

Creative Becomings: Explicit Fanfiction, Reinventing Adolescence, and Queer Relationality

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Women and Gender Studies Institute
University of Toronto

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2022

Abstract

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary study into the experiences of adolescent fans in online fan spaces, particularly as they interact with sexually explicit fanfiction. Drawing together the threads of queer theory, adolescent sexuality, critical race theory, and fan studies, I use debates about teenagers and access to pornographic fanfiction as a starting point for a wider consideration of queer adolescent fans, the generative capacity of fan creative writing, particularly of the pornographic sort, and the relationality between adult and teenage fans. Working from Jen Gilbert's (2007) provocation that "rather than trying to extricate youth from risk, for adolescence to occur, a risk must be taken ... tolerating this view of adolescence as development will require something more of adults and sex educators: the risk of relationality" (50), I explore sexually explicit fanfiction written and read by teenagers which puts adults and adolescents into direct conversations about desire and sexuality. Given the moral panics about teenagers accessing sexual information and engaging with sexual narratives online, as well as discourses that cast any adult engaging in conversations about sexuality with teenagers outside of an institutional setting as inherently predatory, I question what fandom and sexually explicit fanfiction might offer us in terms of alternative forms of "growing up" and relationality outside of the discourses of protection and education. I thus draw on theories of storytelling, play, digital

space, and sideways growth to explore how/if fandom can offer a more generative way of looking at teenage experiences in the digital realm. Working from an understanding of fanfiction as collective, intertextual, and generative storytelling, each chapter of my dissertation involves discourse analysis and a close reading of a mix of fan-generated texts, from fanfiction (including some of my own early writing) to the debates, discussions, and creative engagements with fanfiction stories on the Archive of Our Own, Tumblr, and Twitter. In looking beyond moral panics, and the dual impulses to educate and to protect, I seek to consider what kind of creative work teenagers can generate and what this work can *do* – both for teenagers and for adults who interact with them.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful for the guidance, support, and wisdom of my incredible supervisor, Dina Georgis. From my time in her classroom where her insights and the space she provided pushed this project to places I never imagined it going, to her generous compassion and thoughtful guidance at every step, I am deeply indebted to her. Her scholarly work on the power of storytelling has guided and influenced this project in untold ways. Without her support and encouragement, I would never have taken some of the risks I did with this dissertation. It was in her classroom that the first seeds of this project began to take shape and it was through working with her ideas of capacious storytelling and its transformative potential that I was able to put thoughts to page. I will carry Dina's support, guidance, and pedagogy throughout my career, and I lack the words to truly express my gratitude to her.

Thank you as well to my second reader, Patrick Keilty, whose support and enthusiasm for this project was invaluable. From our first meeting, I always came away from discussions with him feeling reinvigorated, inspired, and hopeful. He pushed me to think in new and exciting ways about the intersections of youth, sexuality, geography, and digital space and his enthusiastic support in the final stages of this project was inspiring and encouraging at a time I needed it most. I am similarly grateful for the support and guidance of Leslie Shade whose generosity with her time and comments I am profoundly grateful for. This dissertation is more ethical, better written, and more expansive because of her suggestions and guidance. I cannot thank Leslie enough for her questions and feedback during my defense – she made the future of this project real for me and for that I am deeply grateful.

I am also incredibly grateful to my external examiner, Benjamin Woo, whose thoughtful, generous, and challenging suggestions in his report and during my defense will make the next version of this project stronger, deeper, and more ethical. In both his work in fan studies and in his generous engagement with my work, he has pushed me to think more intersectionally and capaciously about fanfiction and fandom.

My time at Women and Gender Studies has also been profoundly influenced by my committee member, friend, and mentor, Trimble. T has shaped and inspired my pedagogy at such a deep level that I will be indebted to her for the rest of my career. I am undoubtedly a better teacher and a better scholar because of Trinble's unwavering support, guidance, and enthusiasm.

Particularly during the times when it felt like we were the only two pop culture scholars in the department, Trimble's comradery, mentorship, and friendship has been invaluable and inspirational.

To the staff, students, and faculty of the Women and Gender Studies Institute, I am so deeply grateful for your community, solidarity, and conversation. Thank you to Jo Saliba, Marian Reed, and Paul Tsang for the incredible work you do – the department would not function without you, and I would never have found my way through the administrative weeds of the university without your support and expertise. I am further grateful to have had the chance to teach with June Larkin, Alissa Trotz, and Karyn Recollet, all of whom influenced my pedagogy and my thinking in profound and generous ways.

The seven years of writing this dissertation have been both incredibly challenging and inspiring on a personal and professional level. Without the community of teachers, friends, colleagues, and interlocutors I have been so fortunate to have, this project would never have come to fruition. For your community, your guidance, your support, and your care, I am profoundly grateful to Henar Perales, Casey Mecija, Erin Wall, Elisha Lim, Tama Lang, Cameron Wexler, Stéfy McKnight, Alex Graham-Heggie, Reese Carr, Sam Sanchinel, Jade Nixon, Kaylee Hamilton, Melissa Bush, Cornel Grey, Kate Lahey, Kieran Saili, Elspeth Brown, Alissa Trotz, Katherine McKittrick, Rinaldo Walcott, Rukmini Pande, Effie Sapuridis, Rachael Currie, Barb Henderson, and Derrick Cunningham. To any friends not listed here, I am so thankful for your support and community.

I am guided and inspired by my students, and I cannot express my gratitude to them for their continued enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, and creativity, particularly during the last few, isolated years. I am similarly indebted to an enormous community of fans across time and space whose words and creativity were the inspiration for this project. As I say in my conclusion, fandom did not make me who I am, but it gave me the space to find myself again and again and for that I cannot express my gratitude.

This project would not exist and would definitely never have been completed without the love, care, and support of my family, biological and chosen. I returned to school after being inspired by my sister, Sarah Lovegrove, a moment of inspiration for which I will always be grateful.

My dear friend and pop culture soulmate, Dan Vena, has been a source of inspiration, camaraderie, solace, love, and deep friendship. I see pop culture, monsters, horror, and queerness differently because of him. I am so grateful for his support and brilliance when taking my first tentative steps into academic publishing and without his love and support, this project would have stalled out so many times.

For my dear friend, platonic life partner, and comrade-in-arms, Aarzo Singh, I can barely find the words. Our deep friendship quite literally carried me along during parts of this process and I cannot even begin to imagine how I would have survived it without her. From late-night giggle fits to life-altering conversations to the way she quite literally put together my reference list for me, Aarzo has been there during the big things and the small things and everything in-between. Thank you is insufficient – this project would not exist without her and her love and unwavering support.

Finally, I want to dedicate this project to the two people who have always given me the space and support to be who I am and love who I love. My mother, Barb, a librarian, was the first person who taught me to love words and stories – she gave me a space of escape, love, adventure, and exploration and I can never express my gratitude to her for that. My mom has been an unwavering source of support, love, and friendship throughout this project (and in every day before that). No matter what else happened in our lives, I had her and our relationship and I will never be able to express how much she means to me. She made me a better writer when I was in high school, a more empathetic person when I was a child, and she gave me courage and confidence as an adult. I am inspired by and grateful to her in equal measure.

During the process of writing this dissertation, my father, John, departed from this world, but his love, guidance, and philosophies resonate through every word of this dissertation. There will never be a day that I don't miss his humour, love, support, and kindness, but he has been with me at every step of this project and will be with me for the rest of my life. He was one of my first teachers and I carry him with me every time I set foot in a classroom. And as he always reminded me, age is nothing but a number so let's all laugh a bit more.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Hardly a week goes by without someone in the mainstream media writing an article or an op-ed expressing dismay and concern about the current state of teenagers and their obsession with social media. Many of these articles take the tone of a moral panic, decrying, among innumerable issues, the decline of face-to-face communication, the loss of attention spans, dangerous sexual behavior, and obsessions with pop culture (Hughes, 2022; Newport, 2021; Wetzel, 2022). The history of adolescent sexual and social development theory is littered with theory, policies and programs designed to guide and protect teenagers on the road to various versions of proper – typically heterosexual – development and adulthood (Levine, 2002). The new moral panic about teenagers and social media is simply the latest iteration of this ongoing discourse of protectionism, oversimplifying the impact of social media on teenagers while simultaneously missing the agency, creativity, and complex relationality that teenagers bring to online interaction.

One particularly generative – and undertheorized – Internet subculture that showcases teenager’s creativity and agency while putting them in intimate relation with adults and sexually explicit material, is online fan communities, or fandom. Once a relatively niche subculture, the growth and mainstreaming of so-called “nerd culture” has resulted in the rapid expansion of fandom engagement across all demographics; an expansion that has only accelerated as the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed more and more leisure time online. As with most social media spheres, teenagers make up a significant portion of online fan communities (McLelland, 2011; Tosenberger, 2008). Consequently, online fandom is a particularly informative and revealing subculture in which to study the interplay of teenagers

and social media, teenagers and sexuality, and the complex relationality between adult and teenage fans outside of an institutional setting. As fan and young adult literature scholar Catherine Tosenberger (2008) argues:

In an era when representations of adolescent sexuality are both exploited and policed, [Harry] Potter fandom is an arena in which fans of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations can tell stories to satisfy their own desires; this freedom is especially valuable for younger fans, whose self-expressions are heavily monitored in institutional settings. Fans are able to tell narratives of sexuality in a space not directly controlled by adults, and do not have to shape their stories to adult sensibilities and comfort levels (202).

Along with the productivity and creativity that online fandom offers, it also centers questions about relationality, power differentials, and the intersections of sexuality with race, gender, and age – questions which remain underexplored and undertheorized in fan studies literature. Historically, a significant amount of fan studies research has been rooted in queer theory and explores fandom as a queer online space and a participatory culture that engages in critical, creative ways with source texts (Busse, 2006; Dhaenens, 2008; Flegel and Roth, 2010; Jenkins, 1992). A considerable amount of this work, however, focuses on adult fans, leaving the experiences of adolescent fans undertheorized and often conflated with those of adults (Duggan, 2021; Hunting, 2019; Walton, 2018). Further, the question of race in fan studies is often disregarded or mentioned only briefly and thus is often flagged as one of the most significant gaps in scholarship on fandom (Gatson & Reid, 2011; Stanfill, 2011; Wanzo, 2015; Warner, 2015; Woo; 2018). Given my position as a longstanding member of fandom who has been reading and writing fanfiction since I was a teenager myself, I seek to contribute to bridging the

divide between studies of adolescent sexuality and fanfiction in a manner that will allow me to produce new understandings about how teenage fans interact with online creative texts.

In this dissertation, therefore, I consider questions of adolescence, sexuality, adulthood, race, growth, temporality, and relationality through the lens of fan creative work, fanfiction in particular. Working from Jen Gilbert's (2007) provocation that "rather than trying to extricate youth from risk, for adolescence to occur, a risk must be taken ... tolerating this view of adolescence as development will require something more of adults and sex educators: the risk of relationality" (50), I explore sexually explicit fanfiction written and read by teenagers which puts adults and adolescents into direct conversations about desire and sexuality. Given the moral panics about teenagers accessing sexual information and engaging with sexual narratives online, as well as discourses that cast any adult engaging in conversations about sexuality with teenagers outside of an institutional setting as inherently predatory, I question what fandom and sexually explicit fanfiction might offer us in terms of alternative forms of "growing up" and relationality outside of the discourses of protection and education.

Background

For context, I begin with a brief overview of fandom. Creative fan works are built around understandings of *canon*, or "the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters" (Busse & Hellekson, 2006, 9). Canon is the source material – what is presented on screen or on the page. It is a term often used to delineate "official" information from fan-created material in *fandom*. Defining fandom, as Mark Duffet (2013) explains, is no easy task as it "can indeed involve different experiences, concern different practices and mean different things in various contexts" (19). What I offer here is a

definition based on the work of a number of fan scholars as well as my many years in online fan spaces (Duffett, 2013; Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Hills, 2002; Reid, 2009).

Fandom is a collective entity, a community of people, or fans, who actively, and often creatively, engage with a particular canon text; the canon texts (and their attendant source information such as plots, characters, contexts, and settings), for the purposes of this dissertation, refer specifically to media texts, such as television shows, movies, comic books, anime, gaming, or science fiction and fantasy literature. Fan engagement with source material can involve, among innumerable other activities, discussion, debate, critique, transformation, expansion and/or creative interpretation. The term fandom is sometimes used specifically to define a particular community derived from popular culture. For example, there is a *Lord of the Rings* fandom, a *Harry Potter* fandom, a *Doctor Who* fandom, and so on. At other times, it can be used very generally to define all fan communities and fan activity as one enormous, nebulous collective.

Creative activity in fandom varies enormously and can include creating art (fanart), videos (fanvids), and fan writing, or *fanfiction*. Fanfiction (fanfic, fic) is a broadly defined term for stories written by fans using characters and settings from an original work – such as books, visual media, or celebrity culture (Reid, 2009).

One of the attractions of fanfiction is that it can allow readers and writers to engage with familiar characters and settings in a wide variety of contexts and genres beyond those of the original work. Henry Jenkins lists the following as some of the transformative work that fanfiction does: recontextualization (adding new information to a story via an added scene or coda), expanding the series timeline, refocalization (recentering a story around a different character than the protagonist), moral realignment (changing the motivation of a character);

genre shifting (e.g., drama to comedy, horror to romance, etc.), crossovers with other media texts, character dislocation (setting a character into an alternate universe), personalization (inserting oneself into a story), emotional intensification and eroticization. One of the most popular types of transformative fanfiction is slash, in which characters, who may or may not be queer in canon, are given queer identities and put into queer relationships (Penley, 1991). Particularly in times when queer characters were few and far between in canon, as well as for queer identities that are underrepresented or invisible even now, slash fanfiction offers a way for queer readers and writers to see and explore themselves through pop culture characters and narratives.

In this project, I differentiate between audiences and fandom (although the boundaries between the two are by definition quite complicated and blurry) by positioning fans as a type of audience who not only consume and appreciate pop culture, but actively and purposefully engage with it in a creative, critical, or transformative capacity. Fandom is enormous, with both long historical roots and a near-global range. Therefore, in order to situate the scope of my project and work with a relatively definable community of fans, I focus on English-speaking, transformative media fandom based in Canada, the US, and the UK. Specifically, I focus on teenage fans reading and writing pornographic fanfiction in the fandoms of *Harry Potter* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)*. I choose these fandoms as my objects of study both because they are currently and historically quite active and also because they contain a mix of adult and teenage fans whose interactions are complicated and generative.

Theoretical Framework

I situate my work at the complex intersection of the fields of fan studies, youth studies, queer theory, and critical race theory. Within the relatively new, but quickly expanding field of fan studies, I draw on scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992), Paul Booth (2015), Kristian Busse (2006), Robin Anne Reid (2009), Rukmini Pande (2018), Rebecca Wanzo (2015), André Carrington (2016), and Catherine Tosenberger (2008) who consider online fandom a transformative space to creatively reimagine and reinterpret popular cultural scripts in a way that makes room for queer subjectivity.

In what is typically considered the foundational fan studies text, *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins (1992) theorizes that fan reading is a social process wherein “the meaning of texts accumulate through their use” (51). In other words, fans “poach” many different meanings from the original text and use these to create new texts that prompt deeper engagement and new meaning from the original. Fans, as Jenkins argues, derive much of their pleasure in consuming pop culture from the acts of interpretation, extrapolation, and creative transformation and are often drawn to texts that allow them to talk about bigger social issues.

Following Jenkins, much early research in fan studies was focused primarily on slash fanfiction and puzzling out what drew people to write, read and discuss these stories so passionately (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Russ, 1985). Studies of pre-Internet and early Internet fandom were based on data that indicated that the population of slash fanfiction writers was primarily made up of heterosexual women. Consequently, academics interested in fan studies and slash fanfiction advanced a number of theories to explain the seeming

incongruence of heterosexual women dedicating their time to writing stories about characters, mostly male, engaged in same-sex relationships (Tosenberger, 2008). These theories included: fanfiction as pornography for women, fanfiction as a way for women to express a desire for equal relationships between equal partners, and fanfiction as a reaction to the lack of fully formed female characters, particularly in science fiction and fantasy (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Lamb and Veith, 1986; Penley, 1991; Russ, 1985).

Although several recent studies on fandom and fanfiction still rely on one or more of these theories, the clear presence of significant numbers of fans who are not heterosexual women resulted in new theories about fanfiction (Lackner, et al., 2006). Specifically, fandom is now often conceptualized as a queer online space that functions as a resistance to hegemonic masculinity, a place to explore gender and sexual identities, and a participatory culture that engages in creative and critical ways with source texts (Bury, 2005; Busse, 2006; Dhaenens, 2008; Flegel and Roth, 2010; Reid, 2009). Robin Anne Reid (2009) suggests that online space that “masks the body and foregrounds discourse” (472) allows for a different performance of gender and a “queer female space in which complex deconstructive performances of all aspects of identity can take place” (472). This practice of queer reading is not necessarily undertaken with the intention of “making texts queer but rather as trying to understand how texts might be understood as queer” (Dhaenens, 2008, 342). Fanfiction is thus often conceptualized as part of a long tradition of queer reading that opens up the possibility for queer lives and experiences to emerge from heteronormative structures.

