers already familiar with Sayers's work. While those who had not read the Lord Peter mysteries may still be able to enjoy MissFisherFan's story, her intended audience feels a special connection to MissFisherFan and her work because they are in on the "secret" of Lord Peter's identity. This rhetorical move is deliberate, for MissFisherFan says, "I just wanted people who had read those stories to go, 'Oh, I know who she's talking about.'" MissFisherFan even employs this rhetorical move during her

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<sup>14</sup> "Canon" refers to events that occur officially in a media property, or facts that are confirmed by the property, its creator(s), or its legal owner(s). For instance, a canon relationship in a television show is one that occurs between characters on screen or is explicitly referred to within the show or by the show's creators/owners. Some fans place more value upon canon than upon non-canonical theories posited by other fans.

oral interview. After mentioning Miss Fisher “running into Lord Peter Wimsey,” MissFisherFan describes her later crossovers as follows: “She also runs into Bertie Wooster. So I had a lot of fun with both of those, and then later on, she also meets Harriet Vane.” MissFisherFan never explains to her audience—myself—who Peter Wimsey, Bertie Wooster, or Harriet Vane are. She seems to assume that I am already familiar with the characters she mentions, and that I will ask her for clarification if not. As it happened, I did have passing knowledge of the three characters, but I speculate that had I not, I would have felt disinclined to reveal my ignorance by asking MissFisherFan to explain.<sup>15</sup>

Despite her confidence in her audience’s ability to recognize Lord Peter within her crossover fan fiction, MissFisherFan does express that she felt some initial apprehension over writing and posting the story. She avoided checking to see if another author had already written a similar story because she worried that she would “get scared out of it.” MissFisherFan elaborates, “I just wanted to put it down and put it out there and then run away.” Her use of phrases such as “scared” and “run away” indicate a substantial level of anxiety, but she does not specify why she felt such apprehension over her story. She might have worried because she was new to writing fan fiction or because she was unsure of how the *Miss Fisher* fandom would react to a crossover. Taking into consideration the value she places upon quality writing,

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<sup>15</sup> I had already made one such blunder earlier in the interview. I had not heard of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* before interviewing MissFisherFan, and I mentioned that I might enjoy the series because I liked Agatha Christie’s *Miss Marple* mysteries. MissFisherFan responded, “Oh, ooh, well this is also, uh, you know, very explicitly feminist. So it’s just for somebody who is, you know, very feminist, likes to see interesting, you know, strong but flawed heroines.” I thus felt embarrassed at having assumed any similarities between Miss Fisher and Miss Marple, as well as distinctly un-feminist for enjoying the latter. I tried to limit my responses to “unh hunh” after that.

MissFisherFan may also have feared that her story was not good enough for a fandom known for its “exceedingly high” quality fiction.

While her primary vocation is as an instructional technology librarian, MissFisherFan calls writing her Jane Austen-inspired novel series her “second job.” Therefore, she does not consider the novels to be unsanctioned writing, although she also says they could be described as a “Jane Austen modern AU<sup>16</sup>.” She describes at length her thought process as she brainstormed the first novel in the series:

My husband and I met and broke up for six years, and so I’ve always jokingly said that our story is *Persuasion*. And so, I just started really thinking about what—not so much the story itself, but I was thinking like, what would *Persuasion* look like now? Because there’s certain things that are very anachronistic that you couldn’t sort of transpose it neatly to the modern day. And I started thinking, what my way in was. I started thinking about it in modern America, you know, sort of capitalist as opposed to having a peerage society. What would be the modern equivalent of a British baronet in the Regency? And I came up with a Harvard business school professor. And so that was kind of my way in, and I grew up in New England, and I went to private schools in Massachusetts, and you know, did that kind of thing, and so I knew what that world looked like. [. . .] And then from there on, I was just kind of like, well all right, how do we continue to build out this world and what are some of the modern equivalents thereof, and that was my first book, and it hewed fairly closely to the story of *Persuasion*.

After completing her first novel, MissFisherFan continued the series by retelling other Austen stories in modern settings. She describes her work as a novelist the way she and the other study participants describe their fan fiction: “I was writing what I wanted to read.” Because she can become so absorbed in the work of novel-writing, MissFisherFan thinks of her *Miss Fisher* fan fiction as a “palate-cleanser.”

MissFisherFan’s own life is one source of inspiration for her novel series. Because she sees her relationship with her husband as mirroring *Persuasion*, she decided to translate the

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<sup>16</sup> “AU” refers to the abbreviation for the fan fiction term “alternate universe.” An alternate universe fan fiction moves the characters of a media property to another time, place, or otherwise altered setting. In the case of MissFisherFan’s novels, she moves Jane Austen’s characters from Regency Era England to the modern day United States.

entire novel to the modern day. Beyond the initial idea for the novel, MissFisherFan’s personal experiences contributed to its development and world-building; in particular, her childhood and private school education allowed her to set her novel in the environs of Harvard and Cambridge because she “knew what that world looked like.” Her familiarity with her subject matter gives MissFisherFan confidence in her writing and establishes her ethos as an author of a modernized classic. Yet MissFisherFan gains ethos as a writer of quality fiction in other ways as well. Her narrative of the brainstorming and planning for her first novel reveals the care she took in thinking through every detail she intended to write. As she describes it, MissFisher Fan “just started *really* thinking” (emphasis added) about how to translate Austen’s original story to the modern day. She uses the word “thinking” four times while describing her process of plotting out the novel, emphasizing how much effort and time she put into the book’s creation even before she began to write. She identifies the problem she had to solve—elements of the original text without clear modern analogues—and describes the steps she took using a question-and-answer format, the way one might talk through possible solutions for a technical problem. As with her first narrative, MissFisherFan peppers her description of the novel’s inception with dialogue, although here the dialogue is all internal, consisting of the questions she asked herself and the answers she reached. Thus, MissFisherFan’s narrative relates her thought process in an organized manner which reflects the care she took in planning her novel. Her satisfaction with the results of this method for conceiving a novel is evident with her comment that the final product “hewed fairly closely to the story of *Persuasion*.” Despite the difficulties in modernizing Austen’s work, MissFisherFan managed to compose a version of *Persuasion* set in the present day which remains close to the original text.

Throughout all three of MissFisherFan's narratives related here, one omnipresent textual feature is her use of "and" (particularly when followed with "so") to connect independent clauses, in effect stringing together a number of sentences to convey the passage of time and/or the steps taken in the literacy practices she describes. For instance, in the narrative in which she relates the development of her *Miss Fisher* crossover fan fiction, MissFisherFan uses "and" in this manner five times: "And I started thinking," "And so I wrote," "And I didn't even go looking," "And it turns out," "And so I went from there." This style of joining stages of the process with the coordinating conjunction "and" instead of a subordinating conjunction helps to place all steps of the process on equal footing; no one step is more crucial to the story's development than any other. In addition, the use of "and" as opposed to a time marker such as "then" or "next" gives MissFisherFan's narrative a sense of inevitability. As she clearly retraces her compositional steps and connects them with the repeated "and"s, MissFisherFan leads the audience to what feels like an obvious outcome.

#### MMPRFAN

MMPRfan is a 33 year old white woman born and currently residing in the deep South, who defines herself as having been in the lower-middle class throughout her life. MMPRfan works as an adjunct instructor at a branch campus of a public research university, where she teaches two to three classes of first-year writing each semester. These classes entail lecturing, meeting with students, and grading their work. MMPRfan composes a great deal of writing for her job, including assignment sheets and other materials for her courses, evaluations, emails to students, feedback on student writing, and articles for her English department's custom text book. MMPRfan writes fan fiction for the television show *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and reads fan fiction for the Marvel Comics movies.

MMPRfan discovered fan fiction around the same time that she acquired regular access to the internet in 2001, when she was an undergraduate in college. She began going online in university computer labs, then eventually got her own personal computer. MMPRfan explains that her first encounter with fan fiction occurred after she began taping episodes of the anime *Dragonball Z* off television:

Then I was like, “Well, that’s not enough.” So I started looking online, and there was this thing called fan fiction, and they had fanfics of all the characters. And that’s when I kind of realized that I’d been doing sort of that my whole life. Like, my Barbies would be sort of Power Rangers, like spy organization people who would fight the evil two-tone-haired Ken. So it just sort of became natural, and I started reading [fan fiction] a lot, and then I decided to start writing. In this short narrative excerpt, MMPRfan establishes a strong rhetorical context for her initiation into fan fiction authorship. She places the incident she relates at a definitive moment as she notes the specific year during which she began writing fan fiction, unlike other participants who could make only a rough estimate of how old they were when they discovered fandom.

MMPRfan also expresses her ethos by explaining that she has *always* rewritten canon: “I’d been sort of doing that my whole life.” As an example of her past seizures of authorial agency, she describes how she defied the canonical, commercialized narrative which accompanies the Barbie doll. Instead of acting out the Mattel-sanctioned story of Barbie as Ken’s girlfriend, MMPRfan recast her female dolls as the heroic Power Rangers and Ken as the villain. Because of such play, reading and writing new stories about existing characters seemed “natural” to MMPRfan. Fan fiction also held factors of both nostalgia and social acceptance for her. Not only did MMPRfan’s discovery of *Dragonball Z* fan fiction remind her of fun childhood activities, other people enjoyed such activities and participated in them publicly by sharing their fan fiction online.

MMPRfan has been interested in her primary fandom, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, since she was in elementary school. She says, “I was a huge, huge fan. . . and then I got way too

cool for it.” Her perceived outgrowing of the show coincided with what MMPRfan identifies as a decline in the show’s quality in its fourth season. However, when Netflix began streaming old *Power Rangers* episodes, MMPRfan decided to rewatch the series. Upon viewing the children’s series as an adult, MMPRfan saw what she perceived as weaknesses in the show’s writing, which she decided to correct through fan fiction:

I’m like, “No. That’s not happening.” So I decided to rewrite the whole five-part [story arc], and I kept having different ideas, and then it just sort of went from there. So that story has gone into multiple books with multiple chapters. And it’s very, very long and it’s basically a canon rewrite. But with some of my own things thrown in there when I don’t particularly like the canon.

As with her early fandom play which recast Barbie as a Power Ranger, MMPRfan’s fan fiction constructed a narrative she found preferable to canon; she uses her ethos and agency as a fan author to retell the story in a more satisfactory way. In this narrative episode, MMPRfan further expresses her strengths as an author by emphasizing the length and complexity of her fan fiction. She explains that she had “different ideas” that developed into what she terms a “canon rewrite,” and she blended in original content where she found the canon inadequate. These complex ideas provided enough material for an on-going story, and MMPRfan refers several times to the length and complexity of her work, such as when she describes it as “very, very long” and consisting of “multiple books with multiple chapters.” Like other participants, MMPRfan uses quotations and dialogue to fill out and elaborate on her narrative episodes. She often expresses her past thoughts as quotes, as in “Well, that’s not enough” and “No. That’s not happening.”

Both narrative episodes about MMPRfan’s initiation into fan fiction convey the importance of nostalgia in fandom. In *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, Adam Banks refers to the “rhetoric of nostalgia” when he discusses recruiting students for a course on the era of African American soul music. Banks describes this rhetoric of nostalgia as “not only a reclamation of soul and funk music but also a searching through that

music for values, mores, and commitments of what now seems to have been a better time. . . . I appealed to [the old school] ethos not only because I knew people would enjoy exploring old school music but also in hopes of evoking that sense of possibility that people hope for when they reach back to that old school” (63-64). Here, nostalgia is more than a fond recollection of the good old days; as a rhetoric, it is a way of composing which calls up beloved artifacts of the past *and* the possibilities they embodied. For Banks, soul and funk music evoke the sense of hope and possibility of the Civil Rights Movement (64), while for MMPRfan and other fans, nostalgia for childhood fandoms can recall both the joy of childhood and its youthful excitement for the future. Although the past often has its own problems—Banks points out that it only “*seems* to have been a better time” (63, emphasis added)—the rhetoric of nostalgia can be useful for addressing these problems as well as recalling the good. Banks’s course focused on an era fraught with inequality and tension, yet during the same period, there existed the fight and movement for change. With the rhetoric of nostalgia, we can draw upon that era’s feelings of hope and possibility to fuel the battle for further change. In MMPRfan’s first narrative episode, she encounters fan fiction online and realizes that she already has experience in rewriting the canon of media properties. As an example, she recounts her childhood play with her Barbie and Ken dolls: “my Barbies would be sort of Power Rangers, like spy organization people who would fight the evil two-tone-haired Ken.” Viewed as the playing out of possibilities, this incident shows the young MMPRfan already challenging traditional gender roles, as well as the limits canon places upon Barbie as Ken’s girlfriend. MMPRfan’s second narrative episode describes her decision to begin writing fan fiction for *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Although she jokes that at one time she felt “way too cool” for a children’s show, MMPRfan is now far enough removed from her childhood to see it through the rhetoric of nostalgia. In

Banks's terms, she can "enjoy exploring" *Power Rangers* again, which includes exploring possibilities for bettering it. As an adult, MMPRfan is now capable of the sophisticated literacy practices needed to improve the show's writing: critical reading skills to identify its flaws, and critical writing skills to correct them with fan fiction. Through the rhetoric of nostalgia, MMPRfan can participate in her favorite childhood fandom while opening it up to new possibilities.

#### KAILEY

Kailey is a 33-year-old white woman who grew up in a major Midwestern city and now lives in a smaller city, also in the Midwest. She identifies her socioeconomic status as upper class when she was growing up, and upper-middle class now. As she has just completed a PhD and is beginning another master's degree in library science, Kailey is currently unemployed. Her last job was as a graduate teaching assistant at the public research university where she earned her PhD. As a GTA, Kailey taught first-year literature classes and professional writing classes for advertising majors. She considered writing her dissertation to be part of her job; her other writing tasks included creating guidelines and assignments, providing feedback on student writing, and corresponding with students. Kailey writes fan fiction for the television series *Leverage* and an ongoing crossover blending the *Thor* movies with the television series *Being Human*. She is also planning a crossover of the *Harry Potter* book series with the musical *Hamilton*.

Like most other study participants, Kailey began reading fan fiction as a teenager after she discovered it on the internet:

I started reading fan fiction probably when I was in middle or high school, and I found it through, I was reading *The Wheel of Time* books by Robert Jordan. And I found a fanfic for that. And I didn't even actually at the time, I wasn't quite labelling fan fiction. I was reading a lot of the other kinds of fan productions. [. . .] When I was really into it, and then this is probably eighth, ninth grade, there was what on today's internet would be a wiki, but it wasn't. It was

actually maintained by somebody in all of these fan theories and stuff, and there was [fan fiction] kind of mixed in with a lot of those. I [was] kind of lurking on the fan sites and reading, and then I realized, it was like, “Oh, all of these things that I love, people are like basically writing episodes about the characters.” And so I went from there.

In this narrative episode, Kailey uses time markers to situate her discovery of fan fiction within her educational career. She notes first that she was in middle or high school when she started reading fan fiction, then specifies she became especially invested in fandom in the eighth or ninth grade. Kailey also emphasizes that differences in the internet of the past affected her fan literacy practices. The *Wheel of Time* fan site she enjoyed would likely be set up as a wiki “on today’s internet,” in contrast to the mixture of theories and fiction it consisted of approximately two decades ago. Kailey spent this period of her time as a fan “lurking,” which in internet terminology refers to reading others’ posts without posting, responding, or otherwise interacting with other members of the community. Although “to lurk” has a negative connotation when used in the traditional, real-world sense, it can be a valuable literacy practice in fan and other online communities. Lurking allows newcomers to familiarize themselves with a community’s etiquette and the genre of content posted to it, so that users are less likely to make posts out of line with the community’s standards when they do begin to contribute. As she lurked, Kailey read a large number of “fan productions,” which led to her developing an innate understanding of fan fiction rather than needing someone to define or explain it to her. On her own, Kailey “realized” that fan fiction was “basically writing episodes about the characters” she loved, which prepared her to write her own fan fiction later, as an adult. As do several other study participants, Kailey characterizes fan fiction as an extension of canon and as episodes about her favorite characters rather than as stand-alone stories.

Although Kailey lurked in fan communities as a teenager, she did not actively participate until after earning her bachelor's degree, when she began watching *Doctor Who*. Kailey explains,

I knew about fan fiction. I would occasionally read a little of it related to various shows I was watching, and then I got really into *Doctor Who* fandom a year or two after college. I started watching *Doctor Who*, and I got to the end of the new series. [. . .] I was like, "I need more *Doctor Who*," and so I started exploring more on LiveJournal and stuff and actually actively participating. That was the first time I did that. I had watched to the end of season three, and I was really traumatized by it. [. . .] I was unemployed and applying to grad school and kind of depressed. And *Doctor Who* was my happy place until it was also very emotionally difficult. [. . .] The Doctor was alone again, and I couldn't find what I wanted, so I wrote it, was kind of what happened. I thought, "Well, I know what I want, so I'll just write it."

As with her earlier experience with *The Wheel of Time*, Kailey relates her participation in the *Doctor Who* fandom to a particular time during her education. Instead of noting her age or the year she began watching *Doctor Who*, Kailey specifies the time as being one to two years after she finished college but before she was accepted into graduate school. Kailey also introduces another correlation between her fandom activities and her offline life: a strong connection between the fandoms she enjoys and her emotions, a theme which runs throughout her narrative episodes. In fact, Kailey's response to *Doctor Who* mirrors and even magnifies her feelings about other aspects of her life. The arduous process of seeking employment while applying to graduate school contributed to Kailey feeling "kind of depressed," while the ending of *Doctor Who*'s third season also left her "really traumatized." Kailey expresses her fandom-related emotions far more strongly than her feelings about her offline life, perhaps because she had turned to *Doctor Who* for emotional relief only to be faced with additional distress. In "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," Henry Jenkins notes that fans derive meaning from their emotional attachment to their fandoms: "[M]eanings are not some abstracted form of knowledge, separated from our pleasures and desires, isolated from fandom's social bonds. When fans talk about meaningful encounters with texts, they are

describing what they feel as much as what they think” (*Convergence Culture* 139-140). Both the fact that Kailey used *Doctor Who* as an escape, and the fact that events on the show had the power to affect her emotions, indicate how important fandom had become to Kailey’s life.

Because the canonical *Doctor Who* had let Kailey down and failed to assuage her depression, she turned to LiveJournal and other fan communities for “more *Doctor Who*.” Here, Kailey describes fan compositions as an extension of the canon, just as she viewed *The Wheel of Time* fan fiction as further “episodes” of the book series. However, Kailey was searching for a particular kind of *Doctor Who* episode, one which could ease the trauma and emotional difficulty the canon had caused her. When Kailey could not find such a text, she decided to write it herself and, as she puts it, begin “actually actively participating” in a fandom for the first time. The confidence evident in Kailey’s thoughts at the time shows her certainty about what she wanted and needed: “Well, I know what I want, so I’ll just write it.” Thus, her emotional connection to *Doctor Who* led to her taking more agency within the fandom than ever before and shaping it into what she needed it to be.

Kailey again altered a canon with which she was dissatisfied when she became interested in the television series *Being Human*. The series involves a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost living as roommates and “trying to be ordinary people,” as Kailey describes it. Kailey’s search for *Being Human* fan fiction led her to an alternate universe (AU)<sup>17</sup> series in which the show’s characters lived with Loki, Kailey’s favorite character from the *Thor* movies. Kailey describes

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<sup>17</sup>“Alternate universe,” usually abbreviated as “AU,” refers to the placement of characters, events, and/or other elements of a media property into a different situation or reality. AU fan fiction may involve crossovers in which elements from one property are placed into another, as the example above where Loki is written into the setting of *Being Human*. However, AUs may also involve original elements, such as characters from a property being recast as high school students.

being inspired by the AU because it amended an aspect of the *Being Human* canon which troubled her, the corruption and death of the vampire character. In “Online Fan Fiction, Global Identities, and Imagination,” Rebecca Ward Black describes one of her study participants, Grace, writing fan fiction for similar purposes: “Grace viewed fan fiction writing as a means of righting the injustices of plot twists that she viewed as mistakes in the original media” (417). She wanted “to make new and meaningful contributions to the broader narrative(s)” of her favorite media properties “and to contest the plot resolutions offered by corporate producers” (Black, “Online Fan Fiction” 417). Kailey appreciated the AU author’s efforts to accomplish these ends for *Being Human*’s vampire. In fact, Kailey enjoyed the AU so much, she reached out to its author for permission to write her own fan fiction based upon it:

I found her LiveJournal and messaged her, because you can’t message people privately on AO3, which is kind of a bummer. [. . .] So I messaged her because I was thinking, this side universe just made me want to reimagine some of what happens in the *Being Human* canon in a way that allows. . . the vampire character to not be—he at one point kills an entire train car full of people in the show, you know, so to kind of not go down that road again. But I sent her a message and was like, “Hey, you know, I’ve been really enjoying your work, and it made me think about this, and you know, would you be okay with me writing in your universe?” and she said, “Sure.” And so she’s still writing in it, so I’m kind of the AU of the AU at this point.

The fact that Kailey asks permission before writing a story in an AU someone else created demonstrates her respect and consideration for her fellow *Being Human* fans. Although very few fan fiction authors attain permission from copyright holders, many would consider it rude to write for another author’s AU without asking. If Kailey wanted to write a general *Being Human/Thor* crossover, she would not be expected to ask for permission from other authors who had done the same, but because she wanted to use the specific situation and version of the characters this particular author had created, Kailey does well to get the author’s approval before writing.

As in her other narrative episodes, Kailey specifies the internet site where her fan activities took place, and she also explains why she chose one particular site over another. Because An Archive of Our Own lacks any sort of system for sending private messages to another user, Kailey used LiveJournal to contact the author whose works she admired. The shortcomings of one digital medium drive her to use a second medium and influence her method of participation within her fandom, even for a task as basic as communicating with another fan. Kailey also explains her motivation for wanting to write her own stories set in the author's alternate universe: she could create a positive outcome for the vampire character. She is again writing what she wants to see in order to fill her emotional needs, this time not only for an existing media property but also for another fan's re-visioning of that property. Kailey describes her work as an "AU of the AU." At that distance, she is able to reshape *Being Human* to be exactly what she wants and needs it to be.

At the time of the oral interview, Kailey is also planning a second crossover, this one between the *Harry Potter* book series and the popular musical *Hamilton*. Kailey describes herself as being "completely obsessed" with *Hamilton*, and she got the idea for her crossover from comments made by the musical's creator:

When Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is the writer, the composer, and the star of the show at the moment—he's leaving next month—he has made a number of references to *Harry Potter* in talking about the show and joking about it. There's a scene early in the play that he had compared in a few different places, he says like, "Well this is kind of like when Harry meets Draco Malfoy, but then later he meets his real friends, like that's what this song is, that's how I kind of imagined it." So he, you know, he's often kind of making those analogies, making those references. [. . .] I was like, surely somebody has written a *Harry Potter* crossover. There's not one on AO3.<sup>18</sup> [. . .] And I was like, "Well maybe I'll write it," and I guess it was sort of in the back of my head. [. . .] I don't really have a plot, I just have a couple of little short little chapters right now that are more like thinking through the world and thinking through kind of

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<sup>18</sup> Since the time of Kailey's oral interview, other authors have posted *Harry Potter/Hamilton* crossovers on AO3.

some of the characters, and I don't know how much of a plot it will wind up having, if it has any. It might just be some little vignettes and stuff. But that was kind of the way in, thinking about it. Although MissFisherFan also described how she created a crossover fan fiction, Kailey's planning process differs in a significant way. Whereas MissFisherFan made the decision not to search for existing stories similar to her idea, Kailey *does* check to see if other authors had already written *Harry Potter/Hamilton* fan fiction. As popular as both fandoms are, and because Miranda himself mentions *Harry Potter* as an influence, Kailey assumes that "surely" another fan has had the same crossover idea. As such, she checks AO3 before beginning a story which might duplicate another author's work. Only when she finds that no one else has written such a story does Kailey consider writing it herself. While certainly no rule exists prohibiting multiple authors from writing similar stories, Kailey seems to fear that she might breach fan community etiquette if her fan fiction duplicated another author's idea. Other fans might assume that Kailey had copied, stolen, or plagiarized the concept from another author without giving her credit for the idea. That assumption aside, Kailey could also be faulted for failing to look for similar stories before posting hers; some readers may consider this step due diligence and part of the research process necessary for composing fan fiction. Finally, even if other fans do not consciously criticize her, they may simply not read Kailey's story if they've already read similar fan fiction. Although these same outcomes were also possible for MissFisherFan's crossover, but she had less chance of duplicating another author's story because her fandoms are far less popular than Kailey's. In addition, since MissFisherFan's crossover was her first fan fiction, she feared "get[ting] scared out of" writing fan fiction at all if she found that someone else had already had the same idea. Like Kailey, MissFisherFan has emotional reasons for her fan practices, and her decision not to investigate existing stories before beginning her own is as valid as Kailey's decision to do so.

Kailey has performed research in other areas as she plans her crossover. She draws inspiration from a canonical source, albeit one which lies outside *Hamilton* itself: comments from Lin-Manuel Miranda, the musical's creator, which make explicit connections between *Hamilton* and *Harry Potter*. Such comments suggest that Miranda would condone or even endorse a crossover between the two, and citing him helps establish Kailey's ethos for that reason. Within portions of this narrative episode not quoted here, Kailey also enacts her authorial ethos by describing her plans to match certain events of the historical Alexander Hamilton's life with features of the *Harry Potter* universe in order to compose a story authentic to both. Details of Kailey's composing process show the literacy practices she enacts when she writes fan fiction. Specifically, Kailey writes short pieces to help her "think through" the setting and characters she plans to use. She emphasizes the modesty of these pieces by calling them "little short little chapters" and "little vignettes and stuff." Kailey also deprecates the potential final project by saying that it may be comprised entirely of vignettes and that she "[doesn't] know how much of a plot it will wind up having, if it has any." Kailey's modesty about her abilities as an author and the quality of her work belie her writing skills and the care with which she researches her fan fiction.

Like all the other participants, Kailey uses constructed dialogue within her narrative episodes, not only quoting her own thoughts but also the comments and responses of others. In the first episode, she quotes her reaction upon finishing the available *Doctor Who* episodes ("I need more *Doctor Who*") and failing to find the fan fiction she wanted to read ("Well, I know what I want, so I'll just write it"). Likewise, in the third narrative episode, Kailey quotes her thoughts after discovering no one else had written her crossover idea ("Well maybe I'll write it"). These quotations all give insight into Kailey's thought processes as she consumes fandom-

related texts and prepares to create her own. In the second narrative episode, Kailey uses constructed dialogue to convey information to her audience and to establish that she followed the etiquette expected of an ethical fan fiction author: she asked permission to write a story set in another author's alternate universe, and the other author granted it. That Kailey quotes her own message in detail while summarizing the response in one word ("Sure") shows the value she places on showing respect to other fan authors; relating the response she received is less important to Kailey than proving that she herself acted with propriety. Kailey's quoted message also emphasizes her role in the interaction as the indebted party asking a favor from the other author. She begins with a compliment ("I've been really enjoying your work"), explains her idea ("it made me think about this"), and only then asks with some trepidation if she may begin her story ("would you be okay with me writing in your universe?"). Finally, in the third narrative episode, Kailey reconstructs dialogue from the creator of *Hamilton* to provide evidence that he "kind of imagined" parts of his musical as being "kind of like" what happens in the *Harry Potter* series. This quotation supports Kailey's decision to begin a crossover between the two fandoms more strongly than if she had only summarized the creator's comments without attempting to relay his specific message.

#### LEA

At 27, Lea is the youngest study participant. She is white and grew up lower-middle class in a large Western city. She currently lives in a Mid-Atlantic city and identifies her socioeconomic status as middle class. Lea works as a production editor for a publishing house, where she proofreads and copy edits books for publication. Her writing tasks on the job include reviewing others' writing, both digital and paper editing and proofreading, composing queries, and fact-checking. Lea writes fan fiction for the television show *Shameless* and the *Captain America* movies.

Like MMPRfan and Kailey, Lea also discovered fan fiction while she was searching the internet for sites about a fandom she enjoyed:

I was in, like the beginning of high school, I think, so like 14 or 15, and I remember it quite clearly, which is that I had just gotten a laptop for the first time, and I googled “Harry Potter” because I loved the *Harry Potter* books. And I stumbled upon a fan site that was for a pairing<sup>19</sup> that doesn’t exist in the books, which is Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley. And it was people had edited pictures of them together and written things, and then one of the sections on the fan website was fan fiction, and I was like, “What the hell is that? What is this?” And so I clicked on it, and my little fourteen-year-old mind exploded. I was like, “You can just write your own stories? You can just write them? And nobody does anything about it? And they’re just, there’s more *Harry Potter*?” So that was my discovery, a Google search of “Harry Potter.”

Also like MMPRfan and Kailey, Lea specifies the age at which she became active within a fandom. She states that she recalls her discovery “quite clearly,” a signal of the episode’s importance to her, and her narrative employs other language which conveys how strongly the fan site she found affected her. Lea describes her “little fourteen-year-old mind explod[ing],” and she relates a string of excited questions raised by her discovery. Two elements in particular stunned her: there was “more *Harry Potter*” beyond the canon books and movies, and “nobody does anything about it.” In other words, as far as Lea knew, *Harry Potter*’s copyright holders did not (or could not) prevent anyone from making up her own stories based on the series. Although the stories on the website she discovered had been composed by fans and not by J. K. Rowling, Lea still considered them to be part of the *Harry Potter* series, just as Kailey had gone searching for fan fiction because she wanted “more *Doctor Who*.”

A few months later, Lea began writing fan fiction of her own. Like several other study participants, Lea decided to write what she wanted to read but could not find:

I became frustrated because all of the stories I found always had Draco becoming good so he could be with Ginny, and I had never read any stories where Ginny did the opposite, Ginny went evil, and I was like, “Well, if no one else has written that story, I’m gonna write it.” Also as a fourteen-year-old, I had a pretty high estimation of my own reading and writing skills. You

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<sup>19</sup> A “pairing” refers to two characters presented as a couple. In this case, Lea found a website for fans who wanted to see Draco and Ginny together in a romantic relationship.

know, I was definitely reading above my age level and that kind of thing. So I became frustrated with all of the bad writing, and I was like, “I could write better than this!” And so I remember having a very strong like, “Well, I’m going to do it better and show all of you!” kind of thing. It was a big community, so it wasn’t like I was thinking of specific people. It was just more a frustration with what I perceived at fourteen as a lack of quality.

At another point during her oral interview, Lea describes the appeal of the Draco/Ginny pairing

as being a “bad boy/cute girl thing, that Romeo and Juliet style.” Yet instead of the socially

acceptable outcome of the bad boy turning good to be with the girl he loves, Lea wanted to read

fan fiction where the good girl turned bad (which, admittedly, is itself a trope). Since she

couldn’t find any stories based upon that premise, she took the initiative to write one for herself.

In this narrative episode, Lea also exhibits the ability to reflect back upon the experience through

a critical lens. From a distance of more than ten years later, she can recognize her teenaged

overestimation of her writing ability. She describes herself as having “a pretty high estimation”

of her literacy skills, and she quotes her thoughts as a second illustration of her bravado.

However, Lea does not criticize her past self, and she emphasizes her youth at the time by

repeating twice that she was fourteen after having already established her age at an earlier point

in the interview. Lea also explains that she held no animosity toward any particular members of

the fan community and was not reacting out of ill-will, only a desire to see high-quality stories.

As she looks back on her early experiences in fandom, when she felt a need to prove herself and

her writing abilities, Lea’s critical reflection shows how she has matured as a fan.

Eventually, Lea became “pretty much exclusively a slash shipper,”<sup>20</sup> which she feels happens to participants in many fandoms. While following bloggers on Tumblr who posted content related to another slash pairing she enjoyed, Lea began noticing images of the couple Ian

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<sup>20</sup> A “shipper,” short for “relationshipper,” is a fan who advocates for a romantic relationship between characters (also called a pairing as previously noted). As “slash” refers to gay male fan fiction, a “slash shipper” is a fan whose favorite pairings are usually gay couples.

and Mickey from the television show *Shameless*. Intrigued by the canonical gay male relationship, which Lea describes as being rare on television even today, she watched clips of *Shameless* on YouTube. Then, she says, she “ended up watching the whole show” and writing fan fiction about Ian and Mickey’s relationship. Besides *Shameless*, Lea also writes fan fiction for the *Captain America* movies, in which she pairs the characters of Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Bucky Barnes (the Winter Soldier). Lea says that her decision to begin writing Steve/Bucky stories stemmed from dissatisfaction with canonical developments in *Shameless*:

*Shameless* is really hard right now, because [Ian and Mickey] broke up on the show over a season ago, in a really horrible way. One of them is in prison and the other one has a new boyfriend and spent all of last season bad-mouthing the other half of our ship. So it’s a real hard time in our fandom, and it’s been hard for me to write anything. So I sort of ran into Steve/Bucky as a way to feel less sad about my primary fandom, and I’m trying to recover my love for my primary fandom. So I’m trying to pull away from Steve/Bucky even though it’s so much easier right now. [. . .] That’s why I’ve pretty much been writing exclusively AUs right now [for *Shameless*], because writing canon fic for Ian/Mickey is like, grim, very grim, because you either have to write something happening after he’s been in prison for eight years, or ugh, there’s no good options canonically right now, at all. Sad, sad stuff.

Like Kailey’s emotional dissatisfaction with *Doctor Who* and *Being Human*, Lea felt saddened by events in *Shameless*. Also like Kailey, she has turned to writing fan fiction to assuage her unhappiness with her fandom. However, Lea differs in that she did not involve *Shameless* itself in her therapeutic writing. Whereas Kailey mixed *Being Human* and *Thor* in a crossover to rewrite canon into an acceptable alternative universe, Lea wrote *Captain America* stories completely unrelated to *Shameless* in order to “feel less sad” about her pairing’s breakup. Lea found the *Captain America* stories “so much easier” to write, yet she is now actively trying to enjoy *Shameless* again. Lea describes her current struggle as “trying to recover [her] love” for *Shameless* and “trying to pull away” from *Captain America*. Her repeated use of the phrase “trying to” indicates just how difficult it has been for her to control what she enjoys. Lea also uses emphasized adjectives such as “really horrible,” “grim, very grim,” and “sad, sad” to

express her negative emotions. She makes her frustration with her fandom evident when she states, “Ugh, there’s no good options canonically right now, at all.” Yet instead of giving up on *Shameless* altogether, Lea turned to writing non-canonical, AU fan fiction to repair the damage to her pairing’s relationship, as Kailey composed an AU to repair the damage to a character in *Being Human*.

Also like Kailey and the other participants, Lea weaves constructed dialogue into many of her narrative episodes. However, she does not quote specific other people. In her first two narrative episodes, which deal with her introduction into *Harry Potter* fan fiction, Lea quotes her reaction to discovering fan fiction and her thoughts upon deciding to write her own stories. In both cases, she repeats the same idea in multiple quotes. For her first narrative episode, Lea states the question “What is this” twice and the idea that anyone can “just” write fan fiction without interference three times. In her second narrative episode, Lea expresses her determination to write her own fan fiction in three similar quotes which all relate her belief that she can write what she wants “better” than other fans could. This repetition of ideas emphasizes Lea’s reaction to her discovery of fan fiction, as well as the powerful impact the stories had upon her.

#### CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF LITERACY PRACTICES AND THEMES

A review of data gathered on the five participants’ fan fiction authorship reveals that while a few participants employ a handful of similar literacy practices, most of their practices and the themes that are important to their fan fiction composition vary from author to author. The final section of this chapter describes the participants’ shared practices, then details which unique practices characterize each author’s composition. However, even if a participant does not provide data on a specific practice, she does not necessarily avoid that practice entirely, as it is

impossible to capture *all* of a participant's literacy practices. Therefore, this evaluation focuses more on what participants *do* than what they *do not do*.