Until recently, most fan scholarship has paid only token attention to race. To avoid replicating the same narrow view of fandom as centered on white subjectivity, I draw on fan studies

scholarship that challenges the presumed whiteness of fandom and centers race in any analysis of fandom as a transformative or queer space. In my work, I attempt to heed Rebecca Wanzo's call for a new genealogy of fan studies that attends to the "rich history of black fan criticism and acafandom that has never been seen as such" and is inclusive "of African American cultural criticism" (para. 1.1). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2013) work on citational practices, or "a reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies," Wanzo argues that "fan studies in the West has largely been organized around white bodies ... acafandom arguably makes transparent the ways in which pleasures and fears around certain bodies circulate in scholarship: we replicate paradigms that reproduce who we are, what we desire, and what we fear" (para. 5.2). As Benjamin Woo (2020) puts it, "whiteness has been baked into the way that fans and fan scholars conceptualize the field. The persistent "difficulty" scholars have in finding non-white fans suggests we cannot simply "add minorities and stir" to correct these imbalances. Rather, we must learn to see differently" (249). To attempt to "see differently" in my work, I turn to scholars like Jacqueline Bobo and Kristen Warner who study the creative world-making done by Black female fandom who make "Black femininity visible ... by consciously moving mediated women of colour, who often occupy supporting roles, to the centre, transforming them into leads in fan-produced discourse. The objective of this sort of subversive act is to create imagined moments of identification and representation for an audience that rarely, if ever, gets the opportunity to see an actress of colour in a leading role" (34).

I further draw on another recent and vital addition to the growing work on race in fandom, André Carrington's (2016) *Speculative Blackness*, the first book to consider the comprehensive historical contributions of Black fans to fandom and media discourse and analysis. Considering the spaces of potentiality that Black fans carve out as creative starting points, Carrington draws

on Stuart Hall who “argues that approaches to Blackness in popular culture are incomplete if they only pursue negative critiques of the way dominant narratives facilitate racial marginalization because creativity has also thrived in conditions of subordination” (13). While Carrington echoes Wanzo and Warner in counselling that participatory fandom must attend to critiques made by racialized fans in a way that fully engages with wider political and structural issues of race and white supremacy, he also stresses the world-building potentiality of the creative work done by fans “on the margins” – work that does not need the approval of white fans to thrive. In his words, “[work] on the margins of these narratives that links them to cultural frames of reference beyond their horizons can offer alternative perspectives on the possibilities available to the fantastic genres” (224).

My research also specifically seeks to address the under-theorization of adolescent fans in fandom, particularly as they interact with sexually explicit material. Although a comprehensive study on the demographics of fanfiction readers and writers has not yet been undertaken (and may ultimately prove unfeasible given the diffuse and widespread nature of online fandom), there is sufficient evidence that a significant number of fans who engage with fanfiction (much of it sexually explicit) are adolescents (Duggan, 2021; Hunting, 2019; McLelland, 2011; Tosenberger, 2008). Despite the significant number of teenagers present in fandom, particularly since its move onto online platforms, relatively little fan studies work has focused on their experiences or creative work. Recently, a series of interrelated articles by Lauren B. McInroy, Ian Zapcic, Oliver W. J. Beer, and Shelley L. Craig have sought to address this gap in research. These articles, written between 2018 and 2022, focus on Canadian and American queer teenagers and young adults who participate in online fandom and reveal the importance of online fan spaces for some LGBTQ+ youth. In one article, teen respondents ranked fanfiction websites

(e.g., Fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own, Wattpad) as their second-most important online sources of mental well-being (McInroy, 2020, 1879). Another article discusses the results of a survey on queer adolescent identity-development in online fan spaces and reveals that for over 70% of respondents, fandom was an important space of exploration and experimentation. While these articles are necessarily limited in geographical scope and cannot be extrapolated to fandom globally, they do, however, strongly suggest that for teenagers and young adults, fandom can be an important space of exploration, discovery, and validation.

To discuss the experiences of queer teenagers in online fandom, I further draw on research that exposes the messy, discordant, and fraught experiences of queer teenagers in negotiating and exploring their sexuality – particularly when it runs into conflict with adult desires to educate and protect (Adams, 1997; Gilbert, 2007; Kristeva, 2007; Levine, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2006; Stockton, 2009; Winnicott, 2010). One significant impulse that governs interactions between adults and adolescents is the adult desire to guide, protect and educate teenagers, particularly when it comes to sex and sexuality. Tracing the development and invention of the category of adolescence in North America back to the first half of the twentieth century reveals some of the thinking that governs this desire to protect and educate (Adams, 1997; Lesko, 2012; Moran, 2000). Mary-Louise Adams (1997) traces the invention of adolescence from early Freudian theories that posited puberty as a stage of human sexual development during which the sexual impulse settles into "its definite normal form" (Freud, 2011, 55) to the post-World War II era during which concerns about the future of the nation in North America were conflated with concerns about proper adolescent sexual development. In this thinking, in order to secure the future, the next generation had to be carefully guided through the transitional time of adolescence so that they could cultivate the correct morality – the development of which is

inextricably tied to proper heterosexual development (Adams).

An understanding of adolescence as a tenuous time vulnerable to corruption and deviancy remains central to contemporary characterizations of teenagers who are in the process of coming-of-age into adulthood. Teenagers remain ambiguously and precariously positioned between past childhood innocence and the potential (and danger) of future adulthood. In fact, it is nearly impossible to claim an absolute definition of adolescence, as it continues to be defined primarily as a transitional time between childhood sexual innocence and adult sexual maturity; as neither sexually innocent nor sexually mature, but instead at risk of sexual corruption (Levine, 2002). Accordingly, in my project rather than attempting to define the inherently murky and possibly indefinable category of adolescence, I draw on theory that exposes how this category has been mobilized by adults to position young people as at-risk of harm and in need of protection, particularly from too-early exposure to sex and sexual narratives (Moran, 2000). Harm, as Kathryn Stockton (2009) explains, is “anybody’s pleasure, an adult’s or a child’s, that comes to children (even to their ears) before it is time” (61). A particular temporality concerning when and how children and teenagers should first access sexual knowledge and experience is at play here; one that characterizes young people as “vulnerable and dangerous through pleasure” (62). These same discourses are at work in fandom interactions between adults and teenagers, particularly in debates about adolescent access to sexually explicit fanfiction.

Interactions between teenagers and adults in fandom, however, often transcend discourses of protectionism and education and so I also draw on theory that dispels the notion of a linear, teleological adolescent development and instead posits adolescence as a

relationality (Gilbert, 2007; Stockton, 2009). danah boyd. (2014) suggests that adults “idealize their childhoods and assume digital technology is responsible for the decline in quality of childhood” (16). In its idealization, childhood becomes a repository for “fantasy-tinged ghostly memoirs” (Stockton 6), replete with a sense of utopian futurity requiring the protection and guidance of adults. Put differently, adults imbue the figure of the child both with a sense of sexual innocence and the promise of a future sexuality – a sexuality that must, however, be delayed. Children might, retroactively, be associated with a sexuality, but only, as Stockton explains, “when read through ... future consequences” (14). So, for instance, a child cannot be queer in their present, but may be assigned a queer sexuality as the future adult looks back on their past selves. Childhood is not sexual in its own right, but exists as “a metaphor, a kind of ground zero for the edifice that is adult life and around which narratives of sexuality get organized” (Bruhm & Hurley xiii). Threatening the sexual innocence of children in any capacity thus has the ability to threaten the “edifice” upon which adult subjectivity is built. As Nat Hurley (2011) explains, “[in] allowing for children’s knowledge to be complex and important to the child, [there is] a terrifying unsettling power for the adult. The child looks forward; the adult looks back. It is the adult who can’t bear the point where the gazes meet” (9).

Existing as it does in the liminal, unsettled space between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is also a threat – adolescents are children who must grow up, but in doing so unsettle the edifice of adult subjectivity. In her study of sex education, Jen Gilbert (2007) draws on Julia Kristeva who “troubles the epistemological distinction between the adult and adolescent and considers ‘the term “adolescent” less an age category than an open psychic structure” (48). As such, Gilbert argues for the need to refuse an understanding of adulthood as the endpoint of adolescence and, instead, considers “adolescence, and also therefore

adulthood, [as] a psychological relation” (48). Adult sexuality is “inhabited by the memories, fantasies and experiences of adolescence” (47) – this inhabitation is what puts adult subjectivity at risk. However, in the words of Adam Phillips (2011), while adolescence might both disturb adult subjectivity and make adults feel powerless, these effects also have the potential to be the “two greatest pleasures” (190) in adult/adolescent relationality. He goes on to argue that “[adolescents] present us [adults], often, with insoluble problems because their problems are quite literally insoluble; we have to acknowledge that sometimes to try and solve a problem is to miss the point” (192).

Given that a significant number of teenagers in fandom are queer, I work from Phillips’ suggestion about the “insoluble problems” of adolescence to theorize fandom and fanfiction not as a stepping stone on a linear process of growing up, but rather as an example of what Kathryn Stockton would call “sideways growth.” Pushing back against notions of linear temporality and teleological development, Stockton proposes that there “are ways of growing that are not growing up” (11):

the matter of children’s delay: their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, ‘growing up’) toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness. Delay [...] is tremendously tricky as a conception, as is growth. Both more appropriately call us into notions of the horizontal—what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time (4).

So, rather than seeing growing as finite, expected to eventually achieve a state of completion, “growing sideways” allows us to think of growth as an endless process, one

without any particular set goals and not restricted by age. Traditional notions of growing up are indeed often impossible for many children, particularly those who embody traits that are antithetical to the conventional image of children, such as sex, aggression, or violence.

Some of these children, whom Stockton names queer, are:

1. “the ghostly gay child” queered by their same-sex preference and unable to grow into standards imposed by heteronormativity; and
2. the “child queered by colour” who, given childhood and innocence’s association with middle-class whiteness, is never fully allowed to be a child and thus cannot ‘grow up’ in the traditional sense.

For these children, isolated from, or resistant to, traditional notions of growing up, growing sideways may become an alternative mode of futurity – one that does not have any particular endpoint or purpose – or, as Stockton puts it, “our futures grow sideways when they can’t be imagined as futures” (52). Sideways growth, rather, means that “the width of a person’s experience of ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain to any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (11). I approach the practice of teenagers writing fanfiction, particularly pornographic fanfiction, as a potential site of sideways growth that is outside the purview of any pressure to grow up and allows for sexual exploration not governed by education as well as the imagining of a futurity outside of white heteronormativity.

Importantly for my work on online fandom, theories about adolescent development, relationality and sideways growth take on a particular complexity when it comes to teenage experiences in the digital realm. The Internet, and more recently social media particularly, is often framed as a “conduit to contagion to be contained or countered through traditional

salves to vice and violence, such as the family, the church, or earlier (meaning more wholesome) forms of media consumption” (Gray, 2009, 125). Online risk is nearly always framed around sexual knowledge or sexual experience that is inappropriate, too much, or happens too soon. As Justine Cassell and Meg Cramer (2008) argue, “[the] internet allows for tremendous potential of creative expression – expression that has not necessarily first been vetted by adults. Ultimately, it is when young women construct sexualized images of themselves, or contact strangers, that communication technologies are felt to become dangerous” (68). Sex and sexuality become dangerous sources of corruption for adolescents – corruption that adults must find a way to suppress and control. Yet, running parallel to these discourses of moral panic are those that advocate for the Internet as an important, and productive, place of identity formation for teenagers. For example, in a study about queer youth online, Shelley Craig and Lauren McInroy (2014) explain that teenagers will use social media platforms to construct aspects of their identity that may remain inaccessible to them offline.

To be attentive to the many aspects of identity that inform online experience as well as avoid the kind of scholarship which would cast adolescence as a monolithic white subjectivity, I further turn to work that disrupts the conflation of adolescence with whiteness by bringing together youth studies and critical race theory. The contested terrain of the Internet is not experienced the same way for everyone – particularly for racialized teenagers. While the supposed disembodied, anonymous space of the Internet meant that some early conceptualizations characterized it as a level playing field devoid of inequalities, we know now that this is anything but true. danah boyd (2014) explains that “as teens turn to social media to connect with their friends, they consistently reproduce networks that reflect both the segregated realities of everyday life and the social and economic inequalities that exist within their broader peer networks” (171). Far from utopian

ideals, “youth digital media literacies are radically unequal, structured by lines of class, race, gender, and geography” (Costanza-Chock, 2012, 4). When it comes to race in particular, as Anna Everett (2008) explains, “the notion prevalent in the early days of new media, either that race does not exist on the Internet or that cyberspace represents some sort of halcyon realm of ‘colourblindness,’ is a myth” (129). Digital spaces not only persistently fail in avoiding racism, but often provide the ground for new forms of racial discrimination and strategies that uphold whiteness as the default. This is not to say that racialized teenagers cannot experience online creative play as a site of sideways growth, as the number of fans of colour – both adult and adolescent – suggests, but rather that we cannot theorize a universalized experience of adolescence and the Internet.

My project approaches fanfiction as a form of storytelling that has the capacity to be personal, political, and transformative – a space of play and a site of collective and dialogical storytelling. I do not take a utopian view of fanfiction and storytelling, but instead ask what it *does* and what it *could do*. Dina Georgis (2013) argues that “[story] is the principle of how we make sense of human experience. We are always living out a plot or reading for a plot ... in stories we work out the events that change us. It is our means of becoming and the effect of our creative impulse” (1-2). I suggest fanfiction can be a way of collectively contending with the displacements and disorientations of growing up and growing sideways for racialized and/or queer teenagers. In reading pop culture “for the plot” of our/their own lives, readers and writers turn fanfiction into a fertile ground for explorations of the complexity of adolescence and the negotiation of the categories of child, adolescent, and adult. Fanfiction, as storytelling that is often not only consumed, but often written by adolescents themselves has the potential to do something different than mainstream child and young adult literature

– to produce narratives written by adolescents for adolescents that can speak to the space between adulthood and childhood without becoming a pedagogical tool.

Jen Gilbert (2004) makes the case for the potential of the novel to do this work – to be a place “where [we might] find narratives in education that can approach the ambivalence of sexuality and the difficult work of growing up through adolescence” (233). The novel, as it foregrounds interpretation and world-making “asks us to consider how we read the world, where we find meaning and where meaning breaks down” (233). As interpretation can only ever be partial and polyvocal, the practice of making meaning from literature displaces any concrete sense of absolute truth. Gilbert asks us “what would it mean to see reading as a shared experience of interpreting the world, where one’s ideas would bump up against and be touched by the interpretations of others” (236). I suggest that this practice is at play in fanfiction – as a sense of what Nat Hurley (2011) would call “perverse reading” – in multiple authors reading, writing, and interpreting mass media texts and reimagining and remaking them as part of a communal project of world-making. Hurley describes perverse reading as itself “generative: of surprising interpretations of texts for children, of new modes of sociability, and radical new iterations of stories we all once thought were only for children” (120). Fanfiction readers and writers, as Catherine Tosenberger (2008) explains, “have access to a space where queer sexuality, whether teen or adult, can be depicted in its full, messy, exuberant glory, and the emphasis is on *jouissance*” (201).

I thus draw on theories of storytelling, play, digital space, and sideways growth to explore how/if fandom can offer a more generative way of looking at teenage experiences in the digital realm. In looking beyond moral panics, and the dual impulses to educate and to

protect, I seek to consider what kind of creative work teenagers can generate and what this work can *do* – both for teenagers and for adults who interact with them.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I draw together the threads of queer theory, adolescent sexuality, critical race theory, and fan studies, using debates about teenagers and access to pornographic fanfiction as a starting point for a wider consideration of queer adolescent fans, the generative capacity of fan creative writing, particularly of the pornographic sort, and the relationality between adult and teenage fans. Fanfiction is, by its very nature, an intertextual medium engaging with source material such as television shows and movies that inspire it, wider pop culture discussions about representation, casting, plot, authorial intent, etc., as well as fandom discussions about character, plot, setting, and the impact of storytelling itself. It would thus be impossible to do an analysis of fanfiction without taking into account the wider context in which they are written, read and discussed. Consequently, I will be analyzing stories and discussion from two interrelated online archives:

(1) The Archive of Our Own, a fan-created and fan-run fanfiction archive that was developed as a direct backlash to censorship efforts from other fanfiction and fandom archives.

(2) Current and ongoing debates and discussions (predominantly archived on Twitter and Tumblr) about the presence of fanfiction involving underage characters on the Archive of Our Own, the lack of age-barriers to sexually explicit fanfiction on Tumblr and the Archive of Our Own, as well as the interactions between adult and teenage fans in both spaces.

Working from an understanding of fanfiction as collective, intertextual, and generative storytelling, each chapter of my dissertation involves discourse analysis and a close reading of a mix of fan-generated texts, from fanfiction (including some of my own early writing) to the debates, discussions and creative engagements with fanfiction stories on the Archive of Our Own, Tumblr, and Twitter. By looking not only at how a text is produced and consumed, but the wider social practices surrounding it, critical discourse analysis allows for consideration of the ideological and normalizing effects of discourse and how it works to produce meaning and identity (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1985; Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). Situating fanfiction stories in the wider context of fandom (and social media more generally) allows me to explore the social processes and ever-changing relationality between fans that govern the production of stories and narrative.

A significant impetus for this project was my own extensive personal history with fandom and fanfiction. I have been reading and writing fanfiction since I was a young teenager myself and I return to some of that early writing in this dissertation. Consequently, my project involves both a close reading of some of my own early fanfiction writing as well as autobiographical storytelling, or autotheory. Lauren Fournier (2021) describes autotheory as “the practice of theorizing from the first person” (8). While the term has existed since the 1990’s, it only came to prominence after the publication of American writer Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, a ground-breaking, genre-bending memoir that won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2015. In many ways, autotheory pushes back against traditional notions of knowledge-making that situate it as the purview of an objective outsider. As Fournier explains: “The very integration of auto or autos, the self, with theory in a single term is contentious, especially in light of the historical disparagement of self-reflective work as a supposedly narcissistic and therefore nonintellectual or fundamentally

uncritical mode—and especially when the work is made by women and people of color” (6). In my project, autobiography and autotheory allow me to return to my own early writing and garner new insights into the role fandom played in my own identity exploration and formation.

As this project involves theorizing the experiences of teenagers and young adults, I am concerned with issues of anonymity and privacy. Consequently, I refer to teenage fans either anonymously or using their online pseudonyms. Additionally, the Archive of Our Own (Ao3), the main fanfiction archive I consider in this project, offers the option for authors to make their stories private and only accessible by other Ao3 users. With privacy and consent in mind, therefore, I only analyze stories that are publicly available on the archive and refer to the authors either anonymously or using their online pseudonyms. The only exceptions to this rule are when I refer to stories written by adult fans who have chosen to make their identities and fanwork public (e.g. Aja Romano, Naomi Novik).

Chapter Outlines

My dissertation consists of this introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. My second chapter considers the history of censorship debates involving fanfiction archives including Fanfiction.net and Livejournal, particularly as they relate to fanfiction in the *Harry Potter* fandom. Using an attempt by Warner Brothers to remove what they considered “objectionable content” from a *Harry Potter* fanfiction archive as a jumping off point, I consider how histories of fandom censorship are reliant on a conceptualization of adolescence as a stage in sexual development that is perpetually at risk of corruption. By looking at a series of other moments of fandom censorship, I further question what drives the adult impulse to protect teenagers from

encountering pornography online, as well as why this impulse is centered so predominantly around sexual narratives, rather than racism, violence, or anything else that might be considered harmful.

In my third chapter, I trace the figure of the Mary Sue, a character type that has long been associated with teenage readers and writers, from her first appearance in fanfiction in 1973 to her presence in modern fandom. Although Mary Sue is most commonly associated with bad, cringy, or immature writing, I argue that she provides a vehicle for readers and writers lacking representation to “see” themselves in pop culture narratives as well as a space to explore sexuality and desire outside of the supervision of adults. To do this, I return to a piece of fanfiction that I wrote when I was fifteen years old, years before I came out as queer, to retrospectively consider how reading and writing fanfiction provided a mechanism for me to begin to imagine myself as queer, even in a physical setting in which queerness felt dangerous and impossible.

Building off the previous one, my fourth chapter discusses the use and evolution of the genre of Mary Sue/self-inserts beyond my own personal experience. Specifically, I consider a subset of Mary Sue fanfiction known as “Canon Sues,” or the use of canon characters as authorial avatars, as well as a relatively new genre known as Reader-Inserts to consider how other fans, specifically racialized teenagers, engage with Mary Sue fanfiction and the barriers, both structural and personal, that can limit which fans have full access to fandom as a space of queer possibility. In the first half of this chapter, I contrast the reception and use of two “Canon Sues,” Bella Swann from Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, and Shuri from Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018). I argue that while both characters have been used as a vehicle for teenage girls to insert and see themselves in popular culture, wider fandom reception to both characters has

been drastically different, specifically as a result of the anti-Black racism leveled at the character of Shuri and her fans. In the latter half of this chapter, I turn to the genre of Reader-Inserts to argue that, even when racialized fans create space for themselves within fandom, structural barriers often limit its potential and popularity. While Black fans have worked to create their own space within the genre of Reader-Inserts, using the tag “Black Reader,” the Archive of Our Own’s tagging policies make using and finding this tag difficult to the point of limiting its usage.

My fifth chapter explores the shifts that have taken place in online fan communities between my teenage years and today. Specifically, I return to 2007 to trace fandom’s mass-migration to Tumblr from the blogging site Livejournal, alongside the creation and development of the Archive of Our Own to argue that these two significant shifts in online fan space caused a concurrent change in the way adult and teenage fans come into contact and interact with each other. These shifting dynamics have given rise to a group of fans dubbed anti-fans, anti-shippers, or simply, antis, who are invested in ridding fandom of stories and representations they deem harmful. Anti-fans position adult fans, particularly those that are supportive of the Archive of Our Own’s liberal content policies, as potentially dangerous threats who are encroaching on online spaces meant primarily for teenagers. Yet, simultaneously, adult fans use the label of “anti” as a quick, easy way to dismiss the concerns of teenage fans as unimportant and unreasonable. I argue that both sides of this debate are reliant on a conceptualization of growth that positions childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as three separate life-stages with adolescence as the primary stage of sexual development and identity formation. An understanding of adolescence and adulthood as discrete life-stages results in teenage fans being suspicious of adults who remain in fandom long after they are supposed to have grown out of it, and adult fans being dismissive of teenage fans for their supposed immaturity and lack of experience. However, in the final section of this chapter, I argue that by shifting from a

teleological framework of growth and development to a queer temporality in which adulthood and adolescence are co-inhabitants of the same self, online fandom can be read not as a space for the age category of “teenagers” but as a space of ongoing adolescence. Put differently, reading fandom as an adolescent space regardless of the ages of individual fans reveals how fan spaces can be avenues for identity exploration at any life-stage.

Chapter 2

Harry Potter and the History of Fandom Censorship: Adolescent Development, Childhood Innocence, and the Politics of Harm

On April 27, 2019, blogger and long-time fanfiction writer Aja Romano tweeted:

A weird thing happened today; I got an email from someone wanting to know why there's a chapter of my most popular HP [*Harry Potter*] fic missing from Fiction Alley, the HP fanfic archive. And I'd completely forgotten about this. This missing chapter is a relic from a CRAZY BYGONE FANDOM ERA (Romano, 2019, emphasis in original).

According to Romano, back in 2003 Warner Brothers reached out to the Fiction Alley [FA] site owner “to tell her that they were okay with FA hosting slash (queer fanfic), except for 3 popular fics in particular ... BECAUSE THEY WERE JUST A LITTLE TOO SMUTTY” (Romano, 2019, emphasis in original). As she goes on to note, a media corporation reaching out to a fanfiction site was not an unheard-of occurrence, particularly in the early days of the Internet. Lucasfilm, for example, made a concerted effort to shut down fanfiction archives that were hosting slash stories in an attempt to quash the part of online fandom that was invested in writing *Star Wars* characters as queer (Romano, 2018). Yet, as Romano goes on to explain “this was the ‘modern’ era of fandom and the internet, and J.K. Rowling was supposedly cool with fanfic” (Romano, 2019). It had been years since the last time a media company had attempted to shut down a fanfiction archive. So, what prompted Warner Brothers to revive the practice? Romano (2019) has thoughts about this as well:

This is hilarious given the state of Harry Potter fanfiction at the time. In the wilds of livejournal, people were writing the most insane, obscene, blasphemous, explicit fic

imaginable, but on Fiction Alley, my fic where two teens had sex was too much for Warner Bros.

In fact, that same year Warner Brothers had sent a Cease & Desist letter to the Restricted Section, another *Harry Potter* fanfiction archive. Putting this letter and Romano's experience together, I argue that Romano hones in on Warner Brothers' issue with the story – that it is *teenagers* having sex - and more specifically, *queer* sex – that is the issue, not the fact that the story is explicitly sexual in itself. Full of loaded language, Warner Brothers' letter calls on discourses about presumed childhood innocence, the inherent riskiness of adolescence, and the “harm” of sex and sexually explicit narratives.

In this chapter, I use Romano's fanfiction and its censorship as a jumping off point to consider how histories of fandom censorship are reliant on a conceptualization of adolescence as a stage in sexual development that is perpetually at risk of corruption. I further question what drives the adult impulse to protect teenagers from encountering pornography online, as well as why this impulse is centered so predominantly around sexual narratives, rather than racism, violence, or anything else that might be considered “harmful.”

Risk & Histories of Censorship

Warner Brothers' somewhat-successful attempt to police the content of *Harry Potter* fanfiction archives is hardly the first instance of censorship in online fandom history. Two significant events in particular clearly demonstrate the enduring and pervasive nature of discourses about teenagers, risk, and harm in online spaces.

On September 12, 2002, Fanfiction.net, the first multifandom fanfiction archive, unceremoniously banned and deleted all sexually explicit stories. While it is difficult to find exact statistics outlining the number of stories deleted, particularly given the high emotions and outrage from fans which often resulted in hyperbolic claims, Fanlore (fandom's version of Wikipedia) has amassed sources that point to the deletion of over 60,000 works. In one fell swoop, large swathes of fandom history irrevocably disappeared. In an announcement, Fanfiction.net creator Xing Li made the impetus for the deletion clear:

NC-17 based entries will no longer be accepted ... the highest concentration of them are growing in areas with subjects targeted to younger readers and with increasingly controversial subject matters. However, not all NC-17 based stories fall into this description but as a result of their increasing volume a decision has been made to resolve this problem ("Fanfiction.net's NC-17 Purges").

While acknowledging that many sexually explicit stories do not contain "increasingly controversial subject matter" – a category that was never defined – the administrative team of Fanfiction.net made the decision to ban all NC-17 stories in the interest of protecting younger readers. In linking "younger readers" and "NC-17 based stories" together under the label of "problem," we can see the workings of a discourse that frames teenagers as in need of adult protection from sexual knowledge that comes as too much or too early.

Five years later, in a strikingly similar series of events, another fanfiction archive was also unceremoniously deleted – this time by the social networking site Livejournal. On Tuesday, May 29, 2007, many Livejournal users woke up to find their journals suspended or deleted. Although the suspensions affected journals across a broad range of interests, including role-playing games, book discussion groups, and rape survivor groups ("Strikethrough and

Boldthrough”), fan journals were hit hardest, particularly those in the *Harry Potter* fandom. The immensely popular *Harry Potter* erotic fanfiction archive *Pornish Pixies* found itself suspended for producing material that Livejournal labelled as “child pornography, incest, pedophilia and rape” (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough”). In fact, in what became known as Strikethrough ’07, Livejournal suspended or deleted over five hundred journals that dealt, in one way or another, with the aforementioned topics. The impetus for the suspensions did not become clear until the online-based, right-wing, Christian conservative organization Warriors for Innocence came forward to take responsibility for pressuring Livejournal into taking action. Warriors for Innocence has as its stated goal, “hunting pedophiles where they fester,” and in 2015 a self-professed former supporter posted the following statement on Tumblr addressing the events of Strikethrough ’07:

Addressing the immoral, perverted HP [Harry Potter] Fandom! I am a former supporter of the “Warriors for Innocence” organization, a group dedicated to bringing down the perversion that resided at LiveJournal as of 2007 ... This resulted in “Strikethrough” ... a move that was widely condemned by perverted fanartists and fanfic writers ... Our group tried (and succeeded) to end the liberal idiocy on LJ. Children were viewing these blogs, and were being influenced by immoral behaviours (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough”).

In a statement from an employee, Livejournal reinforced the rhetoric espoused by the Warriors for Innocence that the suspended journals were a potential danger to children.

The goal here was to get journals with profiles that listed "child rape" or "pedophilia" as their interests to know they're not welcome on LJ. Naturally, the list of sites submitted by groups like WFI [Warriors for Innocence] likely included some friendly

fire, including legitimate communities for abuse survivors, or, yes fandom ... Hell, half of our volunteers and team members actively participate in fandom. We're not going to ever deliberately do anything to endanger that. But we do make human mistakes from time to time, especially when we're under the gun to Do Something To Protect The Children (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough”, emphasis in original).

A close look at both statements reveals some strikingly similar ideas about teenagers and sexually explicit fanfiction. Both statements assume that the people creating sexual content are always adults and that children and adolescents are only passive, and often unwitting, viewers and readers. What neither of the groups took into account is that “it is young people themselves who create, disseminate and consume the majority of fictional representations” (McLelland, 2011, 470) of sexually explicit fanfiction in *Harry Potter* fandom. In an analysis of the events of Strikethrough '07 as they relate to Australian child pornography legislation Mark McLelland (2011) considers the “pollution fear” (469) espoused by Livejournal and the Warriors for Innocence who are concerned with protecting children from “contamination by age-inappropriate knowledge” (469). Put differently, there is an assumed inherent risk that children and adolescents exposed to sexual material will be polluted or contaminated by it and authorities, in this case the administration of Livejournal, are thus under a moral obligation to protect underage fans.

The idea that sexually explicit content is a potentially corrupting or contaminating influence on the precarious innocence of children and teenagers is not an ahistorical one and in fact has its roots (in the North American context) in post-World War II ideas of family, nation, and futurity. As I explained in my introduction, my dissertation focus is primarily on North American fandom and as such I am concerned with how the category of teenager was

developed and is deployed in North America. Despite its seeming naturalness, adolescence as a distinct age category is a relatively recent invention in Canada and the United States. Arising in large part because of changing social circumstances in the post-World War II period, adolescence as a marked period of transition between supposed childhood innocence and full mature adulthood is rooted in white, middle-class anxiety about the future of the nation (Adams, 1997).

After World War II, and following Freudian sexual development theory, concerns about the future of the nation, specifically Canada and the United States in this case, became conflated with concerns about the proper moral development of adolescents. In this thinking, white, middle and upper-class teenagers had to develop properly in order to reproduce with each other and thus, replicate a specific formulation of the nation – one which idealized the white, middle-class family. In order to secure this future nation, the next generation of white youth had to be carefully guided through the transitional time of adolescence so that they could cultivate the correct morality – the development of which is inextricably tied to proper heterosexual development.

As Mary-Louise Adams (1997) argues in her study of postwar youth in English Canada, throughout the uncertainty of the Cold War years, an idealized heterosexual family structure became almost a patriotic obligation and any deviation from this norm was “indicative of lack of investment in citizenship, ‘moral’ failings or ‘character’ weakness” (23). Given that, in Freudian frameworks, heterosexual development is a fragile, easily corruptible process, “adult heterosexuality was not taken to be an inevitability; it was an achievement, a marker of safe passage through adolescence” (10). Accordingly, the future of the nation became reliant on the “correct” development of teenagers through the fraught, easily-corruptible time of adolescence.

As teenagers were “in the process of becoming sexual” (60) any deviation from the proper path of normalized heterosexual development would result in delinquency and leave one “lost in abnormality forever” (66), threatening not only teenagers themselves, but the nation as a whole. It therefore became imperative for adults to develop strategies to shepherd teenagers through the time of adolescence and attempt to both keep them sexually innocent for as long as possible while simultaneously directing them to the appropriate [hetero-] sexual object (Moran, 2000).

This understanding of adolescence as a tenuous time vulnerable to corruption and deviancy remains central to contemporary characterizations of teenagers who are in the process of coming-of-age into adulthood. Teenagers are ambiguously and precariously positioned between past childhood innocence and the potential of future adulthood. In fact, it is nearly impossible to claim an absolute definition of adolescence, as it continues to be defined primarily as a transitional time between childhood sexual innocence and adult sexual maturity; as neither sexually innocent nor fully sexual, but instead at risk of sexual corruption (Levine, 2002). Accordingly, rather than attempting to define the inherently murky and possibly indefinable category of adolescence here, I am more concerned with how this category has been mobilized by adults to position young people as at-risk of harm and in need of protection, particularly from too-early exposure to sex and sexual narratives (Moran, 2000).

As a caveat here, the statements from Warriors for Innocence, Livejournal, and Warner Brothers all universalize the supposed innocence of youth and the positioning of teenagers as at-risk but, as Hannah Dyer (2020) explains, innocence is not evenly afforded to children and teenagers. In the second half of this chapter, I consider how this uneven distribution of childhood innocence both positions racialized children and teenagers as the source of risk

rather than at-risk and simultaneously leaves them exposed to unrecognized sources of harm. Here, however, I am concerned with how the universalizing discourse of childhood innocence is used as a tool by corporations like Warner Brothers to censor narratives they do not approve of – queer narratives in particular.

Coming right in the middle of the censoring of Fanfiction.net in 2002 and Strikethrough in 2007, the Cease & Desist Warner Brothers sent to the Restricted Section archive is a notable example of a corporation mobilizing discourses about corruptible adolescence and the harm of sexual content in order to justify censorship. The letter reads:

The sexually explicit content of the fan fiction available at www.restrictedsection.org, which is plainly based on characters and other elements of the fictional world created by Ms. Rowling in the Harry Potter books, is a matter of serious concern to our client. In addition, our client Warner Bros, which owns the film and merchandising rights to the children's series of Harry Potter books, is concerned to protect the integrity of its Harry Potter properties. For the avoidance of doubt, our clients make no complaint about innocent fan fiction written by genuine Harry Potter fans. There is plainly a very real risk that impressionable children, who of course comprise the principal readership of the Harry Potter books, will be directed (e.g. by a search engine result) to your sexually explicit website, which you will appreciate most right-minded people would consider wholly inappropriate for minors. Plainly the warnings to the effect that children under 18 should not access your website do not in fact prevent minors from doing so. Indeed, such warnings may well serve simply to entice teenagers to your site (“Restricted Section”).