The most similarities in practices and themes existed among the three youngest participants: MPRfan, Kailey, and Lea. All three discovered fan fiction when they were teenagers and got reliable internet access for the first time. MPRfan gained access at the oldest age of the three, when she used her college's computer labs before she owned a personal computer. Kailey and Lea were in late middle school or early high school; Lea specifically mentions that she had just received her first laptop, which could ensure personal and private access to the internet. This freedom to explore their interests led to all three conducting online searches for information about their favorite fandoms, and in turn, to discovering fiction other fans had composed. All three of the youngest participants also explained that they began writing fan fiction because they could not find the fandom content they wanted to see, either in canon or in others' fan fiction. MPRfan was dissatisfied with *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*'s narrative failings, so she began to rewrite the canon in a better way. Canon fandom developments in *Doctor Who* and *Being Human* saddened Kailey, so like MPRfan, she turned to fan fiction to ameliorate the situation. She herself wrote what she wanted to see for *Doctor Who*; then she found another author's alternate universe which she preferred to the canon world in *Being Human*. After securing permission, Kailey began to write in that AU to create a happier outcome. Likewise, when Lea could not find the *Harry Potter* fan fiction she wanted to read about a "good girl going bad," she wrote the stories herself. Years later when she was unhappy with canon developments in *Shameless*, Lea turned to AU fan fiction and wrote what she preferred to see, as Kailey did for *Being Human*.

Kailey and Lea share other beliefs and fan literacy practices as well. For instance, both view fan works as potential extensions of canon: Kailey calls fan fiction “people. . . writing episodes about the characters” and “more *Doctor Who*,” while Lea refers to it as “more *Harry Potter*.” Both Kailey and Lea also show strong emotional ties to their favorite fandoms. They turn to fandom as an escape from stress in their own lives, and in turn, developments within their fandoms affect their emotions. Kailey relates that *Doctor Who* was her “happy place” while she felt “kind of depressed” over her unemployment and the graduate school application process, until *Doctor Who* itself became “very emotionally difficult” and “really traumatized” Kailey. Similarly, Lea expresses true pain over her favorite characters’ break-up in *Shameless*: she describes her feelings as “sad,” and writing canonical fan fiction for the show as “grim” and “hard.”

While the literacy practices of older two participants, Effie and MissFisherFan, have little in common with one another of those of the younger participants, Effie and Kailey do share one characteristic: both are concerned with the ethical implications of fan fiction composition. Effie expresses this concern in multiple ways. For instance, she neither reads nor writes fan fiction about real, living people because she feels it is “weird” and “disrespectful” to its subjects. She also shows anxiety about the fair representation of fictional characters and about how others may perceive her because of her fan fiction. Effie stopped writing the *Star Trek* fan fiction that might have embarrassed her and shifted to writing stories about *Castle* instead, which she “would feel just fine” showing to acquaintances. She fears that people would not only perceive her as “crazy” for her *Star Trek* stories but also see her as causing harm to the media property. Kailey is equally dedicated to remaining an ethical fan fiction author, particularly in the matter of respecting the rights of other fan creators. When Kailey wanted to write stories set in an

alternate universe another author created, she first asked that author for permission. Even when Kailey came up with her own idea for a *Hamilton/Harry Potter* crossover, she checked to be sure no one else had already written a similar story upon which she might accidentally infringe.

All five participants use constructed dialogue to elaborate on details when relating narrative episodes during their oral interviews. Because *all* participants convey details in this manner, I feel it is significant as a shared behavior, even though it is not necessarily a fan literacy practice. As described throughout this chapter, each participant quotes her own thoughts and reactions in many of her narrative episodes. Some participants also quote other individuals while recreating actual conversations they've had about fan fiction, or they construct reactions they imagine others might have to their work. Kailey also quotes *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda while discussing her writing for that fandom. Constructed dialogue adds descriptive details to the narrative episodes, directly expresses the participants' reactions and feelings about fandom, and gives at least some form of voice to other figures in the participants' lives. When the participants relate not only what happened during an event, but also what they and others said at the time, their narratives transport me to the scene and make me a part of their experience.

Despite sharing the above literacy practices, each participant has a unique focus when composing her fan fiction or participating in fandom in general. Effie exhibits change and growth throughout her long career writing fan fiction as she moves from a teenager writing real person fiction to the author and fan she is today. Besides shifting away from writing RPF, Effie's practices have also changed from a reliance on editors and beta readers to enough confidence in her fan fiction that she discusses works in progress with no one outside of her family, and from handwritten stories physically passed around among a few friends to digitally produced fiction with a worldwide online distribution. All the changes in Effie's literacy

practices have helped develop her ethos, both in terms of showing respect to the subjects of her writing and appearing respectable to her acquaintances.

During her first year of writing fan fiction, MissFisherFan's focus has remained on the production of quality literature. She had previously avoided fan fiction due to a perceived lack of quality, but when she discovered a well-written story for a series she enjoys, she quickly embraced fandom and set about writing her own short fan fiction in addition to her Jane Austen-inspired novel series. Nostalgia emerged as the primary catalyst of MMPRfan's fan literacy practices. She still enjoys the first fandom she discovered, and her extensive body of fan fiction focuses on her favorite childhood television series. MMPRfan also writes in order to correct the shortcomings she sees in canon texts she otherwise enjoys. Meanwhile, Kailey turns to fandom as a respite from the stress and depression she encounters in her professional and personal life. Although her fandoms themselves may cause her some emotional distress, she gains comfort from them. She sought happiness in *Doctor Who* before entering graduate school, and as she currently seeks employment and considers beginning another graduate program, Kailey shows excitement and joy in the diversion of planning her a new writing project. Finally, the influence of visual media characterizes Lea's fan experiences. Her earliest encounters with fandom included viewing fan-edited images, and she discovered her favorite fandom through animated images, also created by fans, on Tumblr. Lea continues to tout Tumblr's usefulness as a social media platform for fans, in comparison to older platforms like LiveJournal, because of its suitability for visual rhetoric.

After exploring the participants' individual literacy practices in this chapter, I turn in the next chapter to an examination of the practices the participants employ in their interactions with online communities of their fellow fans.

## CHAPTER THREE

In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Kathleen Blake Yancey describes how “writers in the 21st century self-organize into what seem to be overlapping technologically driven writing circles, what we might call a series of newly imagined communities, communities that cross borders of all kinds” (66). Online, fans often organize themselves into such communities because, as Henry Jenkins notes in “Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans,” “Fandom is one of those spaces where people are learning how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community. We are trying out through play patterns of interaction that will soon penetrate every other aspect of our lives” (*Convergence Culture* 134). A portion of my research sought to investigate this behavior. I asked each study participant a series of questions related to her interaction with other fans on the internet, such as whether she sees herself as being a part of any online fan communities and, if so, how she defines these communities’ boundaries.<sup>21</sup> Based upon the data these questions generated, this chapter uses narrative analysis methods to explore participants’ literacy practices within the following four areas: Community Insiders, Community Composition, Community Spaces, and Community Dissolution.

### COMMUNITY INSIDERS

When I asked study participants to explain how they recognized who is a part of their online fan communities (“insiders”) and who isn’t (“outsiders”), each participant framed what it meant to be an insider in a slightly different way. For instance, Effie consciously identifies being

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<sup>21</sup> See the appendix for a complete list of interview questions.

an insider as being an influential member of the community, something she claims she is not. In response to my question of how she knows who is a community insider, Effie replies, “I’m kind of an outsider myself. It’s not like I have a big voice or anything. I have a little voice.” When she speaks of “voice,” Effie refers to how much influence a fan’s words have within her community in the form of commentary, fan fiction, and other means of participation. A fan with a “big voice” reaches many community members and plays a large part in shaping their perception of the fandom, whereas a fan with a “little voice” lacks much influence or clout within the community. Effie states that she is “kind of an outsider” with a “little voice”; thus, having a “big voice” with the ability to affect the opinions of other fans is evidence that one is an insider. According to Effie, insider status bears no relation on whether or not a community member is a true fan, only on whether or not other members listen to her. When asked how she could tell if another member was “really a fan,” in my words, of a media property, Effie replies, “When you get into a discussion about fan fiction, you can hear people talking about, ‘Well, I like so-and-so’s story about this because it addresses this point,’ and then people get into a discussion about that point, and you can kind of tell who’s either watched the episode or knows the characters.” Effie believes someone is a true fan when that person can demonstrate her knowledge of and familiarity with the media property in question, even if her writing has little influence in the online community. Therefore, although Effie categorizes herself as “kind of an outsider” in her fan communities, she can still count herself as a true fan because of her extensive knowledge of media properties such as *Star Trek* and *Castle*. Yet outsider or not, Effie must participate in her communities to fulfill her own definition of a true fan, for she must have an audience for her demonstration of knowledge and her fan identity. For Effie, being a fan is a performance, whether one is an insider or an outsider.

Like Effie, Kailey discusses markers of community insider status. However, while Effie only claims that insiders wield significant influence over their communities, Kailey describes three specific literacy practices of insiders: they post frequently about their favorite topics, they form reciprocal relationships with other community members, and they add chapters often to their serial fan fiction. When asked how to recognize a community insider, Kailey notes that often the same members will “orbit” certain fan fiction genres or concepts. The insiders will write fan fiction about these tropes so often that they become associated with the tropes, and their user names “come up over and over again” within the fan community. Kailey says, “To me, that’s the community in there, like you interact with those people.” To use Effie’s terminology, these users have “big voices,” yet according to Kailey, their voices are big only because they post so often. Effie implies that influential community members are somehow privileged and just happen to be fortunate enough to be heard by other fans, but Kailey feels users can help their insider status grow by posting frequently and developing a reputation within a certain fandom niche. Likewise, Kailey explains that community members can put forth effort in another way to become insiders: forming relationships with their fellow fans. Kailey says these relationships determine “who does and doesn’t belong [in a community] in terms of behavior.” By behavior, Kailey refers not only to how frequently users contribute to the community but also to the ways in which they contribute; the members who “belong” are those who engage with other users and work to maintain interpersonal relationships. According to Kailey, engagement can include “warmly encouraging people,” reading others’ fan fiction, and leaving reviews or comments on those stories. The exchange often becomes reciprocal with the give-and-take of a real-world friendship: if author A comments on author B’s fan fiction, then B will return the favor by reading and commenting upon A’s fan fiction, and so forth.

Kailey also feels that fan fiction authors garner more readers and become more important to the community when they update their stories frequently. Unless a work is a stand-alone short story, known as a “one-shot,” authors typically release fan fiction serially by posting new chapters online as the authors complete and edit them. Because many authors lack the time or resources to finish chapters on a set schedule, updates can be erratic, and many multi-chapter fan fiction stories end up abandoned and unfinished. Even when authors do update their stories, readers may forget what has happened in a story and lose interest in the work if long periods of time elapse between chapters. To illustrate this point, Kailey describes a popular author within her fandom as being “a little more regular about posting” than Kailey herself is. Kailey says, “I’ve had a more intermittent kind of following. . . . I think I’ve just been too slow [updating my story], to be honest. I think it’s more that people forget, or as I do, you just get busy in your life [and say,] ‘Oh, I’ll read that later.’” Because she understands how busyness can impact the time one has to spend on fan activities, Kailey makes no judgment upon community members when communication becomes one-sided or readership dwindles. She realizes that some members will be unwilling or unable to participate as actively as others. She also allows that popular authors may get “a bazillion comments” and “probably can’t possibly read everybody’s” feedback on their work. However, less-popular fans also have the right to “choose not to [reciprocate comments] just because they have real lives and they’re busy.” Kailey herself only reads and responds to fan fiction she enjoys, rather than feel obligated to read the work of everyone who reads hers, even though this choice may make her more of an outsider than an insider. She explains, “I’m much less involved in what I would consider a community these days online, just because that’s not where my life is.” At the time of her oral interview, Kailey was in between

graduate degrees and seeking a job, which left her less time and energy for participating in her fandom.

Effie and Kailey both discuss the role of knowledge within online communities. Henry Jenkins describes the significance of fan communities to knowledge-building in his essay “Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans” when he notes that “no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate” a fandom. By participating in communities, fans can share what they know while tapping into the different things other fans know; thus, the entire community benefits and becomes more productive as a whole (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 139). Whereas Effie describes judging who is a true fan and who isn’t, saying “you can kind of tell who’s either watched the episode or knows the characters,” Kailey explains how it feels to be the fan judged and found wanting. When she began exploring fandom online, Kailey lurked in fan communities for a long period of time because she always felt “nervous about. . . offending someone or being the newbie.” Eventually, Kailey felt she had learned the “norms” of being a fan and participating in a community, and that she knew “how to kind of interact and behave with people,” yet other fans sometimes expected more of her than she anticipated. For instance, Kailey once published a short blog post responding to a new *Doctor Who* episode which had just aired. Although Kailey’s post made it clear that she did watch the episode in question, other fans critiqued her for missing references the episode made to the earlier series of *Doctor Who*,<sup>22</sup> as well as references to a classic movie unrelated to the television show. Kailey explains that after the episode left her confused, she asked the *Doctor Who* community via her blog entry, “Is there something I’m missing?” She received a

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<sup>22</sup> The original *Doctor Who* television show began airing on the BBC in the 1960s. Before its current incarnation now popular in the United States as well, *Doctor Who* had a much smaller following, consisting mostly of science fiction fans, compared to its viewership today.

condescending response from another fan who “kind of mansplained<sup>23</sup> [the classic movie reference] to me, and I was like, ‘Well, I realize that’s a movie, but I’ve never seen it.’” While Kailey accepts that outside life often becomes too “busy” for one to stay on top of everything going on within one’s fandom, the response to her blog entry shows that some community members believe one must remain immersed in the fandom at all times in order to be a true fan.

## COMMUNITY COMPOSITION

Sometimes members of an online fan community will collaborate to produce a coauthored text. Three of my participants describe various group literacy activities conducted by their communities, including “gift fics,” “beta reading,” and “big bangs.” All three of these activities are unique to the practice of composing fan fiction. In addition, MissFisherFan describes a fourth activity, “Pitch Madness,” which is a Twitter event organized by fiction publishers and thus not a genre exclusive to fan communities. However, because MissFisherFan has involved her online fan community with her participation in Pitch Madness, I have included it within the discussion here.

MissFisherFan is part of an especially close-knit community of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* fans, and she describes two different forms of collaboration that its members perform as fandom-based literacy activities. One form is what fans often refer to as “gift fic,” when one or more authors write a story as a present for another fan. In the *Miss Fisher* fan community, when a member’s birthday approaches, other members will work together to surprise her with a fan fiction story as a birthday present. This practice of composing birthday gift fic began with MissFisherFan’s own birthday. Unbeknownst to MissFisherFan, community members wrote a

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<sup>23</sup> Kailey clarified that she does not know the gender of the other fan, but that she chose to use the term “mansplained” to emphasize the patronizing tone of the comment.

story combining her favorite fandoms of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* and Jane Austen's novels. Each coauthor wrote a chapter about a different pairing of characters, and together they produced what MissFisherFan calls a "fan, multi-chapter, multi-author fic that was one of the characters in the show having a Jane Austen/Regency coming of age party." The thoughtfulness of her fellow fans touched MissFisherFan, and she describes her emotional reaction when she read her gift while on vacation with her husband at the Biltmore Estate: "We were waiting for the restaurant to open, we were starving, and I start reading it, and I was trying not to cry. I was so touched that they did this for me. People [are] walking past me at the Biltmore, and I'm just like, 'I can't believe they did this to me, I can't believe this is so awesome.'" In the time since the community wrote MissFisherFan's gift fic, composing birthday stories has become what MissFisherFan calls "a tradition," and she has since participated in creating two gift fics for other community members.

Besides writing fan fiction together, the *Miss Fisher* fan community also "beta reads" stories composed by individual members. To "beta read" or "beta" a fan fiction story is for someone other than the author to read the story and provide constructive criticism for editing and revision. When I asked MissFisherFan if she discusses her works in progress with anyone, she replied, "almost constantly" and "almost on a daily basis, honestly." She and the other members of her fan community beta read in-progress stories for one another and offer feedback and suggestions for improvement such as "Oh, that really works" or "Ooh, you used the same word twice in the same paragraph." The group also beta reads one another's chapters for the gift fics they compose. However, MissFisherFan appreciates her community for their companionship as much as for their editing help, as she explains: "You know the whole thing about writing being lonely and sitting alone in a room? That's kind of not for me. But I am reasonably introverted,

so that I don't necessarily need to have a person right in front of me." In recounting the stereotype of the lonely writer, MissFisherFan echoes Lisa S. Ede and Andrea Lunsford's description of "the pervasive commonsense assumption that writing is inherently and necessarily a solitary, individual act" (5). Like Ede and Lunsford, MissFisherFan proved the stereotype to be false with her own experience; like them, she too wrote with others and found collaboration to be "natural" and "productive" (6). When conducting research for *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, published in 1990 with research beginning in 1984, Ede and Lunsford found that within composition studies, writing was almost always depicted as something done in isolation (6, 13). *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* investigates the discrepancy between this phenomenon and the authors' personal experience, and ten years later in 2001, Ede and Lunsford's article "Collaboration and Concepts of Authorship" continued the investigation. Although composition studies and the humanities as a whole do not recognize collaborative authorship to Ede and Lunsford's—or, I would venture, MissFisherFan's—satisfaction, fandom allows for and welcomes group literacy practices, which are deemed acceptable and common.

In her response above, MissFisherFan also dispels some of what Henry Jenkins calls the "sacred aura" of authorship in his anthology of essays, *Convergence Culture*. Jenkins writes that this aura prevails

in a world where there are limited opportunities to circulate your ideas to a larger public. As we expand access to mass distribution via the Web, our understanding of what it means to be an author—and what kinds of authority should be ascribed to authors—necessarily shifts[, which] can result in a demystification of the creative process, a growing recognition of the communal dimensions of expression, as writing takes on more aspects of traditional folk practice. (*Convergence Culture* 179)

When an author goes online, she gains opportunities to distribute to a larger audience, but

Jenkins points out other effects which the study participants recall experiencing. In chapter four, Lea recounts the "demystification of the creative process" she witnessed as a reader and writer of

fan fiction, which later helped her in her career as a professional editor. MissFisherFan's discussion above of her community's companionship supports Jenkin's claim that that online writing resembles "traditional folk practice" and features "communal dimensions of expression." For MissFisherFan especially among the study participants, authorship is a group practice. Even when they are not actively composing together, writing gift fic or beta reading, the *Miss Fisher* fan community can be found discussing their ongoing work or simply keeping one another company, virtually. An online community, as opposed to one physically present at MissFisherFan's location, staves off the loneliness that might come from writing completely by herself, while still keeping other people at a far enough remove to keep the "reasonably introverted" author from feeling uncomfortable.