Harm, as Kathryn Stockton (2009) explains, is “anybody’s pleasure, an adult’s or a child’s, that comes to children (even to their ears) before it is time” (61). In asserting that the “very

real risk that impressionable children” would be able to access a “sexually explicit website” would be obvious to “right-minded people,” Warner Brothers is both furthering this conceptualization of harm and making the protection of children and teenagers a moral imperative for adults. Here, the young readers of *Harry Potter* are in serious risk of being harmed or corrupted if they are able to read the explicit fanfiction available in the Restricted Section archive. A particular temporality concerning when and how children and teenagers should first access sexual knowledge and experience is at play here; one that characterizes young people as “vulnerable and dangerous through pleasure” (62). This timing is not within the control of young people themselves, denied agency or autonomy by laws meant to shield them from harm, but in the hands of adults who supposedly know more and better.

Warner Brothers uses language like “entice” to emphasize the vulnerability of young fanfiction readers - they are easily seduced and unable to prevent themselves from reading “harmful” material. As “omnivorous and indefatigable, suggestible but independent, adolescents don’t want to be balanced ... [and] love extremes of everything” (Bonami & Simons, 2003, 4) – lest they be lost to these extremes, teenagers need the guiding hand of adults to find balance. Adolescent fans cannot be trusted to only access fanfiction that they are comfortable with, even when it is clearly rated, so it becomes the responsibility of adult fans to remove all temptation. As Kerry Robinson (2012) explains, “[t]he strict regulation of children’s knowledge of sexuality not only operates to constitute and maintain definitions of the child, youth and adult, but also relations of power within and across these categories” (270).

Of particular significance is the type of fanfiction Warner Brothers was most concerned with removing. As Warner Brothers themselves put it, they are not concerned with “innocent fan

fiction written by genuine Harry Potter fans.” What is “innocent” fanfiction and who are “genuine” Harry Potter fans? If we look at which three pieces of fanfiction were targeted by Warner Brothers on Fiction Alley, all three were about a sexual relationship between the characters of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy or, as Aja Romano put it, teenagers having [queer] sex. Using Warner Brothers’ own words then, what is “wholly inappropriate for minors” are stories that portray consensual queer sex between teenagers. Given the abundance of sexually explicit fanfiction about heterosexual couple and/or adults that is easily accessible to “impressionable children,” Warner Brothers’ narrow focus on Harry/Draco stories points to a belief that queerness is a particular threat over and above that of teenagers reading and writing explicit material.

In her Twitter thread, Romano was able to identify the story and the particular chapter that Warner Brothers found so objectionable. She offered a link to the unedited version of the chapter on her personal website. Reading it, the most explicit material came in the following excerpt:

Harry pulled Draco’s head up roughly and snaked his tongue over his throat. Draco shivered and gasped, and Harry abruptly broke away. “That makes two of us,” he said fiercely, pulling Draco’s boxers open and finally freeing him. I should have done that a long time ago... Draco’s eyes darkened in arousal, and he pulled Harry’s mouth to his, wanting more of his tongue. Harry kissed him deeply as his hands shakily found what they had been longing for. Draco cried out sharply as Harry began to touch him, and instantly Harry was fighting to keep control. They scrambled for one another, hands flying eagerly over bodies, moans

and sighs bringing them to the surface of pleasure and then pulling them even farther in [...]

Harry had the faint impression that Draco had had a lot more experience than he let on—but this and other thoughts were suddenly driven out of his mind when Draco, without warning, took Harry into his warm, wonderful mouth. Harry let out a scream of absolute ecstasy, so full of lust and longing it nearly sent them both over the edge. Draco immediately pulled away, eliciting a curse and a growl from Harry, who managed by a miracle to stay in one piece. With a chuckle Draco began teasing him, playing, demanding that Harry come inside of him as Harry tried to remain coherent and failed. His brain whirled; he hardly knew where he was or who he was; it was heaven, it was hell, oh, god, it was amazing... he heard himself moaning Draco's name again and again, felt Draco's mouth open around him, saw amber-gray eyes sparkling into his, and then he knew nothing but the sparks shooting through him, wracking him with pleasure, carrying him through a tidal wave of pleasure unlike anything he'd ever felt [...]

His hardness was incredible, almost as incredible as the way he felt and tasted in Harry's mouth. Hands tangled in Harry's hair; he heard the low gasps, felt Draco's body heave and contort from sheer pleasure, and finally got what he'd craved for an eternity—

Draco came, gasping his name, and Harry knew, with the kind of certainty that can only be felt, that he had made the right decision (Romano, "Love Under Will").

I quote this story at length to note its overall *lack* of explicitness. While the story is undeniably sexual in nature and the descriptions of sex are clear, the story makes relatively little mention of particular body parts, and the focus remains on the emotions and physical sensations felt by the characters. Rather than offer a graphic depiction of sex, the story focuses on the connection between the characters, the pleasure they feel in exploring each other's bodies, as well as the relief at finally having desire sated. An outsider looking for sexually explicit material would have a difficult time finding this particular section of this particular story – Romano takes great care to avoid referring to genitalia or any specific sex act. While I do not want to stray into the realm of conspiracy theory, this does raise the question of how the story appeared on Warner Brothers' radar in the first place and whether it involved a similar targeting of fandom as in the case of *Warriors for Innocence*.

Regardless, it is clear that someone took the time to bring this story to the attention of Warner Brothers who then reacted with the desire to control the “risk” to “impressionable children.”

Why the specific investment in censoring or restricting access to sexually explicit queer stories? I argue that in the discourses of sexual development, risk, and harm I laid out earlier in this chapter, queerness and queer sex poses a particularly potent danger. In these discourses, queerness is, first, something that “threatens the essence of childhood” (Abate & Kidd, 2011, 6) by first introducing children to sexuality too early, and later, being an identity linked to suffering and victimization in adolescence. So often, these “innocent victimizing and pathologizing notions of sexual minority youth” (Driver, 2007, 234) result in discourses that frame queer adolescence as something that must be mediated through adults, lest it become harmful.

It is not that this particular case of censorship is definitely rooted in homophobia or anti-queerness (although this may be the case and has certainly been the case in other cases of fandom censorship), but rather that it reinforces beliefs that depictions of young queer sexuality must come from official sources (namely experienced, knowledgeable adults).

Whitney Monaghan (2019) explores how this ideology works in her analysis of the growth of depictions of queer girlhood in film. While the past few decades have seen a substantial rise in representations of queer girlhood on film, Monaghan argues that these depictions still fall into two dominant tropes: “the *coming out as coming of age* narrative” and queerness as “a passing phase of girls’ adolescent development, through which queer sexualities, identities, and experiences are written off as temporary deviations from a linear path toward heteronormative adulthood” (98-99). It is when stories about queer teenagers deviate from these well-established tropes that they become a potential risk to young readers and writers. A story that ends with a character coming out to a trusted adult is acceptable. A story that involves queer characters exploring desire, pleasure, and sexuality is not. As Monaghan puts it, stories about “queer experiences and desires” that do not “valorize linear and progressive life narratives and celebrate certain hetero- normative milestones (such as birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, monogamous relationships, marriage, reproduction, parenthood, anniversaries, retirement, and death) ... are excluded from this straight line of development and queer identities are thus uncelebrated, rendered as deviant, or deemed aberrant in heteronormative culture” (100). Moments like the censoring of Romano’s story and Strikethrough ‘07 serve to prop up a hierarchy of acceptable queer stories – one with sexually explicit stories near the bottom.

Nearly all the fanfiction targeted during these moments of censorship has since been deleted and the absence of this fic tells a profound story. What also tells a profound story, however,

is what stories are *not* targeted by those supposedly invested in protecting teenagers from harm. Harm, in nearly every case of fandom censorship, is firmly located within sex and sexual narratives, and stories that involve graphic violence, misogyny, and racism never face the same scrutiny or backlash. It is to this apparent contradiction that I now turn.

What is “harm”?

All the moments of censorship in fandom that I have traced so far in this chapter have two important things in common – a particular concern with protecting young people from harm, and the belief that harm comes primarily from too-early or too-often exposure to sex and sexual narratives. Harm caused by racism or racist narratives rarely, if ever, receives the same kind of sustained backlash, let alone attempts at censorship like the ones I describe in this chapter. I contend that this is in large part because of who we imagine the victim of harm to be. If, as I argued earlier in this chapter, the impetus to protect children and teenagers from harm derives from anxieties about the future of the family and the nation, then the figure that must be protected is the one who would ensure that future – the future heterosexual adult. Yet, as Nancy Lesko (2012) explains, in the North American context, the nation and the family are inextricably tied to ideas of whiteness. So, the imagined victim of harm is the *white* child/teenager who has the potential to become the future white heterosexual adult. Tracing the history of the Livejournal community *Pornish Pixies* alongside the historical moments in fandom known as Strikethrough ‘07 and RaceFail ‘09 reveals the shifting and uneven application of the concepts of harm and innocence.

Pornish Pixies is a Livejournal (now InsaneJournal) community for posting and sharing pornographic *Harry Potter* fanworks. It was formed on November 4, 2003, on LiveJournal by a

fan using the pseudonym switchknife as a place for fans to post fanworks that were sexually explicit and/or pornographic. Fans could post their stories to the community at any point, but the moderators also ran regular writing challenges. In fan communities, writing challenges are events wherein individual creators are tasked with creating fanwork (fanart, fanfiction, fanvideos, etc.) according to a set of predetermined criteria. This might involve writing to a prompt, writing on a particular theme or about a particular event (i.e., Christmas, the COVID-19 pandemic, graduation from school, etc.), writing stories based on art or vice versa, Big Bangs (writing a long story with a set minimum word count), etc. Because *Pornish Pixies* has a focus on sexually explicit stories, their writing challenges were typically focused on sexual themes and activities. For example, they ran challenges focused on characters' first sexual experiences, threesomes, bondage, magical sex, etc. It was during one such writing challenge that the *Pornish Pixies* moderators posted a writing prompt containing a racial slur about a Black character, Dean Thomas.¹ Despite sustained backlash from fans, the *Pornish Pixies* moderators did not take down the prompt and it was eventually reported to Livejournal administration. Importantly for this chapter, unlike during Strikethrough, Livejournal took no action in response to reports, but instead maintained that the moderators had not broken any rules by posting the slur and were free to keep it up as it did not violate Livejournal's Terms of Service.

If we compare Livejournal's reaction to the reported use of a racial slur and their reaction to complaints from Warriors for Innocence about sexual content, the double-standard here is clear –

¹ The Livejournal post containing the slur and the backlash from fans have since been deleted (likely in Strikethrough '07. I am recounting this event both from my own personal memories of it as well as based on posts from other fans who were active in *Harry Potter* fandom at the time.

the threat of children being able to access sexually explicit fiction was enough to get the community summarily deleted. The threat of children being exposed to racial slurs was not.

Until quite recently (and in many cases continuing on into the time this chapter was written) discussions about censorship in fandom focused on debates about freedom of expression and consent. Race was, at best, a side concern. Yet by revisiting moments of censorship in fandom history and looking for what Jacques Derrida (1995) might call “traces” or a “mark of the absence of a presence, an always-absent present,” (254) we can see that the conspicuous lack of discussion about race and racism in historical accounts of Strikethrough actually points to the centrality of race, specifically whiteness, to concepts of harm, innocence and adolescence. Revisiting historical moments of fandom censorship ostensibly meant to protect children and teenagers and refocusing on the operation of race and racism means not only looking at a diversity of experiences but approaching the entire idea of adolescence in fandom from the standpoint that adolescence, innocence, development, and protection are embedded in white supremacy.

Tracing the connection between adolescent development and the nation, Nancy Lesko (2012) explains how worries over racial progress, male dominance and nation-building coalesce in the figure of the teenager. If whiteness is central to citizenship in the United States and Canada, then the project of adolescent development becomes “a technology of whiteness, of masculinity, and of domination, even when boys and girls of colour [are] the ones being developed” (11). Put differently, adolescent sexual development is reliant not only on following the proper heterosexual path, but that of a white heterosexuality central to national progress. For racialized children and teenagers, this means occupying the fraught position of being both subject to the pressure to develop along the proper moral path, yet simultaneously

being unable to ever attain the white, middle-class ideal. Racialized children and teenagers are thus positioned as potential *risks* to the white family and the white nation, rather than being included among those whose innocence is at-risk of harm. In the framework of a teleological theory of sexual development, therefore, it is only white, heterosexual youth who can logically reach the endpoint and enjoy full sexual maturation. As Hannah Dyer (2020) puts it, “[w]hat becomes inscribed into the figure of the child has to do with the political future desired by adults” (126). When desirable political futures remain bound up in images of the white, middle-class family, as is the case in mainstream neoliberal narratives, the white child needs protecting, while the racialized child is a potential threat. In *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood*, Hannah Dyer describes this unequal distribution of childhood innocence as “the untimely time of childhood, in which the child knows too much or not enough and is either withheld from danger or is construed as a threat” (56).

Coming back to *Pornish Pixies*, Livejournal justified the deletion of the community during Strikethrough because they were under pressure to “Do Something to Protect the Children,” yet a racial slur in the same community provoked no similar call to action.² Comparing this event and Strikethrough reveals how companies like Livejournal (and fan communities themselves) have shifting and uneven understandings of the concepts of childhood and harm. In the case of Strikethrough, children are innocent beings who must be protected from sexual narratives lest they be damaged or harmed by reading them too early.

² Prior to Strikethrough '07, Livejournal's Terms of Services only stated that it restricted content “expressing interest in, soliciting, or encouraging illegal activity” (“Strikethrough and Boldthrough”) and did not list specific content restrictions.

In the case of the *Pornish Pixies* writing challenge, the potential harm and damage to Black children caused by reading a racial slur directed at a beloved character is not even considered. Monique Morris (2013), in her study about how Black girls are repeatedly and systemically “pushed-out” of schools and the education system, discusses the “adultification” of Black girls, and Black children more generally. Morris explains that adults see Black girls as less innocent and childlike than their peers, often because of qualities they have had to develop as survival mechanisms. As Morris says “to be ‘loud’ or ‘defiant’ – two infractions that may lead to the use of exclusionary discipline in schools – are qualities that have historically underscored Black female resilience to the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism” (5). The impact of this goes far beyond the education system and discipline, however. Black children are often considered to be more mature than their peers, more sexually aware (and experienced), and less sensitive to pain and harm. Livejournal’s double standard in response to reports of potential harm is a clear example of this. Sexual narratives are a threat to a universalized conceptualization of childhood innocence and must be stopped, while exposure to racial slurs is not a threat to Black children because they are not afforded the same presumption of innocence.

Official attempts at (or responses to) censorship are far from the only places where this unequal distribution of innocence is apparent. Fannish discussions are rife with the same unquestioned assumptions about childhood innocence and the location of potential harm. Returning to yet another important historical moment in fandom, RaceFail ‘09, illustrates this clearly. RaceFail ‘09 took place from January to May 2009, although resonances from

these debates and discussions remain contentious and unresolved in fandom as of 2020.³ It occurred “within a complex network of discussions relating to the cultural makeup of fandom and is connected to a history of work by fans of color and white allies” (Gatson and Reid, 2011, para. 3.4). Where and how it began is a subject of considerable fandom debate. Some fans argue that it began with posts by fans of colour about racism in fandom, others that it resulted from responses by racialized fans to statements made by white fans and authors (“RaceFail ‘09”). Regardless, much of the crux of the early debates centered on a post made by professional fantasy author Elizabeth Bear, a white woman, in January 2009. On January 12, Bear made a post on her blog entitled “whatever you’re doing, you’re probably wrong,” in which she offered advice for “writing the Other” (Bear, 2009, para. 1). Two of the central points of her post were to not think of “the other” as other, but to see everyone as “just people” and to “consult people you know who live what you are writing about” (Bear, 2009, para. 4).

The following day, Livejournal blogger Deepa D. (“RaceFail ‘09”) made a post that she characterized not as a direct response to Bear’s words, but an articulation of her personal emotional reaction. As an Indian reader of fantasy, Deepa D. considered the Eurocentricity of fantasy literature and the corresponding trend in fantasy of appropriating African, Native American and Asian characters. On the same day, Avalon Willow, a black woman, wrote a direct response to Bear in which she pointed out the racist portrayal of a black man in Bear’s novel *Blood and Iron*:

³ It is impossible to attach exact dates to RaceFail ‘09, as discussions did not abruptly end in May 2009. However, fandom archivists who compiled links to the discussions and debates generally agree that these five months were when the bulk of the discussion occurred (Tablesaw, 2009; Wong, 2009).

It's about my personal confusion that an author so highly spoken of by people I respect, would write about a magical negro who gets bridled by a white woman after trying to kill and eat another white woman and, to my horror, becoming some sort of beast of burden/big buck protector; my horror at watching the humiliation of yet another black man so that a white woman can be empowered in front of her peers (Avalon Willow, 2009, para. 6).

These responses drew a lot of attention to Bear's post and her comment section filled up with responses, both positive and negative, and significant debate, which soon moved into the larger space of Livejournal ("RaceFail '09"). Discussion quickly grew to include voices of other professional authors, including MacAllister Stone, Patrick Neilson Hayden, and Will Shetterly, several of whom were dismissive and insulting to Bear's critics ("RaceFail '09"), calling them abusive and insinuating a lack of intelligence. Conservative approximations of RaceFail '09 estimate that over ten million words were written in the space of four months (Editor, TWC, 2009).