Along with gift fics and beta reading, fan communities also create another type of community-authored fan composition during challenges known as "big bangs."<sup>24</sup> While members of the *Miss Fisher* fan community work together to produce textual fan fiction stories, big bangs mix media to bring fan fiction authors together with fans who create art, videos, or other types of compositions. Lea describes joining a big bang as participating in a community-wide challenge:

The basic concept is, you have a community run by a moderator, and both writers and artists sign up to participate in the challenge. [. . .] Once everyone has signed up, the writers [post] anonymous summaries of their stories. . . and the artists, based only off the summary and not off who's writing it, claim [which stories they want to illustrate].

According to Lea, the community moderators then distribute contact information for the writers and artists who have claimed their summaries. Over the course of the big bang, the writers and

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<sup>24</sup> Lea explains the origin of the term "big bang" as follows: "Apparently the original challenge was a Harry [Potter]/Draco [Malfoy] challenge, and it had something to do with their chemistry being like a bang." However, she prefers what she calls "the obvious reasoning for the name: a big bang of creativity." Not being a fan of *Harry Potter*, I tend to agree.

artists exchange drafts and work together to complete a multimedia composition which consists of a text-based fan fiction story accompanied by a visual, audio, or other form of media text. Lea says, “Most people do traditional art, but other people do digital art, or I’ve had people make fan videos, gif sets, [or] fan mixes,” which are playlists of songs pertinent to the author’s fan fiction. The big bang’s moderators set an end date by which all participants must have their works completed, and Lea explains that after this date, “there’s a schedule, and then everyone on a different day for a week or two posts their stories [and media] together” to the community for the other participants to enjoy.

Both Effie and Lea have participated in big bangs, and I asked each of them to describe their experience. Effie once participated in a fan community on LiveJournal, and she defines its big bangs as “these competitions. . . where you pledge to write a certain number of words, and you get together online with somebody who’s either an artist or a playlist maker. Basically, I told the artist what the theme of my story was, and she created some art for it.” While Effie only briefly relates her past experience with big bangs, Lea had recently completed a big bang at the time of her interview, and she offered the in-depth explanation of its process above. Like Effie, Lea initially participated in big bangs on LiveJournal, but her community now runs them on Tumblr instead.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Lea refers to big bangs as “challenges,” Effie calls them “competitions.” In my experience both in conducting research and as a fan, Effie is alone in her view of big bangs as competitive events or contests; while big bangs are meant to be demanding as exercises of creativity, their challenges come from working against a deadline and cooperating with another fan to create a project, not from competing to outperform other participants or to

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<sup>25</sup> For Lea’s discussion of why her community moved its fan activities to Tumblr, see the “Community Spaces” section below.

“win.” Effie did not offer her reasons for viewing big bangs as “competitions” rather than “challenges,” but this language recalls her earlier description of insiders and outsiders in online fan communities: “I’m kind of an outsider myself. It’s not like I have a big voice or anything. I have a little voice.” Effie depicts communities as sites of opposition between insiders and outsiders, those with big voices and those with little voices. Likewise, she calls big bangs “competitions,” implying that participating fans are rivals rather than colleagues. At least in these instances, Effie views fan communities as antagonistic, more likely to tear apart a composition (as the *Doctor Who* community did to Kailey’s blog entry) than to work together to create a composition (as do Lea’s big bang communities and MissFisherFan’s group).

As noted above, MissFisherFan describes a fourth form of collaborative online composition called “Pitch Madness,” which takes place on Twitter. During a Pitch Madness event, which MissFisherFan refers to as “a hashtag contest,” publishing houses follow the hashtag #pitmad, and an author will tweet the premise of her book along with the Pitch Madness hashtag and a second hashtag denoting her book’s genre. MissFisherFan explains that, “if an agent or an editor likes what they see, they’ll favorite it, and that’s an invitation to pitch them.” Pitch Madness thus utilizes the unique features of Twitter to bring together authors and publishers who might otherwise never find one another. Twitter is a particularly effective platform for such an event for several reasons. The 140-character limit on tweet length keeps authors’ premises short, and the genre hashtags allow agents and editors to compile all pitches of a particular genre into one location. Finally, the system of “favoriting” a tweet to indicate interest means that agents and editors can invite authors to submit a pitch efficiently with a single click. All three of these Twitter features allow publishers to read many premises with only a small time investment, especially premises from unagented authors they likely would otherwise

never encounter. Likewise, with over 300 million active users per month, the Twitter platform allows authors to promote their works to a large audience with minimal time or effort, and the favoriting system alerts authors to a potential publisher immediately with no uncertainty of whether the publisher would welcome a pitch.

MissFisherFan's experience with selling a novel via Twitter illustrates Pitch Madness's effectiveness in uniting publishers and authors, as well as the depth of the relationships developed among members of online fan communities. As described in chapter two, MissFisherFan writes novels retelling the works of Jane Austen in a modern-day setting, which she considers to be a form of fan fiction. Rather than compose her first novel according to her own vision then seek a publisher, MissFisherFan made deliberate rhetorical choices of genre and length as she drafted the book in order to appeal to the editors of Teagan Publishing (a pseudonym), the electronic imprint she hoped would published it. She explains, "I like to say I kind of engineered [the novel] in a lab in the hopes that Teagan would find it interesting." This calculated approach worked, because when MissFisherFan tweeted the premise of her novel during a Pitch Madness event, one of Teagan Publishing's editors favorited the tweet. Although this action served as MissFisherFan's invitation to pitch her book to Tegan, she had only completed the first draft of the novel and needed to revise and edit it before she could submit it to the imprint. She turned to her *Miss Fisher* fan community for help: "Four of my friends from this group, in a course of about a day and a half, read the whole thing and sent me edits so that I could get it in for submission. So I have the world's fastest, most amazing, most generous beta readers that you can imagine." Although MissFisherFan classified her Jane Austen-inspired novel as fan fiction of a sort, it was not *Miss Fisher* fan fiction. Nevertheless, several members

of the fan community were willing to edit—or “beta read,” in fan fiction terms—the work without monetary compensation, demonstrating the strength of the friendship within the group.

MissFisherFan’s experience with Pitch Madness did result in an ideal outcome: she achieved a book sale to the publisher she targeted, with the potential to expand her novel into a series. Although assistance from friends in her fan community helped make this outcome possible, it is not the victory of solely unsanctioned literacy practices.<sup>26</sup> Pitch Madness itself remains very much a sanctioned, sponsored, and monetized event. Brenda Drake, an author of young adult fiction, created Pitch Madness and continues to organize and run it each year, along with several other “pitch”-themed contests. In order to be offered up for consideration by agents, authors’ pitches must be approved by a team of six other published authors, who each choose ten pitches to make available to agents (Drake). Drake and her selection team thus become literacy sponsors<sup>27</sup>: they choose and announce the dates for Pitch Madness, and they choose which authors are allowed to pitch to agents. The team members use their credentials as published authors to arrange the liaison between contest participants and publishers, which benefits both those parties as described above; yet the team members also use their publishing success to position themselves as authorities and arbitrators of which authors are worthy of literary agents’ consideration. The participating publishers’ agents then become literacy sponsors when they

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<sup>26</sup> As I explain in chapter one, I use the term “sanctioned” to refer to those practices which the participants employ in their jobs and/or education. In contrast, I use the term “unsanctioned” to refer to practices the participants employ when writing fan fiction, participating in their online communities, and otherwise composing texts outside of their work or schooling.

<sup>27</sup> A literacy sponsor is an agent who enables or encourages an individual to write, when the individual otherwise would not write, or would be unable to write. However, at the same time, the sponsor may also maintain control over *what* the individual writes, as well as benefit in some way from the individual’s work (Brandt 556). Examples of literacy sponsors include both individuals and institutions such as teachers, tutors, librarians, literary agents, editors, schools, and publishers.

choose which pitches to pursue. While of course the chosen authors have the potential for financial gain should their books sell, the publishers and agents will also profit, and Drake sells “Pitch Wars Webinars” and workshops on her website. In contrast, the three purely fan-based literacy practices discussed here—gift fics, beta reading, and big bangs—are unsanctioned. Fans arrange, manage, and participate in those practices for the benefit of other fans, with no publishers or other authorities involved in the process at any point. Nevertheless, MissFisherFan’s experience with fan-based, unsanctioned literacy practices helped her succeed in the sanctioned practice of Pitch Madness. The novel whose premise she tweeted is a form of fan fiction, and when Tegan Publishing invited her pitch, MissFisherFan received editing assistance from other *Miss Fisher* fans. Not only had she met those fans through an online fan community, they also knew how to edit a fictional work thanks to their past experience in beta reading. In fact, MissFisherFan even refers to them as “beta readers” rather than “editors.” MissFisherFan’s successful Pitch Madness experience demonstrates how sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices can inform one another and at times even work together to produce a single composition.

## COMMUNITY SPACES

While engaging in literacy practices with other members of their fan communities, the five study participants use several different digital platforms, including blogging websites, fan fiction archives, and collaboration applications. Because each platform has its own set of tools and features, each offers benefits and drawbacks as a site where communities can perform their literacy practices. At times, communities will leave one platform when it lacks the tools they need, and move their activities to a different platform better suited to the practices they wish to engage. Such practices may include conducting a private conversation between users,

collaborating to produce a composition, or publishing and promoting fan fiction. However, unintentional gatekeeping by the fan communities may also result from engaging these literacy practices.

The four digital platforms participants discussed in the most detail are the blogging websites LiveJournal and Tumblr, the business collaboration application Slack, and the fan fiction archive website An Archive of Our Own (AO3). Founded in 1999, LiveJournal is one of the oldest online blogging platforms still in use. While its presence in early days of Web 2.0<sup>28</sup> and its longevity mean that LiveJournal has been home to much participatory fan activity, the site has become less active with the emergence of newer digital platforms such as the image-based Tumblr. Slack's website describes it as "real-time messaging, archiving, and search for modern teams"; it combines synchronous and asynchronous messaging in a private, self-contained app, as opposed to a web-based environment like the other platforms described by participants. Lastly, AO3 is the only nonprofit platform discussed by the participants. The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) created AO3 as a "noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting site for transformative fanworks," and its popularity has increased due to features such as keyword tagging and an ad-free interface.

The most crucial community literacy practice for many fans is conversing privately with other group members. While email may suffice for some, others may not want to share their email addresses, or they may prefer faster, synchronous communication. When Kailey wanted to contact the author of a *Being Human/Thor* crossover fan fiction she enjoyed, as described in chapter two, she chose to use LiveJournal as her platform for communication. Although she

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<sup>28</sup> The term "Web 2.0," popularized by Tim O'Reilly, refers to the growth of the Internet to include social media and other user-generated content such as blogs and contemporary fan fiction archives (O'Reilly).

describes LiveJournal as “kind of a graveyard these days” for fan activities, Kailey notes that she saw more communication among fans there than she does on AO3, where she read the crossover story she liked, because AO3 lacks a tool for sending private messages. Therefore, Kailey used LiveJournal’s Inbox private message tool instead for contacting the author she admired, as well as for exchanging ideas with members of other fandoms. Kailey’s experience demonstrates how one platform’s lack of the features fans need to perform certain literacy practices—such as AO3 failing to provide a private messaging tool—will drive users to abandon it for another platform, or at the least will force them to spread their usage across multiple platforms, as Kailey does when she uses AO3 to read and post fan fiction but turns to LiveJournal for communicating with other fans.

While Kailey found a tool she needed on LiveJournal, the platform lacked a feature Lea wanted for her online fan activities, the means to add images easily to her posts and to share the images with other fans. As Lea describes it, LiveJournal is “not a very image-friendly medium,” so she moved her blog to Tumblr where posts tend to be image-heavy, often including animated gifs, memes, fan art, or photographs. Lea says, “There are things that I miss about LiveJournal, but by and large, I’ve been very happy with Tumblr.” Tumblr’s developers recently added a tool for private communication called “Messages,” which Lea feels has further increased the site’s usefulness for fan communities. According to Lea, Tumblr originally only supported two forms of private communication between users: “Asks” and “Fan Mails.” Asks allow viewers to communicate with blog owners but are limited to 500 characters. The now-defunct Fan Mail system allowed for longer messages, but according to Lea, Tumblr did not retain copies of sent Fan Mail so users could not refer back to what they had previously written. In contrast to the asynchronous Fan Mail system, the new Messages system which replaced it is synchronous and

saves a record of sent and received messages; thus fans may communicate privately in real time as well as refer back to their conversations later. Thus far, Lea has been satisfied with the new Messages system and feels that it has been “a big community-grower” for fandoms because of the “one-to-one” contact it fosters between users.

Both Kailey and Lea engage in the literacy practice of communicating privately with other fans, and both need online platforms which can support that practice. AO3 failed to do so and lost site traffic to LiveJournal when Kailey had to turn to another platform for her communication needs. In contrast, Tumblr not only drew Lea away from LiveJournal by offering the image support LiveJournal lacked, but also added the Messages tool to supplant the LiveJournal’s Inbox system and remove any need for Lea to return to LiveJournal. Kailey and Lea’s experiences show that community literacy practices drive fans to particular digital platforms, rather than the platforms dictating which practices the fans engage. When AO3 failed to provide her with a way to send private messages, Kailey did not give up on contacting the author she admired, or decide to contact her publicly; instead she turned to another platform. Likewise, instead of letting LiveJournal’s lack of support for images limit her blog posts to plain text, Lea moved to the more “image-friendly medium” of Tumblr. Savvy web developers, like those who run Tumblr, will monitor the practices of their userbases and continue to add and upgrade features to enable those practices. To do otherwise is to encourage users—fans and non-fans alike—to seek out other sites to fulfill their needs.

As described in the “Community Composition” section, some online communities engage as a group in literacy practices which produce texts with multiple authors. Like the practice of private communication, the participants’ various forms of group composition affect which digital platforms their communities use. While Lea originally used LiveJournal to participate in big

bangs because of its support for group composition, she ultimately migrated to Tumblr which offered better options for creating multimodal posts. In contrast, MissFisherFan found in Slack a single platform which supported all three of her group composition literacy practices: writing gift fics, beta reading, and competing in Pitch Madness.

While Lea was active on LiveJournal, she found its most useful feature to be what it calls “Communities.” LiveJournal’s site describes a Community as “basically a journal run by a member of LiveJournal for people with common interests” (“Community Center”) and “a journal where many users post entries about a similar topic” (“FAQ – Communities”). In other words, a Community functions as a group blog where multiple users can contribute posts and where those posts will reach all community members, likely a larger audience than that of an individual user’s blog. In the past, Lea participated in big bang challenges held on LiveJournal via the Communities feature, which allowed the challenges’ moderators to create group journals for all challenge participants to use. This group journal feature proved effective for two of the literacy practices engaged during big bangs: at the beginning of each challenge, writers could post their summaries to the group journal for artists to view without the extra step of moderators having to post for them, as would be necessary on a regular journal with a single owner; and at the end of each challenge, the teams of writers and artists could post their completed work to the group journal for all participants to see, therefore gaining more exposure than if they had only posted their compositions to their own individual blogs.

Although LiveJournal’s Communities provided Lea and her group with the literacy tools they needed for their big bangs, Tumblr once more produced equivalent features which, along with superior support for images, lured Lea and other fans away from LiveJournal. Tumblr allows users to add multiple “Members” to their blogs; once added, Members can make posts to

the blog just as Community members can post to their group journal. With Tumblr's multi-Member blogs fulfilling the equivalent functions of LiveJournal's Community journals, just as Messages fulfills the equivalent functions of Inbox, Lea and her entire big bang community had little incentive to continue using LiveJournal as a platform for their fan activities. Tumblr supports the same literacy practices as LiveJournal, with the added benefit of being image-friendly. More than any of the other study participants, Lea engages in multimodal fan literacy practices which include work with images as well as text, and she has found Tumblr to be the ideal platform for these practices.

One such practice Lea engages with other fans on Tumblr is the creation and sharing of "gif sets." The term "gif" comes from GIF, the acronym for the Graphics Interchange Format commonly used to encode images uploaded to the internet. One notable characteristic of the GIF format, which sets it apart from other image formats, is that it supports animation ("GIF"). Because an animated GIF file is usually smaller in size and more widely supported than any movie file format, fans often convert short film clips of their favorite movie or television scenes into gifs, then share the gifs online. Since Tumblr allows users to include up to ten images in a single blog entry, "gif sets" in which a user will post a series of several animated gifs in one entry have become popular. Some fans simply post gifs of the scene without altering it in any way, but others manipulate and alter their gifs as a form of multimodal fan fiction by adding subtitles or splicing gifs from different scenes or even different films to give the appearance of a seamless visual story. For example, when a fan wanted to create a gif set recreating one of my fan fiction stories about two *Star Wars* characters, she combined gifs of the actors from other films along with text from my story into a single Tumblr post. The resulting composition was a multi-authored, multimodal fan fiction which appeared to be captured video and textual

transcription of an actual film.<sup>29</sup> Lea enjoys creating gif sets herself, as well as “reblogging” others’ gif sets. To “reblog” a Tumblr post is to share it on one’s own blog with credit to the original author, much the same way as posts may be “retweeted” on Twitter or “shared” on Facebook. Like promoting others’ fan fiction as further explored in the next section of this chapter, reblogging gif sets is a community literacy practice in which fans expose compositions they enjoy to a wider audience. While often, a community’s literacy practices will determine which platform the community uses, in this case, the platform may have generated the practice. Gif sets may not have come into being without Tumblr and its features which enable and encourage users to post and reblog large groups of images with ease.