In an interview with *Transformative Works and Cultures*, fans Coffeandink, Deepa D., Jackie Gross, Liz Henry, Oyceter, Sparkymonster, and Naamen Tilahun identified the way in which RaceFail '09 made visible the white privilege inherent in white fan responses to being called out on their racism.⁴

Coffeandink: People being checked on their privilege repeatedly have defensive reactions and have conversations about it in public – crying white women's tears. These

⁴ Some fans preferred to use their fandom pseudonyms in this interview and others their given names.

reactions are natural – there’s nothing wrong with the emotions, but in having them publicly, you’re saying the entire world should be focused on you.

Sparkymonster: It’s a way for people to affirm their status as a nice white lady.

Coffeeandink: It’s a way of affirming the public space is white, as a space where white concerns are paramount (Editor, TWC, 2009, para. 6.1).

In this exchange, we can again see the uneven distribution of harm in the way white fans responded to RaceFail. “Crying white women’s tears” as Coffeeandink puts it, is a means for white fans to turn the narrative of oppression back onto themselves. Discussing the emotion of pain, Sara Ahmed (2015) posits that “given that subjects have an unequal relation to entitlement, then more privileged subjects will have a greater recourse to narratives of injury. That is, the more access subjects have to public resources, the more access they may have to the capacity to mobilise narratives of injury within the public domain” (33). Ahmed continues by establishing how pain is reduced to narratives of injury that require compensation. Narratives of injury come out when white fans respond with hurt, anger, and denial to accusations of racism in fandom. The negative response by white fans to critique masks the presence of racism in fandom and the effects of white supremacist thinking, effectively turning attention back to white pain and allowing whiteness to remain unexamined. In the case of RaceFail, discussions about the impact of racism in fandom get redirected to how accusations of racism harm white fans. The harm done to racialized fans by the ubiquity of racism in fan spaces is dismissed as far less than the pain felt by white fans.

Rukmini Pande (2018), in *Squeezed from the Margins*, her deeply important intervention into the field of fan studies and its long disregard of race, talks about the “deeply alienating” (13)

experience of being “a fandom killjoy – that is, for one’s pleasure to threaten the invocation of a broadly-inclusive, woman-centric, and queer-coded community” (13). Pande highlights the double-bind faced by fans of colour in fandom where they either have to consume fanworks that repeatedly and obsessively focus on only white characters or be forced to be “someone who consistently brings unwanted drama to fan spaces” (13). Racialized children and teenagers who are part of fandom are faced with the same double-bind and dismissal of their concerns as being unwanted drama.

This is particularly clear when censorship itself becomes the topic of conversation in fandom. In modern debates about fanfiction and censorship, which I will discuss in far greater detail in my fifth chapter, adult fans will repeatedly call on younger and newer fans to “learn their fannish history” as a means of proving the harm done by censorship. Yet rarely does this ever mean returning to a moment like RaceFail ‘09 – one which centered the harm done by racism and white-centric narratives. Instead, it means returning to Strikethrough and the idea that fans and fandom are under attack from the “purity police” intent on removing all mention of sex from fanfiction under the guise of protecting the children. In this sense, fandom is a microcosm of the wider issue of how historical narratives center the experiences of white people and treat the histories and concerns of racialized people as side notes or dismiss them altogether.

Conclusion

The real problem, the kind of thing that would make De Niro in *Casino* groan, “Amateur night!”, starts when people imagine that they can stop immoral behavior by policing immoral characters, phrases, or scenes in literature. They’re looking for the wrong thing. They’re sniffing for depictions of immorality, when they should be scanning the silences,

the evasions. There's a very naïve theory of language at work here, roughly: "if people speak nicely, they'll act nicely" — with the fatuous corollary, "If people mention bad things, they must like bad things." The simplest refutation of that is two words: Victorian Britain. Victorian Britain carried out several of the biggest genocides in human history. It was also a high point of virtuous literature. Because they were smart about language. They didn't rant about the evil of their victims or gloat about massacring them, at least not in their public writings. They wrote virtuous novels, virtuous poems. And left a body count which may well end up the biggest in world history (Gary Brecher, 2020).

In this chapter, I have used several important moments in fandom history to consider the varying and ambiguous deployment of concepts of childhood, adolescence, harm, and innocence. We continue to see the deployment of these particular conceptualizations of harm and innocence in Tumblr's recent decision to ban adult content. Tumblr is the main social media site that fans migrated to after Strikethrough made Livejournal defunct for fannish purposes.

In December of 2018, Tumblr moved to mass censor "adult" content across its platform, which it defined as "photorealistic imagery or photography – images, videos, or GIFs – with real humans that include exposed genitals or female-presenting nipples or depict sex acts is **not allowed** per our guidelines" (D'Onofrio quoted in Hale-Stern, 2018, emphasis in original). The Tumblr community proceeded to spend the next month mocking the use of the term "female-presenting nipples," creating posts that simultaneously laughed at the absurdity of the term, while also pointing out Tumblr's clear double-standard when it came to censoring harmful content. Given that part of Tumblr's justification for the move was their "continued, humble aspiration that Tumblr be a safe space for creative expression, self-discovery, and a deep sense of community (D'Onofrio quote in Hale-Stern, 2018), many users pointed out how this only seemed to count

when it came to sex. For years, users on Tumblr had been pointing out (on their own blogs as well as through the Tumblr's official reporting function) the proliferation of alt-right, white supremacist ideology on the site. And yet, as of June 2022, Tumblr has yet to take action on this content, but it has followed through with its decision to ban sexual content. White supremacy, racism, antiblackness, and xenophobia, in Tumblr's estimation, do not threaten "safe space," but female-presenting nipples are a threat that must be acted upon.

As Gary Brecher (2020) says in the quotation that opens this section: "They're looking for the wrong thing. They're sniffing for depictions of immorality, when they should be scanning the silences, the evasions." Tumblr, Livejournal, Warner Brothers, and Fanfiction.net have all spent years looking for the wrong thing – looking for quick and easy ways to appease censors and to prove that they're Doing Something to Protect the Children. In every statement I have analyzed in this chapter what is left unsaid is *which* children are in need of protection and *what* they should be protected from. If we "scan for the silences, the evasions" in their statements, the universalizing discourses of childhood innocence break down and two things become clear – that "children" in their statements actually mean white children, and that queer and racialized children and teenagers are not only not in need of protection, but actively pose a threat to white children and their future reproductive capacity. Yet the question remains - is the preponderance of sexually explicit narratives in fandom a threat to children? What impact do these narratives have on the experiences of queer and/or racialized children and narratives? It is to these questions that I turn in the following chapters.

Chapter 3

Am I Mary Sue? The Transformative Capacity of Self-Insert Fanfiction

Children may need an unpoliced arena of popular culture if they are going to develop autonomy from their parents and learn to think for themselves. If traditional media, such as television, comic books, and films, can spark this kind of creative and social interaction, the potentials of new media technologies are even greater. The term, “interactivity,” speaks to a popular desire for media we can actively reshape to reflect our own life experiences, desires and agendas (Henry Jenkins, 1997).

I have a vivid memory of reading my first piece of fanfiction. I was fourteen years old and living in Elliot Lake, a small mining town in Northern Ontario. At the time, the only queer person I had ever (knowingly) met in real life had recently been run out of town after a campaign of bullying and harassment led her to quit her teaching job. I had been grappling for at least a year with the sense that something about me was different; something about me did not slip easily into the fabric of the town I was living in. It took a long time for me to figure out what that something was.

Then I discovered fanfiction. The first story I ever read was poorly written, the characters were inconsistent, the plot didn't make any sense, and the grammar was atrocious. And yet, I remember being struck by a sense of connection and recognition that I did not know how to explain at the time. I don't recall all the specific details of the story, but it was about the television show *Boy Meets World* and involved one of the teenage characters, Topanga Lawrence, dealing with her first experiences of queer desire while in a heterosexual relationship that she felt pressured into. Reading that story was the first time I recall wondering if I might be queer – if my queerness was the *something* that made my hometown feel like an ill-fitting

sweater. So, I kept reading, often staying up on our basement computer until long after the rest of my family had gone to sleep. Under the cover of darkness, I devoured terrible sex scenes and overblown emotional revelations, all the while feeling a sense of community and belonging my hometown had never offered me. Over the years, fanfiction not only introduced me to my own queerness, but it brought me to feminism and anti-racism; it gave me lifelong friends and it allowed me to explore my sexuality and desires in a way nothing else ever has. In the more than twenty years since I read that first story, I have repeatedly read accounts from fans expressing that fandom did the same for them – provided a space of possibility for them to explore their identities and desires.

This sense of fanfiction's queer possibility that so many of us remember exists in stark contrast to depictions of queerness in much of the rest of pop culture. Stories told about queer and trans youth in mainstream media are almost invariably concerned with narratives of coming out, dealing with homophobia, and coming of age (Monaghan, 2019). Fanfiction, alternatively, opens up possibilities for other narratives of discovering and experiencing queerness, including stories about pleasure, desire, and joy. In this chapter and the next, I focus on two genres of fanfiction commonly associated with teenagers: the Mary Sue, or authorial self-insertion, and the Reader-Insert, to consider the queer possibilities that these genres offer. Using a mixture of autoethnography and discourse analysis, I explore these genres as a form of collective, dialogical storytelling that opens up space for queer narratives and an exploration of sex and sexuality beyond institutional settings intent on education and protection.

In this chapter, I trace the figure of the Mary Sue, a character type that has long been associated with teenage readers and writers, from her first appearance in fanfiction in 1973 to her presence in modern fandom. Although Mary Sue is most commonly associated with bad, cringy, or

immature writing, I argue that she provides a vehicle for readers and writers lacking representation to see themselves in pop culture narratives as well as a space to explore sexuality and desire outside of the supervision of adults. To do this, I return to a piece of fanfiction that I wrote when I was fifteen years old, years before I came out as queer, to retrospectively consider how reading and writing fanfiction provided a mechanism for me to begin to imagine myself as queer, even in a physical setting in which queerness felt dangerous and impossible. Additionally, I contrast the experience of writing an explicit sex scene in the final chapter of my story, with the narratives and information offered in sex education to argue that fanfiction provides a space for “revolt” and sexual exploration far beyond what institutional sex education can offer. Finally, I consider how my recent return to writing fanfiction at a time when I was discovering my neurodivergency and re-discovering my gender identity is indicative of the potential for what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls “sideways growth.”

Mary Sue: A Brief History

Mary Sue is another, often derogatory, name for a self-inserted character based on the author. In Mary Sue fanfiction, the author will insert themselves – often an idealised version of themselves – into a story, usually as the protagonist. Sometimes this will take the form of an author crafting an entirely new character based on themselves that they then introduce into the narrative. Other times it can involve “alternate universe” fanfiction where the author changes a canon character’s personality and appearance to be more like themselves. While it is impossible to identify the first instance of an author inserting a version of themselves into a story, we can trace the figure of the Mary Sue in fanfiction back to her first appearance in 1973.

Kristina Busse (2016) identifies the first use of the term Mary Sue in the *Star Trek* fic “A Trekkie’s Tale” written by fan writer Paula Smith in 1973. At the time, fanfiction was published mostly through the medium of zines and distributed either through mailing lists or at fan conventions (Coppa, 2013). Although many of the stories in these zines were focused on canon characters, Captain Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek* in particular, some fans, including Smith, began to notice a pattern of stories focusing on non-canon characters who find themselves aboard the starship *Enterprise* and are swept into adventure. Smith, an avid *Star Trek* fan, found herself frustrated by these stories as she was mostly interested in reading about the adventures and relationships of canon characters, not original characters or author self-inserts. In a 2011 interview she states: “... you could see that every Trek zine at the time had a main story about this adolescent girl who is the youngest yeoman or lieutenant or captain ever in Starfleet. She makes her way onto the Enterprise and the entire crew falls in love with her. They then have adventures, but the remarkable thing was that all the adventures circled around this character. Everybody else in the universe bowed down in front of her” (Smith quoted in Walker, 2011). As a result of her frustration, Smith penned “A Trekkie’s Tale,” a satire of the self-insert fanfiction she was so frustrated by. The story centered on an original female character she named Lt. Mary Sue, and became quite popular, with fans calling it “hysterically funny” (“Mary Sue”).

Paula Smith’s Mary Sue was a reflection of fan frustration and in many ways ended up defining the characteristics that make up a Mary Sue: idealized, physically-attractive, typically female, characters who are universally admired and are often overpowered compared to their canon counterparts. Specifically, Smith’s story parodied the way Mary Sue is often introduced into a story only to take centre stage, side-lining all the canonical characters and often developing a romantic relationship with the male protagonist. Smith describes her as a type of wish fulfilment character that allows the writer the opportunity to insert themselves into the story. In short, as

Kristina Busse (2016) puts it, the label Mary Sue “shorthands a variety of criticisms, but centres on the introduction of a non-canon infallible female character who takes over the action” (160). While Smith’s story itself now exists only in archival form, the name Mary Sue has become enshrined in fandom terminology and has even crossed over to more mainstream pop culture criticism.

Smith’s story, however, was only the beginning. Innumerable other parodies of self-insertion stories abound in fandom and stories that unironically feature a Mary Sue are often maligned to the point of mockery in online fandom spaces. For example, during my teenage years when I first began reading and writing fanfiction, the now defunct website Godawful Fanfiction (GAFF) was a popular hub for fans to dissect and critique – or more accurately, tear apart – other fan’s stories, a process that was colloquially known as “sporking,” and one of their favourite targets was Mary Sue. An entire section of the GAFF forums was dedicated to the mockery and sporking of Mary Sue fanfiction. Members would post excerpts (or snippets) of a story alongside their humorous, often sarcastic, analysis of the story’s supposed failings. As the website was set up as a message board, other members would then join in on ridiculing the story. GAFF was deeply controversial during the height of its popularity with some fans seeing it as no different than “wisecracking about a movie with friends” while others calling it “public ridicule for amusement” (“Godawful Fanfiction”). Whatever the case, GAFF left its mark on fandom, particularly in the idea that fanfiction can be categorized as good or bad and that this separation is an objective and self-evident process. A further legacy of the website is in the enduring idea that there are tropes that, just by virtue of existing, make a story bad or worthy of mockery, none more so than Mary Sue. In fact, when *The New York Times Book Review* reviewed Godawful FanFiction in 2004, they singled out Mary Sue as one of the tropes that might prompt readers to visit the site:

When you've had your fill of slash, gen, and 'ship fiction (fanfic terms for various character entanglements), when you groan at the arrival of each new "Mary Sue" (a ludicrously empowered author proxy), when you find yourself wishing every story you read had been beta-ed (i.e. edited), then it's time to visit Godawful Fan Fiction, where the worst fan fiction on the Web is filleted with the hot knife of peer criticism ("Godawful Fanfiction").

Although GAFF became defunct in 2009, the enduring dislike of Mary Sue did not. Unofficial fan groups like Critics United, a loose collection of fans on the website Fanfiction.net, still routinely critique and ridicule any story they feel features a Mary Sue-like character. Other fans have created a "Mary Sue Litmus Test" for authors to use to test their original character and make sure they are not creating a Mary Sue. As a result, the figure of the Mary Sue, originally created by Smith as a satire of a specific genre of what she considered badly-written fanfiction, has come to be used as a stand-in for a much wider variety of criticism. Mary Sue has alternately been used to describe any female character that is perceived as the author's self-insert, or any supposed bad writing that contains female characters – original or canonical – as well as female characters written by "immature" teenage girls. And, particularly in recent years, Mary Sue has been used as an insult to describe canonical female characters who are accused of being too perfect or too powerful – basically any woman who is perceived to be infringing on the sacred space of male characters. To put it simply, Mary Sue has become an all-too-easy way for a viewer to dismiss any female character they personally do not like.

Yet, despite this history of ridicule and the ongoing idea that self-insertion is the mark of a bad or inexperienced writer, Mary Sue continues to show up in a significant portion of fanfiction published today. What then drives authors to write a Mary Sue, or self-insert, knowing that they

will almost certainly be opening themselves up to criticism and mockery? Camille Bacon-Smith (2006) offers a potential reason for why female authors in particular might so often create a Mary Sue:

Fans often recount the scorn they experience for their “masculine” interest in science fiction and action-adventure. These readers grew up in a period during which active, even aggressive, behavior was acceptable for prepubescent girls who were expected to put away their grubby corduroys and baseballs, their books that chronicled the male fantasies of exploration and adventure, when they entered adolescence. With the teen years, girls were expected to turn to makeup, curlers, and dresses with stockings and high-heeled shoes to attract the attention of boys who were winning acclaim on the football fields and basketball courts of their local high schools (Bacon-Smith, 2006).

In essence, Bacon-Smith argues that Mary Sue is an attempt for adult women writing fanfiction to balance their desires to be the active hero of the story with their simultaneous longings for the culturally approved traits of beauty, sacrifice, and romantic love. Here, Bacon-Smith is responding specifically to mass media of the 1970s and 1980s that relied heavily on gendered tropes and stereotypes, particularly in genres considered more masculine, like science-fiction and fantasy. Writing Mary Sues, in her argument, was a response to a highly gendered media landscape that relegated women to the roles of romantic interest, damsel-in-distress, or femme fatale. Mary Sue, alternatively, not only held a vital place in the story, but was, in fact, the figure the story centered around.

Even in the story Paula Smith identifies as being the impetus for “A Trekkie’s Tale,” we can clearly see the author’s attempt at better, more active representation. In Smith’s words, the story “not only had the young teenaged girl who was a lieutenant come on the bridge, where Kirk and

Spock immediately fell in love with her – I think Scotty and McCoy did as well – but they all backed off and were very respectful because she only had eyes for Chekov. So, during the adventure, everybody beams down to the planet and everybody gets captured by the aliens, and this character manages to spring them because—literally—she has a hairpin. When they get back to the ship, she's sick. She had caught something down there and she dies. And then she resurrected herself...” (Smith quoted in Walker, 2011).

Much of what Smith describes here is not uncommon for a *Star Trek* plot (alien adventures, deus ex machina escape plans, miraculous resurrections), but becomes unrealistic or annoying when “a young teenage girl” is the one driving the action. Yet, it is precisely this dismissal of young teenage girls that many Mary Sue authors are responding to in their writing. In reviewing media aimed at teenage girls, movie critics often use language like “impressionable” and “insipid” to describe audiences, perpetuating cultural conceptions of teenage girls as overly emotional, conformist and lacking in criticality or taste (Bode, 2010). The result is a media landscape that often dismisses television and film that centres the subjectivities and experiences of teenage girls while celebrating coming of age stories about teenage boys. In fact, many common criticisms of Mary Sue – that she is overpowered, unrealistically attractive, and takes over the story – mirror the characteristics of many of the most popular male protagonists in media. For example, Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars* is a young, naive farm boy who falls into adventure and ends up discovering his own immense power and familial connections that make him the central figure in a galactic war. Yet, fans of all genders celebrate the character, even over forty years after the release of his first movie. These same characteristics in media featuring a young female protagonist, however, are often seen as worthy of mockery and dismissal, with many being branded with the label Mary Sue.

Consequently, adolescent girls are often left with shallow or stereotypical representation and shamed for enjoying media in which their subjectivities are centered. It is no surprise, therefore, that many teenage fans turn to writing original fiction and fanfiction as a method of writing themselves into stories. Kristina Busse (2016) suggests that “[l]ooking at Mary Sue as a particular instantiation of representing identificatory desires permits us to behold self-insertion fics not only as part of a larger spectrum of fan fiction, but also as an exemplary way in which fans explore and engage with their favourite media texts, their own identities and desires” (159). Mary Sue allows fans an opportunity to “merge our own lives with that of fictional universes, to address our own experiences and emotions within the worlds of our favourite texts” (168). To illustrate more specifically the space of exploration that Mary Sue fanfiction can provide, I now turn to one of my earliest pieces of fanfiction writing – a self-insert Mary Sue.

Beyond “Coming Out”

When I was approximately sixteen years old, I began writing a self-insert fanfiction called “Because You Loved Me” (after the Celine Dion song of the same name) in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandom. My self-inserted character was named Angelica (my naming skills were perhaps not the most creative), a teenage girl who moved to Sunnydale, California (where *Buffy* was set) during season three of the show. Angelica had a mysterious past and strange magical abilities, including telekinesis and the ability to control energy, and was immediately drawn to the character of Faith, another vampire slayer with issues with authority and a similarly mysterious past. In the story, the characters meet after Angelica is attacked by a vampire while walking home from a late-night band practice. Faith, who is out patrolling for vampires when she stumbles upon the attack, manages to rescue Angelica and the two characters strike up a friendship. On the advice of her friends, Faith decides to keep the truth about the existence of the

supernatural from Angelica, unaware that Angelica is hiding magical powers of her own. Over a series of meetings at coffee shops and in school, Angelica and Faith form a deep friendship and develop an attraction for each other, all the while attempting to solve the mystery of several murders in town and keeping their respective secrets. The climax of the story comes as an epic battle between the protagonists and a group of cultists who are trying to summon a demon. During the battle, Angelica is forced to use her powers to save herself and Faith, thus inadvertently “outing” herself as magical. The characters then realize that they are both part of the supernatural world and confess their feelings to each other before having sex in the final chapter of the story. The story spawned three sequels which focused on the evolution of Faith and Angelica’s relationship as they progressed through college.

Returning to this story after more than twenty years has been a revelatory process (and a bit of an exercise in humility), both in terms of the identities and desires I can retrospectively see myself grappling with, and in how I can see early and undeveloped attempts at responding to media representation in my writing. When I wrote this story, I was in the middle of high school and struggling with both understanding and admitting my own queer desires to myself. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, my hometown was a strongly Christian place and had a deep undercurrent of homophobia running through it. Out of what hindsight has allowed me to identify as self-protection, I would not come out, even to myself, until I was living in Toronto as a university undergraduate student. Yet, in returning to my early writing, especially “Because You Loved Me,” my investment in queer narratives and queer readings is clear, but not always in the most obvious elements of the story. Indeed, in my story the most obviously queer element, the relationship between Angelica and Faith, proceeded without either character struggling with their identity, the reactions of those around them, or the threat of homophobia. In fact, on the surface, the main obstacles the two characters face in getting together had nothing to

do with queerness. Rather, it was Angelica's fear of others discovering her magic and Faith's misguided sense of duty in keeping the supernatural secret that kept them apart for most of the story.

Throughout the story, Angelica is preoccupied by her feelings of being an outsider and her inability to trust others with her secret. For example, despite their deepening friendship, Angelica continually worries that revealing her magical abilities will cause Faith to abandon her. During one conversation, Angelica obliquely voices these fears:

I looked at Faith from behind her coffee cup. I could feel tears pooling in the corners of my eyes. "You ... you don't really know much about me. There are ... things about me you might not like," I whispered.

"What kinds of things?" the brunette replied, her open eyes shining with concern.

"Just ... sometimes I feel like such a freak," I mumbled, already feeling stupid for saying anything. God, why do I do this? Sometimes it's like I want people to hate me.

Henry Jenkins (1992) suggests that at least part of the appeal of fan fiction is to "efface the gap that separates the realm of [the writer's] own experience and the fictional" (173). Throughout the story, Angelica has recurring anxiety about how others will react to her hidden magical abilities and struggles with fully accepting them herself. Even without being fully aware of it at the time, in retrospect, this story can clearly be read as a conglomeration of my teenage fears and anxieties about accepting my own queerness while living in a place that felt unsafe. While I was unable to voice these fears, or the desires that underpinned them, even to myself, I was able to articulate them through writing myself into a narrative I loved and connected to. As Hannah Dyer (2020) argues, "[when] queer desires and subjectivities are repressed, their expression requires a large

amount of creativity and fantasy because they are shrouded in shame” (26). “Because You Loved Me” was written less than a year after a teacher was run out of my hometown for being queer, at a time when queerness to me represented the possibility of danger and unbelonging. While at the time, I could not yet visualize an actual future in which I could be queer, “Because You Loved Me” became a space where queerness could be conjured in ways both conscious and subconscious. While writing fanfiction did not erase the experience of living in a homophobic town, it did allow me to explore my sexuality in a space that felt safer, and which kept queer possibilities open for me so they could be revisited at a time when it felt safe to do so. In this sense, “Because You Loved Me” can be read as writing that answers Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1993) call “to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled” (3). I argue that for me, and other fans like me, writing fanfiction became a method of smuggling queer representation past even my own impulses to disavow and repress my sexuality.

And yet, while my retrospective analysis of this story reveals the queer desires and impulses I was struggling with at the time, as well as my own fears and anxieties put to page, my actual experience of writing this was a predominantly joyful one. Ika Willis, in her 2006 study of Mary Sue fanfiction, argues that fanfiction has a tendency to attract readers and writers “desiring subjectivity” (163), particularly in its capacity to allow young fans to imagine queerness in texts that may not contain any canonical queer characters or experiences. While *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is now recognized for its portrayal of one of the first queer relationships (that between the characters of Willow and Tara) in a television show meant for teenagers, at the time I wrote “Because You Loved Me,” the only references to queerness on *Buffy* were via jokes and subtext. In fanfiction, however, I was free to play with the characters in whatever manner I chose.

Indeed, reading fanfiction as a space of play provides insight into the kinds of identity-building work occurring in a space that is often seen as frivolous to many.

Playing, as D.W. Winnicott (2005) posits, is something that happens in the liminal space between our interior and exterior worlds. Existing neither fully inside nor outside the individual, playing offers us the experience of a “non-purposive state” (74) where free association and “a creative reaching-out” (75) can take place. Occurring at the border between self and other, in play children take aspects of their internal imaginative worlds and project them onto external objects in a process of creative interpretation and world-making. Culture, as Winnicott explains, is an extension of play – a continuing engagement with a “potential space” of symbolic meaning-making that exists between the self and the not-self. Thus, if we can see play as something more than the provenance of children, the acts of making art, writing music, creating humour, crafting narratives, and other creative work can be ways for adults to access this liminal space of imaginative potential.

Winnicott, however, cautions us that creative work that *seeks* to explore identity or find an authentic selfhood is doomed to fail – play must be “non-purposive” – it can only be play with no goal attached. This is where I suggest that digital spaces, particularly those dedicated to the pursuit of creativity, can potentially be a place of play. Fanfiction, typically something with no monetary, experiential, or other goal attached, might be one such online place of creative world-making for adults and teenagers alike. “Because You Loved Me,” written before I was consciously aware of my own queerness, offers an example of the potential of non-purposive play. It was not written with any conscious intention to explore or declare my own queerness, but instead became a place for me to work out fears, anxieties, desire, and identity.

Additionally, in revisiting “Because You Loved Me,” I further recognize how my writing was also an unwitting critical response to the notably limited representation of queer teenagers in the media in the mid-nineties. Discussing queer girlhood on screen, Whitney Monaghan (2019) identifies two dominant tropes by which queer teenagers, and specifically queer girls, have been represented: the *coming out as coming of age* narrative and the *just a phase* narrative. The *just a phase* narrative, which asserts that queer adolescence is a phase that must either be avoided or passed through in order to reach full, heterosexual adulthood, I discussed in a previous chapter as part of the ideology that results in attempts to restrict teenage access to sexual and queer narratives. The *coming out as coming of age* narrative in mainstream stories about queer girlhood works to effectively render coming out as a singular moment in time that must occur in order to reach full adulthood. As Monaghan explains, it is an attempt to neatly fit queer experiences into a heterosexual temporality that “effectively erases the lives and experiences of queer youth beyond the moment of coming out” (99). Coming out becomes a singular moment in which a character articulates their sexuality or gender identity as an effective end to their storyline, after which they are often relegated to the background of the narrative or written out entirely. As a result, “this trope simplifies greatly a complex negotiation of identity and represents very little of queer adolescent life outside the climactic verbal expression of sexuality” (100).

Further, queerness is often relegated to metaphor in movies aimed at teenagers, especially those in the science fiction and fantasy genres. For example, the *X-Men* film series is rife with subtext that posits mutation as a metaphor for queerness. However, these films rarely contain any canonically queer characters, effectively rendering queerness something that exists purely as metaphor and never as lived experience. One element of “Because You Loved Me” that stood out to me when revisiting the story after years of training in media analysis, was in my use of

magic as a metaphor for queerness in a narrative where the main characters were already explicitly queer.

In many ways, “Because You Loved Me” is, in fact, a coming out story, although I was not fully conscious of that at the time of writing. Interestingly, however, my self-insert, Angelica, does not struggle with coming out as queer, but instead her fears revolve around coming out as *magical*. Magic does not stand in for *queerness* itself, but rather it is the particular experience of *coming out* that is relegated to metaphor. While I am not making any claims to any conscious or purposeful subverting of queer tropes in media, I find it significant that as a queer teenager, I found joy in writing the development of a queer relationship but could not yet conceptualize even an avatar of myself actively *coming out* as queer. In retrospect, I suggest that while I was not yet ready to come out as queer, even to myself, playing with the idea of coming out allowed me to practice the experience in a setting that was safe and under my own control. By the time I was ready to come out in real life, I had already been grappling with my fears and anxieties about it for years, a type of practice that I argue made the actual experience easier to conceptualize and less overwhelming to experience. Indeed, fanfiction offers the ability to play with or practice many other experiences, including that of sexual desire. It is to this idea I now turn.

Playing with Sex and Desire

In revisiting the final chapter of “Because You Loved Me,” which contains an explicit sexual encounter written years before I had much sexual experience beyond kissing, I was struck with a vivid memory of struggling to imagine what sex between cis women might entail. While I had read several pieces of fanfiction that contained explicit queer sex scenes, the experience of

actually trying to write one brought home to me how limited my conceptualization of sex was. At that point in my life, my parents had discussed sex with me multiple times and I had experienced sex education in school starting in grade five, when I was eleven years old. I was not unfamiliar with the concept of sex. Yet, as is often the case with sex education in North America more broadly, each of these discussions had revolved around the mechanics of penis-in-vagina sex, as well as how to keep myself safe from disease and pregnancy. Pleasure, desire, and non-procreative sex had rarely, if ever, been discussed, particularly in school settings. And while I was overtly familiar with the internal anatomy of female genitalia, I had never been taught about the external structure of my own genitals, particularly in the context of sex.

In her 2016 book *Girls & Sex*, Peggy Orenstein explains that the three main models of sex education in North America in recent years have been abstinence-only, abstinence-plus, and comprehensive sex education. Although it was never identified to me as such at the time, the sex education I experienced in middle school was abstinence-plus, which Orenstein says differs from abstinence-only sex ed in that it allows for the fact that the average age of a first sexual encounter is eighteen and does not promote restricting all sexual experience until after marriage. However, abstinence-plus education still teaches that the only foolproof way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections is through abstinence. While this may seem like a failing of sex education to some, it is actually sex education living up to its original intended purpose. As Mary-Louise Adams (1997) argues, sex education came into existence in North America at a time when concerns about the future of the nation-state lead to concerns about the future of the nuclear family and the impetus to guide children and teenagers on the path to proper sexual development. Sex education was thus originally conceived as a tool to properly educate children and teenagers so they would grow up to be productive, heterosexual members of society who fulfilled their obligation to reproduce the nation-state. As Hannah Dyer (2020) puts it,

“[allowing] children to determine their own exploration of the world is a gambling of future returns for the nation-state; thus, the pedagogical intervention of sex ed helps to conjure certain modes of futurity. Over and above its actual curricular lessons, sex education in schools is too often marshalled to accomplish the work of the adult’s psychosocial needs and politics” (126).

Even when I experienced comprehensive sex education later in secondary school, the focus only expanded nominally to include discussions of the emotional impact of sex while discussions of queerness were still relegated to a single class focused on homophobia and HIV/AIDS.

Discussions of pleasure and desire were non-existent. In fact, as Orenstein (2016) points out, none of the most common types of sex education in North America has any focus on pleasure, particularly female pleasure, and specifically leaves out any mention of the location or function of the clitoris. As a result, as Orenstein discovered in researching her book, many girls turn to pornography, both visual and written, in order to “figure out how things fit together” in a practical sense. When asking her respondents where they learned about the actual mechanics of sex and pleasure, Orenstein found that most cited pornography, music videos, romance novels, and fanfiction, as opposed to traditional sex education. Sex education, as Jen Gilbert (2007) argues, is obsessed with managing risk as an effort to protect the innocence of youth. These concerns manifest in an endeavour to control adolescent sexuality that goes “astray or arrive[s] too early or too often” (52) yet do so in a manner that does not tolerate the requirement for revolt – “this task of leaving one’s parents behind to invent new selves” (54) – in adolescent sexual development.

In revisiting my fanfiction, I recognized one of my own attempts at a form of “revolt” against formal sex education in my, perhaps over-the-top, use of the word “clitoris.” As a consequence of my lack of knowledge about female sexual pleasure, in the process of writing “Because You

Loved Me,” I necessarily had to research how sex between women actually worked. My father had studied kinesiology in university and kept his old textbooks (one of which, I recall, was titled, simply, *Sex*) on the bookshelf in our basement, where my sister and I usually spent our time and where the family computer was located. Many years later, my father told me that while he made sure to talk with us about sex, he had purposely left his books where we could access them to give my sister and I a chance to look through them on our own time and without feeling like we were being supervised. As a teenager, I remember feeling an illicit thrill every time I would open one of his old textbooks and study the diagrams, and as an adult I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to learn and research on my own terms. And it was to one of these textbooks that I turned when, in reading a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfiction story in which Buffy was giving oral sex to her friend Willow, I was taken aback when I did not recognize the word “clit.” When I looked the word up in the textbooks on the bookshelf behind me, I remember feeling almost betrayed that its existence and purpose had never been explained to me. Without fanfiction, I am uncertain how long it would have taken me to discover how much knowledge of my own anatomy I was lacking.

So, when I wrote the explicit sex scene in “Because You Loved Me,” late at night, after the rest of my family was in bed, I had a fervent desire to include mention of the clitoris as frequently as possible. I may have gone overboard:

Faith and I fell onto the bed together, still kissing, our tongues battling for dominance. She pulled back and looked at me and I felt like she could see right into my soul with her dark chocolate eyes. “Has anyone ever licked your clit before?” she asked in a husky whisper.

My face turned bright red at the word ‘clit.’ I’d never heard that word used before!

“N...no...” I stuttered.

“Have you ever touched your own clit before?” Faith asked with a smirk on her face.

“Yes!” I responded defensively. “I’ve touched my ... my own ... my clit before,” I whispered, my face still burning red.

Amateur writing and overzealous enthusiasm for new anatomical discoveries aside, my experience reflects that of a lot of teenagers, particularly women and/or queer folk rarely have their bodies and sexual experiences explained to them by educators or other institutions. While my actual information about anatomy and sexuality came from a textbook, it was fanfiction that stirred my curiosity and prompted me to do my own research into my body and how it worked, particularly in terms of pleasure.