While Tumblr is the platform best-suited for Lea’s fan literacy practices, it proved insufficient for the needs of MissFisherFan’s *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* community. MissFisherFan comments with a laugh, “I try to stay off Tumblr because I hate it.” Seeking an alternative, MissFisherFan herself introduced her group to Slack, and although Slack’s target audience is business professionals (“Slack”), MissFisherFan says her fan community “took to it like ducks to water.” In fact, the community has taken an app intended for performing the sanctioned literacy practices of business collaboration and instead uses it for performing the unsanctioned literacy practices of their fandom. The community now interacts most often via Slack, and they use it as their platform for engaging in the three forms of collaborative composition described above: gift fics, beta reading, and Pitch Madness. MissFisherFan and her

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<sup>29</sup> As the National Council of Teachers of English declared in their “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies,” “Integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond illustration or decoration. . . . Each [mode of communication] affects the nature of the context of the other and the overall rhetorical impact of the communication event itself” (17). Drawing upon the NCTE’s recognition of multimodality’s ability to “enhance” and “transform” works which include text, I consider gif sets and other multimodal fan compositions to be themselves forms of fan fiction.

group found Slack useful because it allows them to organize, archive, and search transcripts of their group chats and the other products they compose with Slack's suite of tools, such as cloud storage, private messaging, and voice and video calling; in fact, MissFisherFan specifically identified Tumblr as "not the right platform" for the group because of its lack of options for organizing and searching past posts. Slack also appeals to MissFisherFan because it offers a level of privacy which most other platforms lack. Users must receive an invitation from a community administrator before they can join the *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* fan community, and only members can view or contribute to community content, whereas any internet user can view posts made on Tumblr. However, Slack's options for setting privacy filters within groups have proved to be its most useful feature for the community's group literacy practices. Within a group, members can set up areas with restricted access, called "channels," where users may post messages which cannot be read by anyone not invited into the channel. MissFisherFan's community uses this feature when composing gift fics, as she explains: "[W]e'll have a separate private channel when we're planning somebody's birthday fic, and people will say, 'Okay, where are we, how are we working this, and who wants to take which pairing? Oh I have an idea for this.' But that way, it's kept away from the birthday girl." By creating a private channel to which the recipient of the gift fic is not invited, the other group members can compose the gift fic together while keeping it a surprise from the recipient and maintaining access to the group's archives and Slack's other tools. MissFisherFan also describes how she created a private channel for herself and the four group members who beta read her Pitch Madness entry so that they could communicate about her revisions apart from the rest of the community.

Although Tumblr suited Lea's needs for collaborative composition, it failed to support the very different needs of MissFisherFan and her group. The audience for Lea's group literacy

practices is wider than MissFisherFan's; while MissFisherFan composes within a tight-knit, established community of fans, Lea participates in big bangs and gif sets among a larger, disparate fandom whose members do not communicate with each other one-on-one as do members of the *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* group. Therefore, Tumblr is preferable for Lea's purposes not only because of its support for image-based posts, but also because it allows her to share her compositions with a wide audience. In contrast, MissFisherFan's group composition practices thrive upon privacy: gift fics must be kept secret from their recipients, and fan fiction is beta read in its draft stage. Slack serves these purposes better than Tumblr since it keeps the entire community private from the internet at large, as well as allows the group to set up its own internal divisions as needed. Of course, most fan fiction authors do want to make their finished works public, and in the next section, I discuss how MissFisherFan and her group have turned back to Tumblr in order to promote their fan fiction.

Despite her dislike of Tumblr and its unsuitability for most of her group literacy practices, MissFisherFan and her community have used the platform as a way to promote their fan fiction. The community members post most of their stories on An Archive of Our Own, described below, but together they created a series of nine Tumblr posts titled "Miss Fisher's Bookshelf" in order both to direct readers to their work on AO3 and to create an organized reference to the extant *Miss Fisher* fan fiction. A different member of the fan community composed each post in the Bookshelf series, which lists links to a number of stories organized by category or genre such as alternate universe, humor, or character studies to help readers find stories which suit their interests. While MissFisherFan composed and blogged one of the nine Bookshelf posts on her Tumblr blog, she also reblogged the other posts in the series from their original authors.

In the first post of “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf,” fan community member Omgimsarahtoo<sup>30</sup> gives the group’s reasons for making its series of posts:

A group of us fic writers and readers were talking about how much we love the [*Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*] fanfic in all its guises. We worried, though, that the newer fans (and some of ones [sic] who’ve been here a while) might not know where to start, now that there is so much to choose from. So we decided (there may have been alcohol involved) that we could put together some recommendations for people who might be looking for fic but don’t know where to start. (“Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf, part 1”)

Omgimsarahtoo explains that the community wanted to compile a guide for *Miss Fisher* fans who were just beginning to explore fan fiction, whether they were new to *Miss Fisher* in general or were already fans of the series but had not yet read or written fan fiction for it. According to this introductory post, “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf” offers recommendations for where the community feels these newcomers should begin reading out of the vast number of stories now available. Omgimsarahtoo’s discourse takes a supportive, parental tone towards the new fan fiction readers when she writes that the community “worried” about them being lost amidst the available stories. She does not explain what prompted this worry or what consequences the community feared should the new fans “not know where to start”—a phrase she repeats and which also conveys the fan community’s superiority over the inexperienced newcomers. The phrase “there may have been alcohol involved” somewhat dispels the parental tone and, while likely meant as an attempt at humor, undermines the ethos of the Bookshelf posts by suggesting that the community did not curate the lists of recommended fan fiction with particular care. Nevertheless, the “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf” series also acts as a form of gatekeeping, because it highlights only the fraction of the *Miss Fisher* fan fiction corpus, and a particular fan community chose the works the series features. While “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf” performs a service both

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<sup>30</sup> This Tumblr user is not MissFisherFan. In order to protect MissFisherFan’s identity, I do not discuss her post in the “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf” series since it is publicly viewable online as of this writing.

for new fans and for those looking for different material to read, it also serves the community which authored it by promoting the works the community prefers.

While Omgimsarahtoo addresses the exigence for “Miss Fisher’s Bookshelf,” she does not explain why the community chose to make the series of posts on Tumblr. Although MissFisherFan has expressed her personal “hatred” of Tumblr, other community members at least found it to be a worthwhile platform for the Bookshelf series. It allows them to reach a wider audience of *Miss Fisher* fans who might not see their recommendations on AO3 or who might not normally visit AO3 at all. In addition, as Omgimsarahtoo implies, some fans may feel overwhelmed when browsing the *Miss Fisher* category on AO3, which contained over 1,600 stories as of this writing. The visual difference between that crowded AO3 page and the organized Tumblr posts listing stories and summaries could lead a fan to pursue reading some *Miss Fisher* fiction instead of avoiding it. Finally, the ease of sharing and reblogging posts on Tumblr, in comparison to other blogging sites such as LiveJournal, makes it a logical choice for a series of entries intended to be spread among a fandom.

While MissFisherFan and other study participants use digital platforms such as Tumblr to promote their fan fiction, all five use An Archive of Our Own to publish their work, although most have also published their stories on other sites as well. When MMPRfan began sharing her fan fiction online, she published only on FanFiction.net at first but then branched out to use AO3 as well. Similarly, Kailey began her career as a fan fiction author posting her work only on LiveJournal then later moved it all to AO3, where she also does all of her fan fiction reading. Kailey identifies three reasons why she prefers AO3 to LiveJournal and other platforms for both reading others’ stories and promoting her own: the site is “pretty straightforward,” “it seems to have the best fic,” and “the better writers seem to congregate” there. The latter two factors could

be a function of the first; a well-designed and easy-to-use site is likely to draw good writers who as a matter of course will publish the best stories. Other participants choose to “cross-post” their fan fiction, which means to publish the same story on more than one platform. In most cases, cross-posting results in greater exposure and a wider audience for an author’s work, since many readers only patronize one site and will not see works posted elsewhere. Effie cross-posts her *Castle* fan fiction on FanFiction.net and AO3, and while she gets more comments from readers on FanFiction.net, she prefers AO3 because of the options it offers authors and readers. In addition, Effie says, “You can also post other [fan] works there, like videos or images and stuff,” whereas FanFiction.net only allows textual fan fiction. Like Tumblr, AO3 has gained popularity due to its support for multimodal works, although it has not fully integrated them as Tumblr has, and the vast majority of content on AO3 is still text only.

When Effie writes single-chapter short stories known as “one-shots” for fandoms other than *Castle*, she posts them solely on AO3 because of another feature: the ability for users to “orphan” their fan fiction. AO3’s orphaning process allows a member to disassociate works from her account, so that they do not appear in her list of published works or link back to her profile. When a user orphans a work, she also has the option of removing her user name from it entirely so that readers have no way of tracing the work back to her. A user might choose to orphan a work if she is no longer interested in its fandom, or if it contains content she no longer wants associated with her online identity. AO3 encourages users to consider orphaning their unwanted works rather than deleting them entirely because part of the mission of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), the nonprofit organization which maintains AO3, is to “preserve the history of fanworks” which includes preserving as much existing fan fiction as possible (“Archive of Our Own – Organization for Transformative Works”). In

alignment with this mission, orphaned works remain accessible to fans even when the author disassociates herself from them, including if she deletes her AO3 account entirely. While the above describes the intended purpose of the orphaning process, Effie uses it not to remove associations with her older fan fiction, but to post new fan fiction anonymously. She describes her one-shots as ventures into fandoms she does not intend to pursue further, so she prefers to keep them separate from her identity in the *Castle* fandom. As explained in chapter two, Effie previously abandoned her online persona when she stopped writing *Star Trek* fan fiction, and she created a new persona for her participation in the *Castle* fandom. By keeping her non-*Castle* fan fiction anonymous, Effie avoids the need to create yet another identity to protect her *Castle* persona.

As fan communities engage in the group literacy practices described throughout this section, their practices at times lead to inadvertent gatekeeping, where the communities take on roles of authority which can influence their members' ability to produce fan fiction and to participate within the community. By acting as gatekeepers who determine which fans may join the community and engage in group literacy practices, the members who administer or moderate the communities essentially become literacy sponsors. While they do support and enable their members' creation of fan fiction, particularly with the other group literacy practices described above, the communities also control who can become a member. If a group has the power to allow a member to join, it also has the power to remove her if she does not conform to the group norms in her behavior or literacy practices. Even though no participant described a fan community excluding a member based upon what she wrote, the knowledge that such exclusion is possible may influence what a member feels she can and cannot write. Such gatekeeping issues arise in Lea's discussion of LiveJournal's Communities feature, when she describes

participating in Communities where “you, as a user, would actually be part of, literally, the Community.” Lea portrays this aspect of Communities as positive; Communities not only give fans a wider audience for their writing than if they posted just to their individual blogs, but they can also grant a sense of membership into a fandom. A fan may feel that joining and participating in a Community gives her proof that she truly belongs to a collective larger than herself. Yet other individual users administer the Communities, which includes accepting, denying, or revoking the membership of others, as well as establishing Community rules which may delineate what content other members are allowed to post.

Because users cannot so much as request membership to a Slack team without an invitation, teams are even more susceptible to gatekeeping than are LiveJournal Communities. When asked how an interested fan of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* could join her community’s Slack team, MissFisherFan explains that the fan must send her email address to a team administrator, and the administrator would then email the fan an invitation to join. MissFisherFan adds, “We don’t vet membership, but it’s not one of those things where just anybody can join.” Even if the team administrators do not evaluate prospective members before issuing invitations, fans still have to ask to be invited, which may make them feel they are offering themselves up for judgment regardless. As in LiveJournal’s communities, individual users administer Slack’s teams. In the case of the *Miss Fisher* team, MissFisherFan is not only an administrator with the ability to add or remove other members from the team; as the user who created the team and introduced the rest of the community to Slack, she holds the role of “Primary Owner” of the team as well. A Slack team’s Primary Owner “control[s] the highest-level security and administrative settings” for the team as well as has the power to delete the entire team, including its archived group compositions, from the Slack platform (“Roles and

Permissions in Slack”). Thus, while all the *Miss Fisher* team administrators serve as gatekeepers who can allow in or exclude members, MissFisherFan carries the most authority. She functions as a literacy sponsor for her fan community, enabling them to engage in their group literacy practices but also maintaining control over their ability to do so. Even if MissFisherFan would never exercise this control by removing members from the team or deleting the team altogether, her power to do so sets her apart.

In the cases of both Lea’s LiveJournal Community and MissFisherFan’s Slack team, the platform’s features force groups into moderating their memberships. Both LiveJournal and Slack require users to take on administration roles within their groups; Slack goes a step farther by making administrators send invitations to new members before they can join a team. Yet as shown above, fan communities tend to seek out digital platforms which support their literacy practices. If a platform ceases to support those practices, or if the community finds a more suitable virtual space, they will relocate. Therefore, even if group members act as gatekeepers only because their platform requires it, community behavior in other cases indicates that the group would move to a different platform if gatekeeping bothered them. Lea’s big bang Community ultimately relocated to Tumblr for its support of multimodal works, not to avoid gatekeeping. Likewise, while the invitation-only process for joining a Slack team is a feature of the app and not a decision of the *Miss Fisher* community, by choosing to conduct most of their group activities and literacy practices on Slack rather than seek out a more open platform, MissFisherFan and the rest of her community endorse being “not one of those things where just anybody can join.” Gatekeeping via fan communities’ digital platforms may be unintentional, and many groups might even be unconscious of their ability to control other fans’ access to the

fandom and its literacy practices; yet the practice could alienate other fans and potential group members, as well as discourage them from participating in fan-based literacy practices.

## COMMUNITY DISSOLUTION

Two fan communities discussed above died out on specific platforms when those spaces no longer met the needs of the communities' literacy practices: Lea's big bang LiveJournal Community, and MissFisherFan's Tumblr group. Yet the communities did not actually disband, for Lea's group simply moved to Tumblr, and MissFisherFan's group relocated to Slack. In both cases, the core purpose of the communities—the literacy practices they engaged—remained. Lea's community continued to hold their big bang challenges on Tumblr, and MissFisherFan's team continued to compose gift fics, beta read, chat, and conduct their other activities on Slack. In addition, MissFisherFan's team members retained their bond because they remained interested in *Miss Fisher*.<sup>31</sup> Developments in technology which better support fan communities' literacy practices may cause the groups to relocate, but as long as members maintain enthusiasm for their fandoms and practices, the communities will likely survive.

Effie provides the contrasting example of a formerly vibrant online fan community, a private message board for authors of *Star Trek* fan fiction, which disbanded due to the loss of this critical enthusiasm. She joined the board in 2009, when the film *Star Trek* was released to “reboot” the series and when Effie began writing *Star Trek* fan fiction. At one time, Effie received “a lot of feedback” on her writing from other members of the message board, and the community discussed a variety of topics related to the extensive *Star Trek* media universe. Now, however, Effie says, “[I]t's dead. There's basically nobody really posting there anymore because

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<sup>31</sup> During her interview, Lea did not mention the fandom about which her big bang community wrote.

they've all gone to different fandoms or just different venues.” Later in her interview, Effie adds as additional reasons for members’ departure, “people started kind of wandering off into different things. . . or people had to leave for other reasons.” Effie has attempted to maintain contact with the community, describing herself as still a part of it and one of the few users who “check in once in a while” to update the group on what they are currently writing. She relates one instance where she tried to engage other community members in her current fan fiction without much success: “At one point I posted and said, ‘I’m writing some *Castle* stuff. Is anybody interested?’ And I kind of got this ‘meh’ kind of response.” Although Effie concludes her statement with a laugh, she also conveys some disappointment that no one in the community where she once received “a lot of feedback” expressed interest in her current writing.

Effie’s experience shows that shared interest in both fandom *and* literacy practices engaged as a group are key for a community’s survival. Members of the *Star Trek* message board may have had their interest in the fandom piqued by the reboot film, as Effie did; then when the hype surrounding the film and its sequels died down, the members lost interest and moved on to other fandoms. While they continued to write fan fiction, since it was not composed as a group or about a fandom they all enjoyed, it could not hold the group’s interest. According to Effie, those who did continue to write about *Star Trek*, and so might still have a fandom in common, had gone to “different venues.” Therefore, no common practices or interests remained to hold the group together. In contrast, MissFisherFan’s Slack team shares enough rapport to carry it through literacy practices that are not directly related to *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*, such as helping MissFisherFan edit her novel for Pitch Madness. She and her beta readers worked as a group through the editing process, which reinforced their community social bonds, and they knew Pitch Madness was an emergency situation after which they would

return to talking and writing about their shared fandom. When the group members share the *Miss Fisher* fan fiction they composed individually, the rest of the group enjoys reading it because it focuses on the fandom they all know and appreciate.

In “Interactive Audiences?”, Henry Jenkins applies culture and media scholar Pierre Lévy’s theory of collective intelligence and knowledge spaces to online fan communities, describing them as

voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time. Yet, they are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge. (*Convergence Culture* 137)

As Jenkins notes, fan communities are “temporary,” and members come and go “as their interests and needs change.” Effie’s experiences in her *Star Trek* message board illustrate Jenkins’s point; when members were no longer interested in *Star Trek*, they drifted away, and the temporary community dissolved. In contrast, the *Miss Fisher* Slack team maintains the fundamentals required to be a vigorous fan community as defined by Jenkins: “the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge.” Because members of that community still share interest in the same fandom *and* continue engaging in their group literacy practices, the *Miss Team* Slack team has survived.

After this chapter’s exploration of the group literacy practices the participants engage with their online fan communities, in the next chapter I explore the unsanctioned fan literacy practices the participants adapt for use in their professional writing, and the sanctioned literacy practices they adapt for their fan writing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

While existing research has explored the overlap between sanctioned<sup>32</sup> writing composed for school and unsanctioned writing composed throughout day-to-day life, few researchers have investigated the overlap between writing composed for and outside of work. Thus, my final research question asks, “Which, if any, literacy practices do the participants use in both fan and professional writing?” My own identity as a fan permeates almost every aspect of my life, including my career, and I often use the sanctioned literacy practices I have gained as an educator and researcher while composing fan fiction. The reverse is also true: I use skills I honed writing fan fiction while writing for work and teaching my own students how to write more effectively. As I asked each study participant if fan fiction has influenced what she does at her job and vice versa,<sup>33</sup> I discovered that my situation is far from unique. Using methodology based on a combination of narrative and discourse analysis, this chapter describes how all five of my participants blend their sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices to compose their professional writing, their fan writing, or both. The participants also discuss to what extent they discuss their fan practices with their professional colleagues.

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<sup>32</sup> As I explain in chapter one, I use the term “sanctioned” to refer to those practices which the participants employ in their jobs and/or education. In contrast, I use the term “unsanctioned” to refer to practices the participants employ when writing fan fiction, participating in their online communities, and otherwise composing texts outside of their work or schooling.

<sup>33</sup> My specific questions were as follows: “Has your reading and writing fan fiction influenced what you do at your job? If so, what kind of response did you get from your supervisors and/or coworkers? Did they realize fan fiction had influenced your work? Do you ever use what you’ve learned or done for your job when you read or write fan fiction?”