Yet, even in an academic setting, sharing this short explicit excerpt from my story feels like a dangerous sort of transgression. In a society that tends to disregard and disavow representations of female pleasure, expressions of sexual desire from teenage girls are often targeted as being dangerous, immoral, and even illegal. In a study on media reactions to teenage girls engaging in sexting activities, Amy Adele Hasinoff (2013) argues that the ease of communication offered by the Internet and mobile phones leads to concerns that “girls are more likely to make inappropriate sexual decisions when communicating with these technologies” (453). While the technology of which Hasinoff speaks may be new, the panic and concern about teenagers and technology is not. Within the last two centuries, similar panics have sprung up around the “vice of the telegraph” and the dangers of “illicit wooing” (Cassell & Cramer, 2008, 60) over the telephone. Teenagers, particularly young women and girls because of their presumed innocence

and naiveté, have long been positioned as at-risk by new and dangerous forms of corruption made possible by advances in communication technology. As with these earlier forms of technology, the Internet, and more recently social media, have been framed as a “conduit to contagion to be contained or countered through traditional salves to vice and violence, such as the family, the church, or earlier (meaning more wholesome) forms of media consumption” (Gray, 2009, 125). According to Hasinoff, the risk of teenagers engaging in sexual behaviours online is typically framed around sexual knowledge or sexual experience that is inappropriate, too much, or happens too soon. It is not the Internet itself, but rather its conduit to sexual knowledge and experience, that is the danger.

While I do not disregard the potential dangers inherent in teenagers engaging in sexual communication online, I argue that is only one side of the story – one that ignores the potential for discovery and exploration offered by digital technologies. A report from the American Psychological Association “states that by becoming cultural producers rather than just consumers of media, girls can resist sexualization because it enables them to be more effective cultural critics” (Hasinoff, 2013, 45). By taking control of their own sexual narratives, teen girls can resist being framed solely as sexual objects and instead take agency in exploring their own desires while simultaneously speaking back to representations of adolescent sexuality in the media. I argue that fanfiction, possibly even more than other forms of adolescent sexual media production practices like sexting, allows for this reclaiming of sexual agency due to its inherent anonymity and focus on pleasure, particularly queer and/or female pleasure. In recalling her early experiences of fandom as a teenager, a fan using the pseudonym *goddammitstacey* (2014) explains, “fanfiction has allowed me to explore sexuality and gender and kinks to my heart’s desire and all without ever having to face the judgmental looks of the real world.” Catherine Tosenberger (2008) further tells us that “fandom is an arena in which fans of all ages, genders,

and sexual orientations can tell stories to satisfy their own desires; this freedom is especially valuable for younger fans, whose self-expressions are heavily monitored in institutional settings. Fans are able to tell narratives of sexuality in a space not directly controlled by adults, and do not have to shape their stories to adult sensibilities and comfort levels” (202).

Writing “Because You Loved Me” not only offered me a space to explore my sexuality and queer desires, but it did so in a way that provided agency and control over my own narrative. The process of writing that story was not about arriving at a conclusion or a realization of myself as a queer sexual being and thus did not serve a clearly definable purpose or have a recognizable endpoint. Instead, the experience of creating Angelica and writing her (my) story became part of a tapestry of experiences of sexuality, pleasure, and desire that continues to evolve to this day. In this way, writing fanfiction can be read as a form of what Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) calls “sideways growth.” In fact, during the time of researching for this dissertation, I found myself returning to writing fanfiction for the first time in several years and in the process, came to discover that its promise of a space for exploration was still open to me.

Growing Sideways with Fanfiction

During the process of writing this dissertation, I made a couple of significant discoveries about myself: namely, that I am nonbinary and autistic. These revelations have made revisiting my early writing in detail in this chapter illuminating and revealing in unexpected ways. First, in the ways in which hints of my nonbinariness and autism were evident in my writing long before I was consciously aware of either and second, in a newfound passion for writing fanfiction that I had been missing for many years. I wrote my first fanfiction story since entering grad school in December 2020, nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic and a year-and-a-half after the death

of my father. In many ways, I felt lost, disconnected, and adrift in both my personal and professional lives. I had recently joined the *Schitt's Creek* fandom and had read dozens of stories revolving around the character of David Rose, a pansexual man whose behaviour and dress many fans read as gender nonconforming or genderqueer.⁵ Within the span of two months, I had written eleven stories focusing on David and his partner Patrick and came to the realization that I was using David in the same way I used Angelica – as a fictional avatar of myself that allowed me to explore dimensions of my identity I was not yet ready to speak aloud.

In David, I saw a gender fluidity and disavowal of gender roles that appealed to me. Although I would not necessarily classify my writing of David as a Mary Sue or self-insert, the boundaries between the character and myself often felt blurry and transient and allowing myself to explore his gender fluidity provided a space for me to simultaneously test out my own increasing frustrations with binary gender and womanhood. During this same time, I stumbled across the term “gender euphoria” and realized that it was what I was experiencing when writing David Rose. Florence Ashley and Carolyn Ells (2018) define gender euphoria as “a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person’s gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth” (2). The term is often used as gender dysphoria’s positive homologue as both an attempt to discuss trans and nonbinary genders without framing them around the experiences of oppression, and as a way of capturing the joy and a sense of belonging of a gender that feels “right.” In writing a gender-fluid character and infusing him with some of my own experiences and understandings of the world, I had my

⁵ The character never refers to himself as genderqueer and is, presumably, cisgender in canon. However, many fans read some of his dialogue, his dress, and his behaviour as potentially genderqueer or nonbinary.

first experience of gender euphoria, a moment that led to my ultimate recognition of myself as nonbinary.

The almost-simultaneous discoveries of my nonbinary gender and diagnosis of autism have resulted in me feeling like I am experiencing a kind of secondary queer adolescence which I liken to Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2009) idea of "sideways growth." Pushing back against notions of linear temporality and teleological development, Stockton proposes that there "are ways of growing that are not growing up" (11):

the matter of children's delay: their supposed gradual growth, their suggested slow unfolding, which, unhelpfully, has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness. Delay [...] is tremendously tricky as a conception, as is growth. Both more appropriately call us into notions of the horizontal—what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time (4).

So, rather than seeing growing as finite, expected to eventually achieve a state of completion, "growing sideways" allows us to think of growth as an endless process, one without any particular set goals and not restricted by age. Traditional notions of growing up are indeed often impossible for many children, particularly those who embody traits that are antithetical to traditional notions of children, such as sex, aggression, or violence. For these children, isolated from, or resistant to, traditional notions of growing up, growing sideways may become an alternative mode of futurity – one that does not have any particular endpoint or purpose – or, as Stockton put it "our futures grow sideways when they can't be imagined as futures" (52). Sideways growth, rather, means that "the width of a person's experience of

ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain to any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (11).

For me, returning to writing fanfiction at a time of emotional upheaval at the same time I was revisiting my old writing for this dissertation, provided the opportunity for precisely this sort of “lateral contact” between my adult and teenage selves. Both the adolescent and adult versions of myself, in grappling with facets of my identity that felt too overwhelming to confront head-on, turned to fictional characters and worlds and differing forms of self-inserted characters in order to explore my sexuality and gender in a way that was simultaneously both intimate, in my connection to my main characters, and distant in the sense that I could separate myself from my fictional avatars. As Kristina Busse (2016) says:

... for all the ways in which fiction can expose us to new ideas, beliefs, and worlds, there is comfort in familiarity, and self-inserts of the various sorts I’ve discussed allow readers easy entry and access to the narratives. Whether writers pick a canon character or create their own, whether they shape the characters or the worlds around them, the ultimate desire underlying all these self-insertions remains attempts to merge our own lives with that of the fictional universes, to address our own experiences and emotions within the worlds of our favorite texts. Moreover, by connecting the canon worlds with our own lives, fan writers often can address current and personal issues through their writings. And it is this resonance with current affairs and personal concerns that make fan writing an important but ultimately very intimate and specialized form of writing. Mary Sue fiction at its extreme may only appeal to its author, but that it is also one of fan fiction’s central virtues (168).

Connecting canon worlds to my own life, as Busse puts it, has long been one of the primary mechanisms by which I understand and experience the world. My recent diagnosis of autism has gone a long way towards helping me understand why I have such a strong tendency to filter my understanding of reality through fictional worlds. Although to my knowledge, at the time of writing, a study of the frequency of autism and other neurodivergency in fandom has yet to be undertaken, the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) includes fandom as a common special interest of autistic people and some fans argue that the repetitive, ritualized nature of fandom can be likened to “stimming behaviours.”⁶

All together, these experiences of fanfiction have long led me to conceptualize fandom as a space of queer exploration and possibility. However, my experiences have also all been inherently filtered through my whiteness. As I discussed in my previous chapter, fandom has a long history of prioritizing whiteness (both in terms of which characters are highlighted and popularized, and in how racialized fans are disregarded, harassed, and abused).

Consequently, in my next chapter, I go beyond my own writing to analyze two other fanfiction subgenres, the Canon Sue and Reader-Inserts, to consider how other fans, specifically racialized teenagers, engage with Mary Sue fanfiction and the barriers, both structural and personal, that can limit which fans have full access to fandom as a space of queer possibility.

⁶ Short for self-stimulation, stimming is defined as repetitive or ritualized behaviours that feel pleasant, calming or help reduce sensory overload (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network).

Chapter 4

Inserting Limitations: Canon-Sues, Reader Inserts, and the Limits of Archive

In my previous chapter, I revisited a piece of fanfiction that I wrote when I was fifteen to consider how the genre of Mary Sue fanfiction has the potential to offer a space for teenagers to explore sexuality, identity, and pleasure outside of institutional oversight. However, my analysis was necessarily limited to a particular subgenre, time period, and the specific context in which I was writing. This chapter thus builds on the previous one to discuss the use and evolution of the genre of Mary Sue/self-inserts beyond my own personal experience. Specifically, I consider a subset of Mary Sue fanfiction known as “Canon Sues,” or the use of canon characters as authorial avatars, as well as a relatively new genre known as Reader-Inserts to consider how other fans, specifically racialized teenagers, engage with Mary Sue fanfiction and the barriers, both structural and personal, that can limit which fans have full access to fandom as a space of queer possibility.

In the first half of this chapter, I contrast the reception and use of two Canon Sues, Bella Swann from Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, and Shuri from Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018). I argue that while both characters have been used as a vehicle for teenage girls to insert and see themselves in popular culture, wider fandom reception to both characters has been drastically different, specifically as a result of the antiblack racism leveled at the character of Shuri and her fans.

In the latter half of this chapter, I turn to the genre of Reader-Inserts to argue that, even when racialized fans create space for themselves within fandom, structural barriers often limit its potential and popularity. While Black fans have worked to create their own space within the

genre of Reader-Inserts, using the tag “Black Reader,” the Archive of Our Own’s tagging policies make using and finding this tag difficult to the point of limiting its usage.

Canon-Sues and Blurring Boundaries

Although the original definition of a Mary Sue was of an idealized original female character, often an authorial self-insert, Kristina Busse (2016) argues that this definition can be expanded to include what she calls Canon Sues. As Busse explains, fan writers, often afraid of creating original characters only to have them labeled a Mary Sue, will sometimes use a canon character as their authorial avatar, rather than create a brand-new character. Instead, fans will shape already-existing characters to be more like them and/or place them into situations that allow them to play out their own fantasies or desires. In Marvel fandom, a popular example would be the character of Darcy from the films *Thor* (2011) and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). Although only appearing as a supporting character in two movies, Darcy has had an inordinate impact on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fandom and has been paired time and again with nearly every other character in the Marvel universe. Busse argues that because Darcy’s characterization as an unpowered outsider invites fan identification, many fans use her as a type of surrogate self-insert to write themselves into their stories.

Many characters who achieve popularity as Canon Sues in fandom spaces are dismissed by film critics as bad or poorly-written characters. Significantly, the attributes critics consider evidence of bad characterization are often the same ones that invite fan identification. For example, the character of Bella Swann from the film and book series *Twilight* is widely considered a boring, bland character whose entire arc revolves around her male love interest. And yet, Bella has attracted an enormous fan following and I argue that it is, in fact, her blandness that makes her such an inviting character as an authorial avatar.

While there are real critiques to be made of the *Twilight* series (stalking being portrayed as romantic, the sex-negative religious themes, etc.), most mainstream criticism tends to focus on the series' supposed "frivolity" and "shallowness" (Bode). Many critics point to the blankness and banality of Bella Swann's character as a negative aspect of the movie and one that provides a harmful message to adolescent girl audiences. Lisa Bode (2010) quotes reviewer Sean Burns, who refers to Bella as "clumsy" and "banal," (712) while Carmen D. Siering sees Bella as a "blank slate, with few thoughts or actions that don't centre on Edward" (51). In contrast, *Twilight* fanfiction instead often chooses to highlight Bella's moments of agency within the original source material and/or rewrites her story to reimagine her as a more active agent. One of the most popular stories on the fanfiction archive Fanfiction.net is a prime example. The story, entitled "Shields of Power," has as its summary: "What if Bella already knew about vampires before she came to Forks, what if she'd already met the Volturi, but wasn't allowed to tell anyone? And most importantly, what if she had her own gift?" (thunderful, 2011). Unlike the source material that has Bella receiving information and acting according to the desires of other people (or vampires), this story provides her with knowledge and a "gift" from the outset, granting her a place of significantly more power and agency.

It is not only in rewriting or fixing the blandness of Bella's character, however, that fans engage meaningfully with the text. I also suggest that Bella's "banal self" is one of the innate pleasures associated with the film, allowing the female viewer to locate herself more easily as the heroine of the story. This is where Bella can be read as a Canon Sue. The flatness of the character, rather than simply being a negative aspect of the movie, may actually open up possibilities for women and teenage girls to see themselves in her position and craft narratives that underline their own subjectivity and importance to the narrative. For example, Bella's blankness allows fanfiction authors to craft stories that attend to the complexities and challenges of navigating teenage

sexual desire. Bode (2010) suggests that one of the appeals of *Twilight* is in its attention to chastity and abstinence, which might be felt as “a small victory against a perceived insidious sexualizing of culture” (714). Perhaps counterintuitively, given these sexual politics, much of *Twilight* fanfiction focuses on sexual desire and subjectivity, often reframing the female protagonist as the subject, rather than the object of sexual desire and the sexual gaze.

Here, I consider Jessica Taylor’s (2014) suggestion that “Bella can also be seen as offering the predominant female readership a way to conceptualize and express the sexual desires of young women, desires that have previously been largely denied in popular culture” (396). Canon Sue fanfiction does precisely this – it allows teenage girl fanfiction authors the opportunity to foreground their own sexual desire and pleasure by inserting themselves into a well-loved and recognizable narrative. For example, in the story “Poison” published on the Archive of Our Own, the author pairs the character of Bella, not with her canonical love interest, Edward, but with another character to explore sexual narratives that Edward disallows in the source material. Written in the first-person, “Poison” (Uke08, 2020) takes place concurrently with the books and movies but focuses instead on the relationship between Bella and Jasper Hale (Jackson Rathbone). Unlike the books’ and movies’ focus on abstinence and chastity until marriage, this story explores a sexual relationship that is not only active and ongoing, but involves non-normative forms of sexual expression, including what the author refers to as “Dom/sub play.” In a note at the beginning of the story, the author acknowledges that Bella’s character is different in their fanfiction because the author has deliberately changed her characterization in order “to be more real to my own experiences.” In crafting the story around a canon character who has been altered to be more like the author, the story involves an intimate and personal exploration of the author’s desires, breaking with the film to center and celebrate female sexual subjectivity in the narrative.

As with many other popular characters in fandom, most Canon Sues are white. One exception to this is the character of Shuri from Ryan Coogler's 2018 film *Black Panther*. In a lot of MCU fanfiction, Shuri is either ignored, deeply underutilized, or used as a cheerleader/support system for white characters. However, she has garnered a small, passionate following of fans, mostly Black teenage girls, who relate to and identify with Shuri and use her as a type of Canon Sue – an authorial avatar or self-insert. These authors write stories that show a sense of identification with Shuri and an intimacy between author and character that blurs the boundaries between canon character and authorial self-insert. Yet, the reaction of wider fandom to the character of Shuri, particularly when contrasted with the mostly-positive reception to white Canon Sues like Bella Swann, reveals the antiblack racism that structures so much of online fandom.

When Marvel Studios released character descriptions ahead of the 2018 release of *Black Panther*, fan reaction to Shuri, the protagonist's younger sister, demonstrated the particular way the mainstream label of Mary Sue is deployed against racialized female characters. Here I am making a distinction between Mary Sue as an authorial self-insert used by fan writers and the pejorative label Mary Sue as used by critics and fans to critique canon female characters. White women in fandom have long pushed back against the mainstream labelling of canonical female characters as Mary Sues. But the reaction to Shuri laid bare the fact that these passionate defenses were really only ever offered in defense of *white* female characters. In Shuri's case, instead of pushing back against mainstream and fan sources that were calling her a Mary Sue, many white women in fandom added their voices to the chorus, even writing fanfiction stories using white male characters as mouthpieces to dismiss Shuri as an unrealistic, impossible character.