Only Effie denied that her participation in fan fiction had any influence on her professional work. She answered the question “Has your reading and writing fan fiction influenced what you do at your job?” with a flat “No.” The other four study participants all discussed at least some ways in which their fan literacy practices affected their jobs. The two women who work in education, MMPRfan and Kailey, both described assignments they developed and taught related to fan fiction, while the other two participants, MissFisherFan and Lea, explained how their fan practices helped them as writers in their professions as novelist and editor, respectively.

MMPRfan and Kailey both teach college-level English courses, and each describes a similar project she assigns when teaching literature. MMPRfan calls her assignment a “reinterpretation project,” while Kailey refers to hers as “creative interpretation,” but both projects have the same goal: students create adaptations of literature they have read in the course. MMPRfan describes a successful project as “taking a piece of literature and responding creatively to it in some way that adapts it, either commenting on the original source or commenting on their own culture and surroundings.” She explains that she engages in this type of adaptation when she responds to texts by writing fan fiction. However, MMPRfan allows students to craft their adaptations and responses using other media besides text alone. In “Remix Literacy and Fan Compositions,” Kyle D. Stedman advocates for this type of “practice-centered” assignment in which students use “playful experimentation” to create mixed-media or “remixed” compositions (107). While some students do write fan fiction to fulfill MMPRfan’s assignment, others have drawn fan art, composed comics, or created even more ambitious reinterpretations of their chosen literary works. For example, projects based upon Dante’s

*Inferno* have included a Monopoly game board and an advertising pamphlet depicting Dante's Hell as "a rehabilitation clinic instead of a place for punishment."

MMPRfan's assignment engages students' critical thinking skills as it asks them to perform rhetorical work upon a text. Although they compose a creative response, students must at the same time take into account the original text's rhetorical situation. They may engage the situation under which the text was composed, or they can explore how the text functions as they read it in light of their own culture. For instance, the pamphlet based upon the *Inferno* engages the concept of "rehab" which has entered popular culture via television shows such as A&E's *Intervention* and the publicizing of celebrities' experiences in, or refusal of, rehabilitation clinics. The project forces students to reconsider the content of the *Inferno*, composed more than five centuries ago, in order to adapt it to the modern construct of rehab. Yet students must also think critically about the concept of rehab and its cultural functions in order to reimagine it as consisting of Dante's circles of Hell.

MMPRfan says that to teach "adaptation" in preparation for the reinterpretation project, she "teach[es] literature like it's something that the students can respond to in the same way that I respond to different things with fan fiction." As the reinterpretations of the *Inferno* show, this teaching method includes approaching texts with flexibility and an open mind, which allows the student to consider literature from their own cultural stances, not just that of the authors. MMPRfan's method for teaching adaptation also allows the students to be flexible in their choices of media, rather than limiting them to compose their projects with written words only. Fans often reimagine rhetorical situations and compose with mixed media, and MMPRfan performs these unsanctioned literacy practices herself when she writes fan fiction. When she teaches these practices and assigns a project in which her students must apply them, MMPRfan's

*unsanctioned* literacy practices become *sanctioned* literacy practices for her students. I discuss the potentially problematic implications of this phenomenon below.

Like MMPRfan, Kailey also teaches an interpretation project in her literature classes, based upon on an assignment developed by a colleague. Kailey first taught the project as a low-stakes assignment in which she asks students to compose fan fiction for a literary work covered in class, although she does not use the phrase “fan fiction” in the assignment instructions. She describes a typical prompt for the assignment as follows: “Pick something we read this semester, and write a scene from a different character’s point of view, write an alternate ending, write beyond the ending, or write what happened off camera, so to speak.” Students also have to include a rationale for their expansion, explaining which features of the text led to the composition choices they made. As with MMPRfan’s project, Kailey’s assignment requires students to think critically about a text in order to adapt it. If students are to imagine a different point of view or alternate version of the text, they must understand it in more depth than a single reading. Such engagement is usually necessary for composing well-written fan fiction as well, and in fact, Kailey’s prompt covers many common approaches of fan authors. They often rewrite existing texts from different points of view, compose alternate endings when they are dissatisfied with how a text ended, write sequels to or extensions of texts, and compose “missing scenes” to explore what might be occurring elsewhere during the events of the text. Yet the rationale component of Kailey’s assignment adds another layer of analysis absent from most unsanctioned fan fiction. Kailey requires students to write a paper explaining what elements of the text led them to their compositions’ content and rhetorical choices. This portion of the

assignment forces students to reflect upon why they reinterpreted the text as they did, something not always considered by fan authors.<sup>34</sup>

Eventually, Kailey expanded the creative interpretation into a larger assignment in which students “give presentations of creative work inspired by [their selected] text.” With this revised assignment, the “creative work” may include media other than text-based extensions of the existing work, although Kailey still requires that students compose a paper describing the rationale for their choices. This version of the assignment resembles MMPRfan’s reinterpretation project, and some of Kailey’s students have adapted their texts in ambitious ways. For example, Kailey’s favorite project was an interpretive dance created and performed by a student majoring in dance: “They [sic] made a video and created voiceovers of a couple passages from the text interspersed with their music, and then they wrote a paper about their choreography and how it’s related to the characters. It was really, really smart and really cool.” Kailey describes the value of such an assignment to the class’s learning experience in her courses:

Everybody goes back and looks at what is in the original, what’s in the canon that we’re going to play with in some way. Especially for students who are non-English majors, which is mostly what I teach, I think it’s a nice way to get them to play and relax. I think they do better work because they relax and have fun, and it lets them be creative and think in ways that they might not if they were just writing an essay.

Kailey draws connections between this assignment and what “fan creation in general is doing, a lot of really interesting interpretive work.” Kailey conveys her enthusiasm about the interpretation assignment with the language she uses in discussing it; she uses positive adjectives such as “creative,” “smart,” and “cool,” and amplifies them with the adverb “really.” She also

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<sup>34</sup> Some fan fiction authors do reflect upon their composition choices. For instance, the author’s notes (A/Ns) sometimes included at the beginning or ending of stories may address why the author wrote the story or the reasoning behind her choices to include certain elements. However, A/Ns rarely, if ever, have the length or depth of reflection required for an academic paper.

emphasizes the inventive aspects of the assignment, the “interesting interpretive work” which parallels fan practices: she wants her students to “play,” “relax,” and “have fun” while revisiting the original text. As Kailey points out, fans perform similar practices when they reinterpret texts to create fiction, art, and fan compositions. Kailey uses the verbs “play” and “relax” twice in three sentences, which underscores her desire that students enjoy completing the assignment. Students’ enjoyment matters because Kailey believes they explore new cognitive pathways and create stronger compositions when she gives them room to play with the assigned texts, rather than holding them to the narrow guidelines of a standard essay assignment. Kailey expresses particular concern for students not majoring in English, who may have more difficulty composing textual analysis essays than English majors. The incorporation of multimedia can make the assignment more accessible to non-English majors, as well as to students who learn best via methods other than reading and writing text.

Both MMPRfan and Kailey see similarities between what they do as fans, and what they ask their students to do for the interpretation assignments. MMPRfan says she encourages students to respond to literature the way she responds to texts with fan fiction; Kailey wants her students to perform the same interpretive work that fans do. Both participants adapt their unsanctioned, fan-based literacy practices into sanctioned, professional literacy practices. Yet as instructors of record, they also serve as authority figures and literacy sponsors<sup>35</sup> for the students they teach, and thus, their students are compelled to adapt unsanctioned practices into sanctioned

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<sup>35</sup> A literacy sponsor is an agent who enables or encourages an individual to write, when the individual otherwise would not write, or would be unable to write. However, at the same time, the sponsor may also maintain control over *what* the individual writes, as well as benefit in some way from the individual’s work (Brandt 556). Examples of literacy sponsors include both individuals and institutions such as teachers, tutors, librarians, literary agents, editors, schools, and publishers.

practices as well. If they do not engage the practices, the students will be unable to complete the interpretation assignment and thus will receive failing a failing grade. While fan-based literacy practices can still offer students benefits, such as fresh ways of approaching and reinterpreting texts, students may not have as much to gain as instructors, who have far more agency and flexibility in the adaptation of their literacy practices. Additionally, without careful planning by the instructor, an interpretation assignment could favor students who already engage in fan practices. A student who has been reading and writing fan fiction since adolescence, like myself and most of my study participants, might already know what the instructor expects of the assignment, whereas a student who is unfamiliar with fan works will likely have to learn their characteristics before beginning to compose her project. Far from arguing that instructors should avoid assignments like MMRfan and Kailey's interpretation projects, I agree with both participants that fan literacy practices can offer students useful methods of exploring academic texts. However, the instructor who wishes to incorporate an interpretation assignment into her curriculum should make sure she devotes enough time to teaching the assignment so that all students gain the literacy skills necessary to complete it.<sup>36</sup> In addition, she must resist the temptation to interact more with students who show excitement about the assignment and about fandom in general. Further research may offer best practices to craft interpretation assignments which will benefit both students and instructors.

Besides the study participants who work in education, the two participants in the publishing industry also discussed ways in which they adapted their unsanctioned, fan-based literacy practices for their professional work. As described in chapter three, MissFisherFan

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<sup>36</sup> In chapter five, I describe some similar difficulties I had when I taught a fan fiction-based writing assignment.

participated in a “Pitch Madness” contest on Twitter, during which a publisher invited her to pitch the first in her series of novels retelling Jane Austen’s works in a modern day setting. Because MissFisherFan counts her career as a novelist as part of her professional life, along with her job as an instructional technology librarian, Pitch Madness illustrates how her fan literacy practices have influenced her professionally. Four members of the *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries* fan community helped MissFisherFan revise her novel in just one and one-half days so that she could submit it to the publisher on time. MissFisherFan had a network of ready editors only because of her participation in the *Miss Fisher* fandom. In addition, their speed and efficiency at editing—what MissFisherFan calls “beta reading”—comes from their experience as fan writers. MissFisherFan even chooses fan fiction as the genre for her professional writing, although Austen rewrites have become lucrative in recent years with the *New York Times* best seller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* spawning other novels with titles such as *Murder at Mansfield Park* and *Emma and the Vampires*.

While MissFisherFan writes professionally, Lea works on the other end of the publishing industry, as a production editor. When I asked Lea if her experience with fan fiction has ever influenced her work, she replied, “Definitely, in a huge way.” Lea explains that, “Starting out in the fan fiction community, it did a lot to sort of demystify the idea of authors for me, in that it became obvious to me from a pretty young age that you were allowed to question the way that people wrote their stories.” This understanding of authorship as unsacred, stemming from her involvement with fan fiction, helps Lea in her career because she draws parallels between how she reads fan fiction as a fan, and how she reads authors’ texts as an editor. She describes that when she reads fan fiction, “even in good fics and what have you,” she notices small editing mishaps such as typos as well as larger-order concerns such as plot flaws and the usage of “that

same dialogue tag fifteen times in a row.” According to Lea, paying attention to such details of written work and “fixing people’s writing” is “literally all I do at work all day long.” She also explains the experience gained from reading fan fiction as opposed to only published texts: “If you’re not in a fan fiction community, the only writing you really see is published writing, and it’s already been polished by people like me who do it for a living, so you’re never really seeing it in its raw form. Whereas fan fiction, even beta-read fan fiction, is basically always going to be in its raw form.” When she refers to writing in its “raw form,” Lea means writing that has not been revised with the guidance of a professional editor, such as herself.

Lea’s long involvement with fan writing has shaped her perception of the rhetorical concepts of author, text, and audience; she reads as a fan the same way she reads as a professional editor. By the time she began her career as an editor, Lea had become accustomed to reading as an empowered audience who consumes texts in what she calls their “raw forms.” Instead of seeing author and text as infallible, Lea believes that the audience can question both. Lea also articulates that fan fiction can affect both how an audience receives a text, and what an audience perceives the final, finished form of a text to be like. She uses a gemological analogy to differentiate between two types of finished texts: professionally edited and beta read. According to her, published writing has been “polished” by professional editors like herself, while beta-read fan fiction remains in a “raw” form. Whether a fan author has edited her work herself or employed a beta reader, fan fiction will never reach the level of refinement attained by professionally published writing. Although Lea reads and writes fan fiction herself, her language indicates that she values professional writing more, not because published authors differ from fan authors but because published work has been edited by professionals like herself. She describes

her job as “fixing” the writing of others, implying that until an editor corrects it, an author’s writing remains broken or imperfect.

I asked each participant if she also used skills gained from her job while reading or writing fan fiction. MMPRfan did not cite any specific overlap in her skill usage and says only, “I guess it’s all writing. . . . I’ve probably gotten better at writing fan fiction because I write for a living, but it’s sort of hard to tell.” Other participants, however, recognized specific ways in which they used sanctioned literacy practices from their jobs while reading and writing as fans. For example, the copy-editing skills Lea learned in her profession assist her in revising her fan fiction. She offers the example of unintentional repetition, which she notices in both professional and fan writing:

[At work] I’m being given these challenges of fixing other people’s faulty writing, and then I’m able to apply it to my own writing equally, which has been really satisfying for me. Something that I catch a lot in other people’s writing is when they use the same sort of verb phrase or the same descriptor a bunch of times in a row. At my job, we call them “echoes,” so you’ll just query for the author, “Fix this echo.” It gets really annoying, and writers don’t realize that they do it because you sort of internalize the concept of the scene or the way that someone’s speaking. [ . . . ] And so in my own writing now, I’ve gotten a lot better at catching it because I sort of, I think, have internalized that instinct of noticing those patterns. . . something that never would have occurred to me if I didn’t spend my whole time fixing it for other people.

As in her above discussion of fan fiction’s influence on her work, Lea uses language implying that an author’s writing remains broken or imperfect until edited by a professional. Her job is “*fixing* other people’s *faulty* writing” (emphasis added), which she sees as a “challenge” that consumes the “whole time” she spends at her job. However, when Lea describes using those same skills on her own work, she uses less pejorative language to describe both her writing process and the texts she produces: she “catches” echoes and “appl[ies]” edits rather than “fixing” her own writing, which she does not label as “faulty.” Lea also differentiates between her self-image and her view of other writers by how she uses the word “internalize.” While other writers internalize their perception of a scene and so become desensitized to repetition, Lea

internalizes an awareness of echoes and thus avoids making the same errors. Lea never states so overtly, yet her language implies that because she herself is a professional editor, her writing does not need editing by a third party. Lea's profession also leads her to awareness of differences between how authors and audiences may view the same piece of writing. While writers "don't realize" that they echo words, the audience finds repetition "really annoying."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Lea acknowledges the reasons why authors fall into this pattern of error. She uses the universal "you" to convey that many authors, herself included, internalize elements of their stories, and she admits that she does the same, although unlike other authors who are not professional editors, she notices and corrects the error without the help of a beta reader.

Because MissFisherFan works as a law librarian and writes fan fiction for a television show focusing on crime, one might assume she experiences more overlap than most between her professional and fan writing. However, when I asked MissFisherFan if she applies the sanctioned literacy practices she uses at her job when reading or writing fan fiction, she replies, "Not as frequently as you might think. This group that I hang with [online] is super smart, and a lot of them have already delved into these historical Australian [legal] arcana, and international legal research is not really my gig." Thus, despite both her career and fandom's relationships to the law, the fact that *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* is set in Australian during the 1920s places it outside of MissFisherFan's area of expertise. While she does add, "Certainly my specific skills in legal research have come into play at times," for the most part, other members of her online community have already performed the research necessary to compose accurate *Miss Fisher* stories. MissFisherFan's experiences with her community's research raise two interesting

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<sup>37</sup> However, Lea's job as an editor may also make her hyper-aware of errors that a typical audience for fan fiction would not notice.

points. First, the other group members have performed legal research on par with what MissFisherFan does professionally, not for their jobs but just so they can compose historically accurate fan fiction. Their unsanctioned literacy practices may even surpass in difficulty MissFisherFan's similar, sanctioned literacy practices. Second, the group members are willing to share their research with the rest of the community, as MissFisherFan seems willing to share her own "specific skills in legal research" used at her job. The strength of the *Miss Fisher* online community lies in its members' readiness to pool their resources and help one another compose the best fan works possible, rather than compete to produce better stories than other members.

Kailey considers her work for her doctoral degree to have been her job over the past few years, and she believes it has contributed to her skill set of fan literacy practices. After spending three years writing her dissertation, she notices that her fan fiction is now "longer and more complex" than before. Her successful completion of the dissertation helped her realize that she is capable of writing long, complicated documents, which "has allowed me to imagine my way into a more complex fictional storyline. At this point, [my fan fiction] is actually quite a bit longer than my dissertation." Before her dissertation work, Kailey says, she mostly wrote fan fiction in the form of vignettes or short stories. Her longest work before her dissertation was seven chapters and approximately 16,000 words, while her current fan fiction in progress was twenty-seven chapters and 116,000 words at the time of her interview. While Lea feels like her sanctioned literacy practices have made her a better editor more attuned to the nuances of good prose, Kailey's professional writing has strengthened her ability to write *more*. Her word choice indicates that she places equal importance on the length and complexity of her stories; she mentions the words "longer" and "more complex" twice and notes that her fan fiction has improved in both aspects since she wrote her dissertation. Kailey uses statistics to support this

claim, the only one of my participants to take the time during her interview to look up and report to me the chapter and word counts of her stories. The fact that she wants to substantiate her argument with verifiable data shows how important Kailey's development as an author is to her. Kailey also points out that her story currently in progress is already longer than her completed dissertation, suggesting that she takes more pride in her fiction than in her academic writing. Kailey's completion of her dissertation gave her both the experience of composing a complex piece of writing and the confidence that she could do so again.

Although Effie denies that her unsanctioned literacy practices have any effect upon her professional work ("Has your reading and writing fan fiction influenced what you do at your job?" "No"), she does apply sanctioned literacy practices to her fan writing. However, instead of using her professional skills to help her compose fan fiction as most of the other participants do, Effie actually creates characters within her stories who are like herself and who show those skills in use. Effie describes writing *Star Trek* fan fiction in which her original librarian character<sup>38</sup> met canon character Captain Jim Kirk. As Effie puts it, Kirk's reaction to her character's profession is, "'Yeah, librarians, whatever.' [My character's] like, 'Uh, let me just show you.' It wasn't a lesson kind of thing. They got stranded on this deserted planet, and they had to survive, and he's way more impressed with the way some of her knowledge came in handy than he otherwise would have been in [another setting]." Effie manufactures a scenario to demonstrate her sanctioned literacy practices by placing a character similar to herself within the *Star Trek* universe, in a situation where her knowledge will impress Captain Kirk. She explains, "My characters are always admiring librarians. If they need information, they know where to go, and

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<sup>38</sup> An original character (OC) is a new character created by the fan fiction author. A canon character is one who appears in the media property for which the fan fiction is written, in this case, the original *Star Trek* television series.

like I said, it's not real [sic] blatant. It's very, very subtle." Despite Effie's assertion, the strategy is likely less subtle than she believes it to be. Readers often view original characters based upon a story's author unfavorably as they may interpret such characters as "self insertion," the author's attempt to fulfill a fantasy by placing herself into the fandom. When an original character impresses a popular canon character such as Captain Kirk, readers may see the self insertion as even more obvious wish-fulfillment. While not all readers dislike self insertion, original characters based upon authors tend to be unrealistically perfect: physically beautiful, intelligent, athletic, or some combination of the above. In the case of Effie's librarian character described above, it seems improbable, even in the *Star Trek* universe, that Captain Kirk and the character would become stranded alone on a planet where a librarian's skill set could save their lives. An author of Effie's maturity and skill may write well enough to avoid this pitfall, but if the canon characters in her works are "always admiring librarians," Effie's readers probably do at times find her self insertion to be "blatant" and possibly off-putting.

When asked to what extent they discuss their fan fiction literacy practices at work, both MMPRfan and Kailey explain that other instructors at their institutions assign interpretation projects. MMPRfan says, "We would always have [the project] whenever finals would come in at the end of the [semester], so December or May would come around and we'd be showing each other the projects and things like that. It was always a good time, fairly positive." MMPRfan and the other instructors at her institution situate the interpretation project to coincide with the end of each academic term, when a more relaxed and enjoyable assignment is welcome: both students and instructors are often stressed with the burden of preparing for final exams and calculating grades, and both groups are likely tired of the more typical English assignments they

have encountered all semester long. A creative project which takes a different approach to the course materials makes the end of the semester “a good time.”

At Kailey’s institution, although a colleague created the original assignment, Kailey “kind of took it and ran with it. [My colleague] does her own thing, and I do my own thing, and at least three or four other people have also kind of taken that and used it.” Kailey explains that in her institution’s English department, instructors often share assignments and other teaching materials in this way, “because nobody thinks anyone should have to reinvent the wheel. We’re all in the same boat.” Due to the large size of Kailey’s English department, instructors have little oversight from administrators “as long as you’re not doing something way out there or getting complaints.” Therefore, Kailey has not experienced any pushback or criticism for teaching a creative assignment, and she adds that when she discusses the assignment with other instructors outside of her institution, she usually gets a positive response. Kailey offers her thoughts on why so many English instructors, including those at other institutions, teach and/or approve of interpretation assignments: “There’s a lot of literature academics. We’re all big nerds, and most [of them], if they don’t write fanfic, I think they probably have read it. They’ve probably dabbled in fandom in some way. So in general, I actually get really positive feedback from people who hear about it and want to know about it.” Throughout this discussion, Kailey continues to acknowledge her colleague as the author of the interpretation assignment, but she describes how she and her fellow instructors adapt it to fit their own courses. As MMPRfan describes the instructors at her institution showing one another the interpretation projects, Kailey and her fellow instructors share assignments such as this one. Her comment that as many as six instructors use some version of the assignment indicates how rhetorically flexible it is—another benefit to the assignment beyond the break in routine it provides as noted by MMPRfan.

Kailey twice categorizes English instructors as “big nerds,” first referring to “literature academics” in general then to many of the professors in her specific department at her institution. She claims that literature scholars in her age group have “probably dabbled in fandom in some way,” but that the older professors in her department (also “great big nerds”) are open as well to projects like the interpretation assignment: “Probably if they were part of our generation of scholars, their work might be different. Their primary fields are much more traditional, but they are also [teaching] graphic novels and stuff, so they’re interested in a scholarly way.” Although her comments suggest some generalizations and assumptions about the interests of English scholars, in Kailey’s experience, her colleagues share her fascination with fan-based activities. She describes them as an interested audience for her discussions about the assignment, one which shares with her and one another the common ground of being “nerdy.”

Likewise, Lea explains that her coworkers know about her involvement in fan fiction because many of the publisher’s younger employees socialize together and share this same common ground:

I work with a lot of other creatives, by which I mean designers, and I think you would be hard-pressed these days to find a person who went to art school and is not active in fandom in one form or another. There’s a lot of nerds in publishing. There’s a bigger overlap between nerds and fandom, so it’s not really weird to me to mention that I write fan fiction to my coworkers. I’m sure sometimes my coworkers would like to hear *less* about my fan fiction. Like Kailey, Lea categorizes people in her career field as “nerds.” However, whereas Kailey only implied a link between being a nerd and being a fan, Lea explicitly states that an “overlap” exists between the two identities. “Nerd” has shifted from a pejorative term for an intelligent but socially-awkward person to a trendy label. Today’s nerds are still smart, like Kailey and her fellow English scholars or Lea and her coworkers in publishing, but most now see their dedication to knowledge as a positive quality. As Lea points out, the stereotype of nerds as fans persists. In fact, many of the media properties once seen as “nerdy” remain favorites of those

labeled nerds today, such *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, and Marvel and DC Comics. Yet these media properties are now among the most commercially successful, and their fans are usually considered to be at the forefront of popular culture. Many people such as Kailey and Lea now embrace the identity of nerd rather than attempt to escape it. When Lea talks with her coworkers about writing fan fiction, she enacts this identity and strengthens the bond she and her peers share as nerds and fans. Their fan talk fosters a sense of solidarity, as does Kailey's discussion of the interpretation assignment with her colleagues.

Nevertheless, Lea points out two instances in which she refrains from sharing her involvement in fandom: she would not mention her fan fiction to her boss or another superior, and she does not share the pseudonym under which she publishes her fan fiction. Lea does not explain why she does not discuss her writing with her superiors, but their influence over her position and career likely affects her willingness to share anything that might reflect badly upon her professional image. Also, of course, most employees rarely share their personal lives with their superiors as they might with their peers. That Lea differentiates between her superiors and her peer group is not unusual. Lea does explain why she has not shared her pseudonym with her coworkers: "a lot of the stuff I write is explicit, and I would be super uncomfortable with that." Whereas she freely shares that she writes fan fiction, Lea expresses concern over what people who know her might think if they were aware that she authors stories with sexual content.

Effie shares this concern, as described in chapter two where she relates how she has created a new online persona to accompany her move from the *Star Trek* fandom to that of *Castle*. As Effie puts it, "When I was writing *Star Trek* fan fiction, I was more cagey about who I told." She describes her writing at that time as "dark," "crazy," and "sexy"/"steamy," and implies that she worried most over how her offline acquaintances might react to the sexual

content of her stories. In that portion of the interview, Effie does not specifically state that these acquaintances include her coworkers, so I later asked if any of them knew about her involvement in fandom now that she has reinvented her online self as a *Castle* fan. Effie replies, “The odd one here or there [knows]. I might have mentioned it in conversation, in passing,” such as to comment upon fan fiction she recently read or current trends within a fandom. Effie also feels comfortable discussing her *Castle* writing projects with a fellow librarian, and at least one of her former students is aware that she writes fan fiction. Like Lea, however, Effie does not reveal her pseudonym to anyone at her job. Although she no longer writes *Star Trek* stories, Effie adds, “Everybody on campus knows that I am the go-to for *Star Trek* information.” Effie feels comfortable sharing her love of *Star Trek* with her colleagues and students, just not that she once wrote *Star Trek* fan fiction. This fact, along with Effie’s willingness to mention her *Castle* writing, supports her argument that it is not the *Star Trek* fandom which she fears may alienate her coworker, but the particular stories she wrote for it. Because her *Castle* stories are neither “sexy” nor “steamy,” Effie is happy to talk over her ongoing work with her colleague. Some of MissFisherFan’s law library coworkers also know about her fan fiction authorship. In addition, she says, “My boss knows that I’m writing fiction in general. I think I’ve offhandedly mentioned, I sometimes use fan fiction as a palate cleanser, because there’s no pressure from any source other than myself. It’s not something that I would be talking a lot about, but it’s also not something I’m ashamed of.” For MissFisherFan, fandom is not an important part of her professional life. While she is not “ashamed” of her fan fiction, as Effie was of her earlier *Star Trek* stories, MissFisherFan also sees no reason to discuss it in a professional setting.

As I suspected they might, the answers to my final research question differ for each participant. I explored which unsanctioned literacy practices the participants used in their

professional lives, which sanctioned literacy practices they used in their fan lives, and to what extent they discussed fandom with their colleagues. Except for Effie, who claims she uses no fan literacy practices at her job, all participants describe some professional benefits they gain from their involvement in fandom. Both MMPRfan and Kailey teach interpretation projects in which they asked students to perform adaptations similar to those of fans; the novel MissFisherFan pitched to a publisher is a form of fan fiction, and she called upon her online fan community to assist her in editing it by the deadline; and Lea's long experience reading and writing fan fiction affected her view of the rhetorical roles of author, audience, and text so that by the time she entered her career as a production editor, she saw authors as fallible and audiences as empowered.

All five participants identify at least one way in which the sanctioned literacy practices they uses in their professions has aided their fan writing. While MMPRfan is the most vague, she does feel that her career as an English instructor gives her practice in writing which benefits her as a fan author. The proficiency at editing Lea has gained at her job also helps her compose better fan fiction, and MissFisherFan's legal research skills have assisted her in writing fan fiction in the murder mystery genre to a degree, although not as much as the dedicated research conducted by others in her online community. Kailey is the most enthusiastic about how her sanctioned writing has benefited her unsanctioned fan fiction when she explains how completing her dissertation convinced her she was capable of writing other long, complex documents. Finally, Effie has used her profession as the inspiration for original characters in her fan fiction, validating her career choice to herself and at the same time educating readers about what librarians do. However, none of the participants discusses her involvement with fandom at length with her colleagues. MMPRfan and Kailey only mention discussing fandom with

coworkers in terms of the interpretation assignment; they do not talk about media properties they enjoy or fan fiction for social purposes. Kailey and Lea both characterize people in their career field as “nerds,” and Lea mentions talking about her fan fiction with her coworkers; yet at the same time, she comments that they likely wish she would bring up fandom less often. Although Effie is less “cagey” about mentioning fan fiction after changing online identities, she still only talks about it “in passing,” and MissFisherFan likewise does not discuss her fan writing often.

As described at the beginning of this chapter, I have learned that I am not the only professional woman and fan who mingles her sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices. Yet throughout the course of my research, I have come to realize that I differ from the study participants in another way. At the outset of my research project, a committee member expressed interest in knowing if the participants see their fan practices as separate from or as an extension of their professional lives. After analyzing the data gathered for this chapter, I conclude that although the participants do blend their fan and professional practices when such overlap is useful for them, they keep their fan and professional *lives* separate. They do not discuss fan issues in much depth with colleagues, unless the discussion is directly related to a professional project, as with Kailey’s interpretation assignment. They also take care to separate their fan and professional identities, such as how Effie created a new online persona when she worried about how her colleagues would react to her *Star Trek* fiction, and how Lea refuses to discuss fan fiction with her boss.

In contrast, I do not view my fan practices separate from my professional life, or from any other part of my life. Instead, I see my life as a cohesive whole shaped in a large part around the unsanctioned literacy practices which give it much of its meaning. The concluding chapter will provide a brief reflection on my own fan literacy practices as a female professional, in terms

of where my practices correspond with and diverge from those of my participants. I will also describe what writing researchers can learn from further case studies and qualitative research of fan literacy practices and fan community literacy, particularly of professional women. Finally, I will suggest the next steps for additional research and practice in these areas.

## CHAPTER FIVE

In this concluding chapter, I reflect upon where two of my own fan literacy practices—one unsanctioned<sup>39</sup> and one sanctioned—coincide with and diverge from the study participants’ practices. I share a similar socioeconomic background with the participants: I am white, middle class, and close in age to three of the five. Like all of them, I hold a graduate degree. Because of our similar backgrounds, I was not surprised to discover that our early experiences with fan fiction also had much in common. Here, I relate my introduction to online fan fiction, compare it to MMPRfan’s similar experience, and reflect upon how copyright owners are monetizing the emotional nostalgia of fans like ourselves. Next, I examine a first-year English Composition lesson I created and taught which asks students to read critically then compose fan fiction. I compare my experience teaching this lesson to MMPRfan and Kailey’s experiences with their creative interpretation assignments, then speculate on why their assignments were successful and mine was not. Finally, I conclude the study with suggestions for future research, and a last word on why women’s fan literacy practices matter.

I have composed fan fiction for as long as I can remember, but the nature of my compositions changed when I acquired home access to the internet as a teenager. Pre-internet, I did not know that other people also made up stories about their favorite characters, that they shared these stories, or that they called their work “fan fiction.” As a child, I composed fan

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<sup>39</sup> As I explain in chapter one, I use the term “sanctioned” to refer to those practices which the participants employ in their jobs and/or education. In contrast, I use the term “unsanctioned” to refer to practices the participants employ when writing fan fiction, participating in their online communities, and otherwise composing texts outside of their work or schooling.

fiction for my own entertainment with no intention of sharing it with anyone else. Often, I made up stories in my head without even bothering to write them down; my enjoyment came from the act of composing rather than from revisiting my composition. When I did compose on paper, I wrote my stories in private places like my diary. For example, the diary I kept when I was eight to ten years old contains short, simple fan fiction stories about the cartoons *DuckTales* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, including crossovers in which characters from the two fandoms interact with one another.

In 1997, when I was fifteen, my family got dial-up internet access at home, and I discovered that many other people also wrote stories about the characters they loved. While combing search engines for websites about *Tiny Toon Adventures*, another cartoon I enjoyed, I found a site dedicated to archiving *Tiny Toons* fan fiction.<sup>40</sup> The site amazed me: not only did these authors make up stories about their favorite shows, other people read them! At that point in my life, I had already decided I wanted to be a writer, so I decided to try writing some *Tiny Toons* fan fiction and submitting it to the website I had found. There, I would have a ready-made audience for my writing, and I was already extremely familiar with the characters and settings after years of watching the show. I wrote a short fan fiction about my favorite female character, then followed it with two sequels before moving on to writing fan fiction for other sites and more adult television shows I enjoyed at the time, such as *The X-Files* and *Stargate SG-1*.

*Tiny Toons* served as my gateway to the genre of fan fiction, but not only because I happened upon a website about it. It also was a fandom which felt familiar and safe as I

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<sup>40</sup> As of this writing, a mirror of this site still exists at <http://tta.toonzone.net/ttافانficmirror/index.html>. The three fan fiction stories I composed twenty years ago are still available there as well—thankfully with no way to identify me as their author. I'd like to think my writing has improved since then.

negotiated its characters and settings to compose my stories. I had watched *Tiny Toon Adventures* since its debut episode in 1990, so the characters felt like old friends. Although the cartoon was aimed at a younger audience, the characters were meant to be about fourteen years old, close to my age as I began to write my fan fiction. Therefore, I could write stories about them engaging in the situations I myself was encountering as a teenager. By the time I had completed and posted my three *Tiny Toons* stories, I felt comfortable writing fan fiction for a public audience and ready to attempt more complex works. This is not to say that fan fiction about cartoons cannot be complex; I feel that I composed some of my best writing in a series of stories about the cartoon *DarkWing Duck*, which I wrote as an adult while earning my master's degree. Nevertheless, *Tiny Toons* allowed me space in a familiar environment to learn how to write fan fiction for an online audience.

My discovery of online fan fiction is very similar to the experience MMRfan relates in chapter two, except she acquired regular internet access as an undergraduate rather than as a high school student. Like me, MMRfan began exploring the internet by searching for sites about her favorite television shows. When she discovered fan fiction for those shows, she says, "that's when I kind of realized that I'd been doing sort of that [composing fan fiction] my whole life." MMRfan and I also had similar fandom experiences as children, when we both engaged in play which created new, unsanctioned narratives with branded character toys. Just as MMRfan describes recasting her Barbie dolls as spies, I used to invent new personalities and roles for my own Barbies, My Little Ponies, and Lego minifigures. As I describe in chapter two, fans' nostalgia for the media properties we enjoyed as children tends to reengage us with those properties as adults. Adam Banks describes a rhetoric of nostalgia with which we recall both cherished artifacts and the possibilities open to us in the past (63-64). This rhetoric for nostalgia

was at work when my lasting affection for *Tiny Toon Adventures* and MMPRfan's love of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* drew us back as adults to write fan fiction about television shows intended for children.

Media property owners are well aware of nostalgia's power over the "Millennial generation,"<sup>41</sup> as shown by the many 1980s and 90s franchises revived in recent years. 2017 alone saw a new *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* movie and no fewer than four updates to franchises which obsessed me as a child: *My Little Pony*, *DuckTales*, *Star Wars*, and *Twin Peaks*. While property owners' interests lie in making money from fans' nostalgia, such revivals have also inspired a vast amount of fan-produced material. Henry Jenkins observes the tendency toward this phenomenon in *Convergence Culture*: "[E]conomic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship" (136). The more popular a media property becomes, the more active fans of that property become. I recently corroborated Jenkins's finding myself with the release of the second movie in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy. Older fan fiction I had written for the first movie in the trilogy had ceased to receive many readers or reviews, but when the new movie opened and *Star Wars* got a boost in popularity, my older stories also gained new fans as well. Yet the "flow" of benefits does not run only one way, from conglomerates to fans: fan compositions in turn fuel greater consumption of media properties. Sometimes fan compositions convert casual viewers to devoted fans who then buy films and television series on Blu-ray or DVD. For instance, in chapter two Lea

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<sup>41</sup> The Pew Research Center defines the Millennial generation as people "born after 1980 and the first generation to come of age in the new millennium." Because I was born in January, 1982, and turned 18 in 2000, I am technically a Millennial, although I do not really identify with the label.

describes becoming a fan of the television show *Shameless* after seeing posts about it on Tumblr, and I first became aware of one of my favorite movie franchises, the *Puppet Master* horror series, by reading a fan fiction story. I eventually purchased all ten movies in the series along with other related merchandise. Fan authors also make purchases to help them compose their works, such as Blu-rays, DVDs, or books for images and other reference material. I even became so invested in writing fan fiction for the television series *Twin Peaks*, I maintained a subscription to Showtime's streaming service for months after the series ended just so I would have access to it until it was released on DVD.

Many fans also purchase merchandise related to their fandoms, sometimes for their private enjoyment and sometimes to perform their identity as fans. As discussed in chapter four, the identity of the “nerd” has been not only reclaimed but mainstreamed until being nerdy is cool. Thus, a vicious cycle has emerged of consuming a property, becoming a fan, then consuming further to enact one's identity as a fan: Jane Doe watches a television show, enjoys it, and to *prove* she enjoys it, goes out and buys a t-shirt, coffee mug, keychain, etc. Then as Jane uses her merchandise, she also advertises the show to others, who in turn watch it, become fans, buy merchandise of their own, and so forth. Thus, the three cultures of nostalgia, nerd, and fan—which so often overlap into the nostalgic nerdy fan—all help sell media properties for the conglomerates, without the conglomerates having to do anything but make the properties and related products available. Nevertheless, I do not argue that this commercialism is a negative thing, as long as we remain alert that we are still consuming even as we are producing, and that we may be encouraging other fans to consume as well. If nostalgia-based fandom had not become big business, MMPRfan would not have a new *Power Rangers* movie, I would not have new *Star Wars* films or new *Twin Peaks* episodes, and the internet would lack thousands of the

fan fiction stories that now enrich it. Even as fandom remains part of what Henry Jenkins terms the “commodity culture,” fans can still use fan fiction to process and rewrite the messages we absorb through the media properties we consume. In chapter two, MMPRfan relates how she corrected *Power Rangers*’s perceived narrative failings with fan fiction. Kailey describes writing “what [she] wanted” from *Doctor Who* and *Being Human* when both series went in directions she disliked. Likewise, I am currently writing fan fiction to “fix” episodes in both *Star Wars* and *Twin Peaks* where I feel strong female characters were denied control over their destinies. Fan fiction may even influence the canon it seeks to reinterpret, according to Jenkins. He cites the conviction of media and culture scholar Pierre Lévy that commodity culture will be one day be shaped by the “knowledge cultures” which produce meaning: “The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum, which will extend from the machine and network designers to the ultimate recipient, each helping to sustain the activities of the others” (Lévy, qtd. in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 144). In other words, the conglomerates and their media properties will be shaped by the fans and their fan fiction, and in some instances, the distinction between canon text and fan fiction may disappear altogether.

Like most of the study participants, I have used unsanctioned, fan literacy practices throughout my academic and professional careers. I found fan practices helpful in learning concepts and completing assignments throughout graduate school, and they have benefitted me as I teach first-year college English composition. For instance, when I proposed and taught an honors class on analyzing visual rhetoric in World War II propaganda, I created the class around WWII-inspired media texts I already enjoyed: Donald Duck propaganda cartoons, excerpts from Pink Floyd’s film *The Wall*, British children’s books about anthropomorphized barrage balloons,

and the anime movie *Spriggan*. Working with these texts and other WWII-era propaganda such as posters and comic books, I showed my students how to unpack and interpret visual rhetorical appeals. At the same time, I learned more about the subtle messages some of my favorite films and cartoons conveyed as I analyzed them alongside my students. This course proved successful, in that most students finished it able to identify and analyze rhetorical appeals in visual and written texts. Unfortunately, when I later attempted to teach a different class using fan fiction, things did not go so well.

I created the fan fiction assignment as a daily work grade in a themed first-year composition course, specifically because I wanted to try teaching composition using fan fiction. The assignment took place over four days of class, during which the students also worked on their major essay assignment and other coursework. For homework on day one of the assignment, I asked the students to read H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Statement of Randolph Carter," and during the following class period, they responded to four discussion questions about the story. While most of the questions related to our course theme, one question asked the students to speculate on an element of the story Lovecraft left ambiguous. With that fourth question, I hoped to encourage the students to think beyond the bounds of the text, like fan fiction authors. Day two of the assignment focused on the course theme, but on day three, I demonstrated in class how to search for and locate fan fiction on FanFiction.net and An Archive of Our Own. For day four's homework, the students read a short fan fiction story based upon "The Statement" and practiced locating additional fan fiction on their own. Finally, in class on day four, the students responded to discussion questions which prompted them to think critically about how "The Statement" fan fiction expanded upon the canon text. We then moved on to other assignments in the course, but as an opportunity for extra credit, I encouraged the students

to write their own Lovecraft fan fiction. On the assignment sheet I prepared, I included a list of story prompts but also stated that the students could write whatever they wanted as long as their fan fiction somehow involved the characters or events in “The Statement.”

During the four days we worked on “The Statement,” the class responded to discussion questions and participated in classwork with the insight and critical thinking I expected of first-year students. Nevertheless, the few extra credit assignments I received disappointed me. I had not anticipated that many students would make an attempt since few ever completed extra credit work and this assignment was particularly challenging. Neither was the quality of their fan fiction particularly poor. Instead, I deem my teaching experiment a failure because only two students actually wrote fan fiction. The others’ compositions did involve the characters and events of “The Statement”; most addressed one or more prompts from the assignment sheet. However, these compositions took the format of essays rather than fiction. Somehow, the majority of the students had misunderstood the genre of fan fiction altogether. Recognizing that the fault lay with my teaching and not my students’ comprehension, I awarded extra credit to all the students who attempted the assignment, and we moved on.

Upon reflection, I recognize many mistakes I made in constructing this assignment, not least of which is assigning first-year students an H. P. Lovecraft story instead of a more accessible work. Yet when I compare this unsuccessful assignment to my WWII visual rhetoric course and the creative interpretation assignments MMRfan and Kailey describe in chapter two, I think my choice of texts matters less than my approach to the literacy practices we use when critically reading and writing. *The Wall* and *The Inferno* can hardly be described as easily accessible, yet MMRfan’s and my students could interpret and build upon those texts when taught the practices they needed. Therefore, my fan fiction assignment failed because *I* failed to

teach my students the fan literacy practices I expected them to use. I believed that if I defined fan fiction for them, my students would immediately understand what it is, and that if we spent a few days covering one canon text with an accompanying fan fiction, my students would know how to read and write fan fiction all by themselves. It is no wonder many of my students were confused by this new textual genre and by what the extra credit assignment asked of them! I expected them to learn in four days what we spent four weeks learning for each genre of essay the course covered. When I taught the WWII visual rhetoric course, the students had an entire semester to grow comfortable with multimedia texts. We began with the most accessible—the Donald Duck cartoons—and the students gradually learned more complex strategies for critical reading and writing until the course concluded with their analysis of the rhetorically dense *Spriggan*. In contrast, the fan fiction assignment gave the students only a few days to master a new, unfamiliar way of composing. Making the assignment optional did not remedy this problem; it only gave the students even less motivation to learn the new genre. My assignment was similar to the early version of Kailey’s creative interpretation assignment described in chapter four, in which she asked students to select a text covered earlier in class and write an additional scene that “happened off camera, so to speak.” Yet Kailey never used the term “fan fiction” in the assignment instructions nor indicated that the students were composing an entirely new kind of text. By front-loading my assignment with so much information, I may have frightened my students away from the new genre of fan fiction and back to the familiar format of the essay. I, and other instructors who want to use fan fiction to teach critical literacy practices, could learn from my experience by adapting assignments to incorporate new practices gradually with plenty of time and space for students to practice. Also, we can frame such assignments in ways other than “writing fan fiction,” which may sound unfamiliar and thus intimidating.

MMPRfan describes a successful interpretation project as “responding creatively” to literature while Kailey calls it “play[ing] with. . . what’s in the canon” and “what happened off camera.” Both relate creative interpretation assignments as demanding but enjoyable experiences which can teach students sanctioned literacy skills using *unsanctioned* literacy practices.

While I have drawn useful conclusions from my initial analysis of this study’s data, further research remains to be done on professional women’s fan literacy practices. The most important task ahead for myself and other literacy researchers is expanding the collection of participant data to include women of other ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and professions. As noted in chapter one, all five participants in this study identify themselves as white and middle class (ranging from lower-middle to upper-middle), and all work in professions somehow connected to literacy (English instruction, library science, or publishing). I did not deliberately choose participants only from these demographic groups; these five consisted of all the applicants who qualified for the study, returned signed consent forms, and scheduled interviews with me. However, I recognize that because I used word of mouth and snowball sampling to recruit participants, my pool of potential applicants was already skewed toward those demographically similar to myself and my colleagues. In order to represent the experiences of more female fans from all backgrounds, we need the participation of many more women. I envision creating a project similar to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives ([thedaln.org](http://thedaln.org)), which would archive narratives, interviews, and writing samples from a large number of fan authors collected over time. Such an archive would allow multiple researchers to gather and retrieve data, and the project could reach a far greater population of participants than could a single researcher’s study.

In addition to collecting data from more participants, several opportunities for future research suggest themselves from the current study. As described in chapter four, both MMRfan and Kailey use fan literacy practices to teach their creative interpretation assignments, and many of their colleagues teach similar assignments. Yet my own attempt at using fan fiction to teach critical reading and writing skills failed. Therefore, useful data could result from a textual analysis comparing documents gathered from the creative interpretation assignments of various classes and instructors. For instance, the researcher could collect each instructor's assignment sheets and lesson materials for all steps of the project, along with the students' drafts, prewriting, and finished projects. The researcher could then compare the assignments and lessons taught by the instructors and see what, if any, effects the differences among them have on the students' work. The resulting data could lead to the development of more effective creative interpretation assignments, in which students better learn how to read and write critically. In addition, instructors such as myself could benefit by learning improved ways to teach critical thinking with fan literacy practices.

Another opportunity for future research involves a closer examination of the group literacy practices of online fan communities. As group practices are not the current study's focus, I did not gather extensive data about them. However, the participants' intriguing narratives about their engagement within fan communities, particularly MissFisherFan's involvement with the Slack group she created, led me to wonder how their community literacy practices coincide with and differ from their individual practices. Such a study would involve collecting data which focuses on composition as a group: texts the community composes together, transcripts of asynchronous discussions and synchronous chats, and interviews with group members both together and individually. While such a study would be interesting to the

field of fan studies as a simple comparison between individual and group fan practices, it has additional merit for composition studies. This research into unsanctioned group composition could give researchers insight on how to make sanctioned group composition, such as texts composed as a team in the workplace, work more smoothly.

A final area for additional research is less an opportunity than it is a necessity if Pierre Lévy's prediction is correct and the distinction between producers and consumers will one day disappear. If this phenomenon occurs, the distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices will disappear as well, and *all* practices will be sanctioned along the "reading-writing continuum," with each practice "helping to sustain the activities of the others" (Lévy, qtd. in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 144). Before popular culture reaches Lévy's event horizon where creator and fan become one, we should prepare by investigating what happens when the unsanctioned becomes sanctioned. Currently, fan fiction is far from being on equal footing with academic prose; no matter how many copies it sells, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is still not *Pride and Prejudice*. However, as the acceptance and commercialization of fandom grows, the sanctioning of fan literacy practices is bound to grow as well. Some practices of this study's participants suggest what future sanctioning may look like. For example, MissFisherFan has written a series of novels transplanting Jane Austen's works into a modern-day setting, as described in chapter two. Although she does acknowledge the series as a form of fan fiction, MissFisherFan also considers being a novelist as her career and therefore a sanctioned form of literacy. Yet MissFisherFan alters her fan literacy practices very little to compose the novels. For instance, in order to edit a manuscript for her publisher, she returned to a practice upon which she relies for her fan fiction: beta reading performed by her *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* fan community. In MissFisherFan's case, when the unsanctioned becomes sanctioned,

the final product resembles a blend of the two. The creative interpretation assignments of MMPRfan and Kailey described in chapter two also serve as examples of fan literacy practices used for sanctioned purposes. MMPRfan's assignment requires students to engage their canon texts' rhetorical situations, and Kailey assigns an additional reflective essay in which students must explain the rationale for their interpretation of the canon text. The assignments adapt fan practices to align them with the sanctioned goals of the courses the participants teach, unlike MissFisherFan's novels which rely more on unaltered fan practices. These two brief examples demonstrate why more research is needed on what happens when unsanctioned literacy practices are used for sanctioned purposes: they are not always used in the same ways, nor do they always produce the same outcomes. The more research we perform on their current use, the better we can envision Lévy's future, in which literacy practices are neither sanctioned nor unsanctioned, and all have equal value.

Despite the idealistic sound of the previous sentence, I do not mean to suggest that all literacy practices *are* equally useful, or that the removal of sanctioning altogether is necessarily good. Again, we need much more research to know just how much is at stake. What is lost when unsanctioned literacy practices displace sanctioned, and are these losses acceptable? Which sanctioned practices do unsanctioned practices replace—and do they truly fulfill *all* functions of the sanctioned, to the same degree? When an instructor teaches creative interpretation, what does she drop from the curriculum to make space and time for teaching the new assignment? Does creating a pamphlet which presents Hell as a rehab facility really help students comprehend Dante's *Inferno*?

Similar questions apply to the recent commercial legitimization of fan fiction, in which it is professionally published and sold for profit. MissFisherFan's series of Jane Austen-inspired

novels is just one example among the multitudes of fan fiction available for purchase. Some commercial fan fiction changes character names to avoid copyright infringement, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* which originated as *Twilight* fan fiction. Other authors take the simpler option of writing fan fiction based upon public domain works for which infringement is not a concern. MissFisherFan's series falls into this category, along with the endless tide of Regency-era titles rewritten as horror novels. Still other authors have somehow been able to get away with selling their fan fiction under the label of "unofficial," such as a series of "Unofficial *Minecraft* Books" based upon the popular video game. While *The Diary of Minecraft Skeleton Steve* will likely never be made into a blockbuster movie, other fan fiction novels such as the *Fifty Shades* series and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* have spawned lucrative films and are now seen as legitimate, if low-brow, franchises in their own right. As some sanctioned literacy practices must go by the wayside to make room for creative interpretation in academic assignments, so must some sanctioned books go unpurchased and authors go unpublished when readers turn to commercial fan fiction. When unsanctioned books replace the sanctioned, when readers buy fan fiction instead of "original" novels, what do we lose? Kirby Ferguson's web video series claims "Everything Is a Remix," but is everything also derivative now that authors are writing fan fiction for *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which is itself fan fiction? What is the effect of legitimizing fan fiction, not only on the book market but also on the concept of authorship and the identity of the author? To turn back to the focus of the present study, what effect does sanctioning the unsanctioned have on women, specifically? What is at stake for female fan authors?

I began this study wondering if I am the only adult woman who still loves fan fiction and who uses unsanctioned fan literacy practices in my professional life. In examining the study results, I found that some of the participants do use such practices at their jobs, but others do not.

However, I also learned much more than that. I discovered that some participants are as emotionally entwined in their fandoms as I am, while others keep their fan identities almost completely separate from their outside lives. I learned that most of the participants have been writing fan fiction since adolescence, yet one began as an adult, only months before I interviewed her. In short, although we each have some things in common, every one of us has her own set of literacy practices, characteristics, and ways of being a fan.

This rich variety of fan literacy is another reason why this study and others like it matter, beyond the need to explore the research areas suggested above. From female fans and their practices—both sanctioned and unsanctioned—we can learn how literacy communities form, communicate, compose together, and then disband. We can learn how women adapt literacy skills they already possess to read and write more effectively at work. We can learn how reading and writing provide emotional comfort and support in stressful times. We can learn how women rewrite and fix broken narratives. Ultimately, this research matters because women’s writing matters—even fan fiction, because for women like the study participants and myself, unsanctioned writing is the writing which accomplishes the most.

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## APPENDIX

### QUALIFICATION SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Do you identify as a woman?
2. What is your age?
3. In what country do you live?
4. In which field do you work?
5. How often do you write fan fiction?
6. Please enter your email address. A valid email address is required for you to participate in the study.

## ORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Today is [date], and I'm interviewing [participant name]. [Participant], just to confirm, I am audio recording our conversation but not video recording it. Also, you have the option not to answer any of the following questions.

1. How old are you? How do you describe your ethnicity? Where did you grow up, and where do you live now? How would you describe your socioeconomic class growing up, and now?
2. Where do you work? What is your job title, and what sort of tasks do you do at your job? What kinds of writing do you do for your job?
3. When and how did you discover fan fiction? Do you feel like you made any mistakes when you first started reading/writing fan fiction? How did you learn to read/write fan fiction better than when you first started?
4. What fandoms do you read and write fan fiction for? How did you get interested in these fandoms? Why did you start reading fan fiction about them/writing fan fiction for them?
5. Do you like to read or write "alternate universe" (AU) fan fiction where the characters from a fandom interact in a non-canonical environment (such as a story where the characters are in high school)? Does a fandom's canon influence what you will and won't write about it?
6. Do you talk about your fan fiction with anyone as you're in the process of writing it? Do you have anyone "beta read," offer feedback, edit, or proofread your fan fiction before you publish it? Where do you publish your fan fiction?
7. How often do you get comments or reviews on the fan fiction you write? What kind of comments are your favorite? Your least favorite?

8. Do you see yourself as part of any online communities for fans? Which fandoms are these communities about? How do you define a community's boundaries—for instance, how do you know who is a community member and who isn't? In what ways do you participate in each community?
9. Does each community have any specific rules about what you can and can't post or say? How does each community enforce these rules, and how strict is it about enforcing them? Are there any things that you feel like you can't post or say in each community, even if they aren't specifically against the rules?
10. Do you ever "remix" fandoms by writing crossovers, incorporating details from one fandom into a fan fiction story about another, or otherwise blending fandoms together? Do you enjoy reading fan fiction crossovers or other stories that remix fandoms? Has anyone ever made fan art or illustrations for fan fiction you've written?
11. Has your reading and writing fan fiction influenced what you do at your job? If so, what kind of response did you get from your supervisors and/or coworkers? Did they realize fan fiction had influenced your work? Do you ever use what you've learned or done for your job when you read or write fan fiction?

May 2, 2016

Susanna Coleman  
Dept. of English  
College of Arts & Sciences  
Box 870244

Re: IRB#: 16-OR-179 "Reading and Writing Fan Fiction as an Online Community Literacy"

Dear Ms. Coleman:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on May 1, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Stuart Usdan, PhD  
Chair, Non-Medical Institutional Review Board