Marvel’s official character description of Shuri reads: “Possessing one of the most brilliant minds in the world, the Black Panther’s sister, Princess Shuri, is also the chief science officer for Wakanda, a position she cherishes much more than her royal status” (“Shuri on Screen”). While the character has existed in the comics since 2005 and was thus expected to make an appearance in the 2018 movie, the movie version of Shuri differs from her comic book counterpart in two important ways. First, she was aged down significantly, being only eighteen in the movie rather than her brother T’Challa’s contemporary, which would put her in her mid-thirties. Secondly, while both versions of the character possess a genius-level intellect, in the movie Shuri is also Wakanda’s chief science officer and is described as a technical genius “surpassing even Tony Stark” (whose superhero alter ego is Iron Man and was previously assumed to be the most intelligent person in the Marvel Cinematic Universe). Reactions to these two changes were intense, with fans taking very little time to start labeling Shuri a Mary Sue and accusing Marvel of “social justice pandering.”

Vitriolic reactions to powerful female characters are hardly new. Recently, we have seen similar pushback to Rey in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Rose Tico in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, the entire cast of 2016’s *Ghostbusters* remake, and *Captain Marvel*, among innumerable others. The important difference in the reaction to Shuri, however, was in how quick many white female fans were to accept the label of Mary Sue and even use it in attempts to discredit Shuri under the guise of “protecting” her. One of the more egregious examples of this began when a user posted the following to Tumblr:

Princess Shuri. Apparently a 16-year-old genius, smarter than anyone else on the planet, the leading force behind the scientific development of her country, ‘her brother’s keeper,’ badass, beautiful ...

To me she sounds more and more like Mary Sue squared. I think I'll skip that movie (xythiatales quoted in Stitch, 2018).

Even setting aside the writer's obvious eagerness to find any excuse not to go see *Black Panther*, this post is indicative of some of the antiblackness and misogyny, or to use the term coined by queer black feminist Moya Bailey (2010), misogynoir, that greeted Shuri when the first details of her characterization were made public. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is full of brilliant characters with extraordinary abilities and talents, including Tony Stark who was, canonically, a child prodigy who graduated summa cum laude from MIT at seventeen. But it was only Shuri whose intelligence and accomplishments were deemed unrealistic enough to discount the entire movie she was in.

The backlash to Shuri's characterization also took on the particular tenor of white liberal racism under the guise of "protecting" Shuri from the adults in her life. The same user who wrote the Tumblr post also posted two separate stories on Archive of Our Own, using Marvel characters as her mouthpieces to continue calling Shuri a Mary Sue (Stitch, 2018). In the first story, which has since been made private, Tony Stark makes public comments questioning whether Shuri was in fact responsible for all her accomplishments or whether her being made Chief Science Officer was a publicity stunt by the fictional nation of Wakanda. When he is called racist for these comments – framed by the author as the protests of "angry reverse racists" – he gives another press conference defending his statements and espousing his concern for Shuri being "used" by the Wakandan government. After a flood of commenters rightly pointed out the racism inherent in this story, the author doubled down by writing a second story. Apparently believing that using a black character as her mouthpiece would make the story less racist, this story involved Sam Wilson becoming convinced that Shuri was far too young and vulnerable to be working on

removing the triggers from the brainwashed Bucky Barnes. In the end, he works himself up to believing this is tantamount to child abuse and decides to go confront T'Challa, Shuri's older brother and the eponymous Black Panther.

In response to all the comments pointing out the antiblack and colonial logic underlying these stories, one commenter came to the author's defense saying:

We don't object to her being smart and talented, we object to the adults around her abusing and exploiting her abilities. How the heck is it racist to object to the abuse and exploitation of a young black girl? How the heck is it positive representation of the black adults who treat a minor that way? (anonymous commenter quoted in Stitch, 2018).

The assumption that Shuri *must* be being abused or exploited because there is no other reason for her to have her position, as well as the perceived need for white fans to intervene reveal the colonial logic and privileging of whiteness at play here. As fan studies scholar Rebecca Wanzo (2015) argues,

[H]igh-profile racist and misogynist speech and bullying demonstrate that some fans of speculative works depend on the centrality of whiteness or masculinity to take pleasure in the text. Sexism, racism, and xenophobia are routinely visible in fan communities ... A number of scholars have criticized ... the first-wave "fandom is beautiful" phase of fan scholarship, but the criticisms of this approach take a different shape if we recognize how often an investment in whiteness may be foundational to some groups of fans (para. 1.4).

While there are myriad other examples of Shuri being undermined as a result of fandom's investment in whiteness, here is where I want to try and flip the script on Mary Sue. I want to make a distinction between people using racist and misogynistic logic to call the *canon* Shuri a

Mary Sue and fan writers who relate to, and identify with, Shuri and use her character as a type of authorial avatar in order to write themselves into stories.

Representations of Black girlhood in media mirror cultural conceptions of Black girls, particularly when it comes to their perceived lack of innocence, or what Monique Morris (2013) calls their “adultification.” As I discussed in a previous chapter, Black children and teenagers are rarely afforded the same presumption of innocence as white children. Traits or behaviours that might be considered the provenance of youth in white teenagers, are often pathologized or criminalized in Black children. Black girls in particular have long been criminalized “for qualities that have long been associated with their survival. For example, to be ‘loud’ or ‘defiant’ - two infractions that may lead to the use of exclusionary discipline in schools - are qualities that have historically underscored Black female resilience to the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism” (Morris, 2013, 5). In mainstream media, this often results in Black girls being portrayed as hypersexualized, aggressive, and/or criminal.

Black girls are thus rarely, if ever, afforded the opportunity to see complex, deep representations of themselves in mainstream media. The same can be said for the presence of Black girls, and Black people more generally, in fandom spaces. As Kristen Warner (2015) explains in her study of Black women fans of the television show *Scandal*: “The stark reality is that the only people who are allowed to be visible within fandom and imagined to be fans by the media industries are White men and women” (33). Historically, Black fans have been left alone with the responsibility and the labour of building and maintaining spaces in fandom where Black characters and narratives can be enjoyed and celebrated. Warner has talked about the work done by Black female fans saying: “[one] of the main ways that Black female fandom makes Black femininity visible is by consciously moving mediated women of colour, who often occupy

supporting roles, to the centre, transforming them into leads in fan-produced discourse. The objective of this sort of subversive act is to create imagined moments of identification and representation for an audience that rarely, if ever, gets the opportunity to see an actress of colour in a leading role” (34).

By reading and writing stories that center Shuri, Black teenage girls are, in a sense, reclaiming an adolescence that has been taken from them. Writing themselves into some of the most popular modern media franchises allows Black teenage girl authors to explore experiences of Black girlhood and racialized trauma through story and narrative. Considering the spaces of potentiality that Black fans carve out as creative starting points, André Carrington (2016) draws on Stuart Hall who “argues that approaches to Blackness in popular culture are incomplete if they only pursue negative critiques of the way dominant narratives facilitate racial marginalization because creativity has also thrived in conditions of subordination” (13). While Carrington counsels that participatory fandom must attend to critiques made by racialized fans in a way that fully engages with wider political and structural issues of race and white supremacy, he also stresses the worldbuilding potentiality of the creative work by fans “on the margins” – work that does not need the approval of white fans to thrive. In his words, “[work] on the margins of these narratives that links them to cultural frames of reference beyond their horizons can offer alternative perspectives on the possibilities available to the fantastic genres” (224).

As an example of worldbuilding potentiality that offers “alternative perspectives,” the story “Royalty, Radioactivity, and Great Reluctance” (TheAmityElf, 2020) on the Archive of Our Own explores Shuri’s relationship with Peter Parker (played by Tom Holland) and Michelle Jones, or MJ (played by Zendaya), from the Marvel movie *Spiderman: Homecoming* when the latter two characters visit Wakanda. As with many other pieces of fanfiction involving Shuri, this

story contains other characters from the movie *Black Panther* but also connects her to teenage characters from other movies in the MCU. Yet, unlike many other pieces of MCU fanfiction that focus primarily on Shuri's intelligence and technological capabilities by slotting her into the role of tech support for the Avengers superhero team, "Royalty, Radioactivity, and Great Reluctance" instead celebrates Shuri's adolescence and the characteristics and interests she shares with the other teenage characters. One example of this is in the central role that memes play in the development of the relationship between Shuri, Peter, and MJ, with their prominence reflected in the story tag "Meme References" and in Shuri's online pseudonym "MemeQueen." Although not solely the purview of teenagers, the use of memes as a primary component of digital communication is often associated with younger generations and adolescents in particular. In this case, in the comment section for the story, the teenage author expresses that the abundant use of memes is a reflection of the way their friend group communicates. In highlighting this communication style in the story, without compromising Shuri's intelligence or place of importance in Wakanda's technology sector, the author gives the character an experience of adolescence that many Black girls are not afforded. In this story, Shuri is allowed to seamlessly shift between her more adult role as Chief Science Officer and her more youthful meme-sharing with her friends, often within the same scene.

In the comment section for "Royalty, Radioactivity, and Great Reluctance" it is clear that this characterization of Shuri as a genius who is allowed to be a prodigy while still being a teenager resonates with a number of Black MCU fans. One comment reads:

I also like how you addressed the disparity in treatment and the changes that will happen with her having to deal with Western stereotypes and viewpoints ... And gosh, this line: what T'Challa had seen, the outside world would demand that she prove herself over and

over again to the unworthiest of people – As a black woman it makes me think of that saying how black women (by onus of being black and women) have to work three times as hard to get recognized for the equivalent of HALF the effort a white man puts out ... Also I got a little teary reading Peter's fluffy feels and reasons why he likes her. And I like the establishment that it wasn't just romantic. It was a friendship. They connected. I feel friendship gives romance such a strength and I am looking forward to this development (grapecase in TheAmityElf, 2018).

Dina Georgis (2013) suggests that “art and narrative are resources for political imagination and for political recovery: they link us to unthought spaces, to spaces that thought refuses” (166). By explicitly and actively centring Shuri’s intelligence while still allowing her to be a teenager with teenage interests and friendships, “Royalty, Radioactivity, and Great Reluctance” acts as both creative resistance to white hegemony in fan communities and an example of the worldbuilding potentiality André Carrington (2016) suggests characterizes the work of Black fans. If, as Georgis argues, “surviving difficulty and trauma is a creative act,” stories like “Royalty, Radioactivity, and Great Reluctance” can be read as a means for Black teenage girls to work out the trauma of experiencing adolescence in a world that does not afford them the luxury of childhood innocence or child-like behaviour.

This does not mean that the experience of racism or white supremacy is absent from this story. In fact, the above commenter explicitly points out how the story addresses structural antiblackness in the line that reads: “the outside world would demand that she prove herself over and over again to the unworthiest of people.” Rather, fanfiction like this one allows for stories to be told that more accurately represent and include the experiences of Black teenage girls that are so often ignored or elided in fandom. However, for many Black readers of fanfiction, finding stories

that center the subjectivity and experiences of Black characters is not an easy task and is often made more difficult by structural barriers, present even in spaces that were made by fans themselves. In the next section, I explore an example of one such case in a relatively new genre known as the Reader-Insert.

Reader as Character and the Limits of Archive

Like all literary genres, fanfiction is rarely static. Rather, it is constantly evolving to reflect changing technology, fan demographics, and popular media genres. As digital technologies made communication and collaboration easier in the late 1990s/early 2000s, the genre of Mary Sue/self-insert fanfiction evolved concurrently. Mary Sue remains an ever-popular figure in fandom, particularly among teenagers, but the past twenty years has seen the rise of another “insert” character: the reader themselves. Several unofficial fan historians (“Reader-Inserts”; DarthSuki, 2018) trace the genre of the “Reader-Insert” or “Reader-as-Character” back to the late 1990s and suggest its appearance in fandom might be connected to Paul Granger’s popular Choose Your Own Adventure books which began printing in 1979. In essence, reader-inserts are similar to Mary Sues/self-inserts in that they typically involve a character from the real world (in this case, the person reading the story) being inserted into the world of a particular media franchise. These stories are most often written in second-person with the reader-character being referred to as “you” or “y/n” (an abbreviation of “your name”) and are particularly popular in anime/manga and RPF (real-person fanfiction) fandoms.⁷ Physical descriptions of the reader-character are kept purposefully vague (although many assume the reader to be white, a point to

⁷ ‘Y/n’ as a way of referring to the reader-character grew increasingly popular as downloading fanfiction became more accessible. Often readers of reader-inserts that use ‘y/n’ will download the story and then use a word processor to find and replace all instances of ‘y/n’ with their own name to make the story even more personal.

which I will return shortly) so that the reader might fill in those details themselves. The reader character is usually gendered and the story will be typically be tagged with “Female Reader,” “Male Reader,” or “Nonbinary Reader,” so that readers can easily filter for the stories that reflect themselves. Reflecting the wider demographics of fandom, the majority of reader insert stories involve a female reader who is paired romantically with a canon character.

Like Mary Sue, many fans consider reader-inserts to be a more immature and poorly-written form of fanfiction, with the archive Fanfiction.net going so far as to entirely ban self-insert/reader-insert/choose-your-own-adventure fic in 2005 (“Reader-Inserts”). The administrative team at Fanfiction.net gave two primary reasons for this ban, the first of which echoes the earlier bans and mass deletions I analyzed in chapter two. Posting on their own internal forums, an administrator for the site attempted to explain the ban by likening sexually explicit reader-insert fanfiction to child pornography; that is, if a reader who was under eighteen were to read a sexually explicit reader-insert story and place themselves in the position of the reader-character, that would make the author guilty of creating child pornography. I will return to discuss the conflation of sexually explicit fanfiction and child pornography in more detail in my next chapter, but this is another example of ongoing discourses of protectionism and risk in fandom and one that is specifically targeted at a genre with a large proportion of teenagers as authors and readers.

The second reason the administrative team gave for the ban on reader and self-inserts was that they were “often used for interactive stories. As in people send in reviews asking the author to write what they want, rather than going off the actual authors own “imagination”” (“Reader-Inserts”). Embedded within this reasoning is a clear value judgment; one that places solo-authored work as superior to collaboratively written work. While this reasoning would be notable

in any literary genre, as writing for publication almost always involves some form of collaboration, in a space like fandom which has been built and maintained by networks of collaborators, it reads as particularly out of step with the operation of fan communities.

In fact, I would argue that it is the interactivity and collaboration between author and reader that is part of what distinguishes fanfiction (and other forms of digital publishing) from traditional publishing and that the genre of reader-inserts is a logical evolution of the dialogic and collaborative nature of fan storytelling. In fan communities with a focus on transformative works, fanfiction in particular, there is a long tradition of authors sharing unfinished work and asking for feedback from fellow fans. Authors will regularly post excerpts or “snippets” of works-in-progress on social media platforms like Tumblr and Discord in order to solicit feedback or ideas about where to take the story next. This type of collaborative writing has been an important part of fandom since its pre-Internet days but has become all but ubiquitous in the age of social media.

Previous fan studies scholars (Lothian, Busse & Reid, 2007) have discussed the intimacy that exists between fanfiction authors, particularly when they co-author a story, but here I wish to extend that thinking to the intimacy, and specifically the queer intimacy, that exists between fanfiction author and reader. Online spaces, like fandom, where fans carefully explore and construct queer narratives and identities can allow for a form of queer pleasure. Discussing the bonds that form between authors of sexually explicit fanfiction and their long-time readers and collaborators, a fan using the pseudonym Jintian explains, “it’s not just about physical sex (or rather, imagined physical sex) ... it’s also the relationship of creation and consumption, the bond that forms between the writer and the reader” (Lothian, Busse & Reid 107). I argue that these bonds can be read as a form of queer intimacy that open up space for queer exploration and

identity-formation. As fan T. says, “[n]ot all slash fans identify as queer, but this space provides room for people to queer their identities ... queerness isn’t a mandate here – it’s an open possibility” (Lothian, Busse and Reid 109).

For teenagers discovering and exploring their identities, the genre of reader-insert fanfiction can provide a space to essentially “try on” different aspects of identity in familiar worlds and with familiar characters. For example, one fan explains how trans reader-insert fic led him to both discover and understand his gender and identity in ways he never could in mainstream media:

... fics normalized the idea of being a trans man with a normal life. Not a genderqueer person, the identity I’d tried on as a high schooler ... but a trans man ... I had better models for transmasculinity that wasn’t het and macho; for men who had intimate friendships with other men of the kind I’d had with my best guy friends but had always assumed would end if they ever saw me as a man. To this day I haven’t seen a single mainstream non-fan work that handles a character’s incidental transness as elegantly as some of those stories on AO3 ... These fics were also the first time I’d ever seen a description of a medically-transitioned male body in writing, presented as something both normal and desirable. ... Reading that story ... made me realize really sharply that some of the parts I had could go away, and others could be understood and named differently by a partner. I could be re-embodied, and have someone else appreciate that body too (anonymous fan quoted in Duggan, 2021).

In a study about queer youth online, Shelley Craig and Lauren McInroy (2014) explain that teenagers will use social media platforms to construct aspects of their identity that may remain inaccessible to them offline. Particularly for queer youth, online spaces can offer the opportunity to explore their sexual and gender identities in ways that might be limited in their offline lives.

Indeed, as “the traditional dichotomy of the public sphere and the private sphere is in many ways an archaic concept for contemporary adolescents whose lives exist both online and offline, and for whom online participation is a fully integrated aspect of their ‘social life’” (Craig & McInroy 97), it is often impossible to separate the online and offline social lives of teenagers. Identity-formation, alliance-building, and sexual exploration that happens online can have direct, immediate impacts on the offline lives of adolescents.

For racialized teenagers, reader-inserts offer not only an opportunity to push back against a mainstream media environment that is oversaturated with white characters and stories, but also to connect with other racialized fans and explore questions of desirability beyond the white gaze. One striking example how fanfiction can provide the opportunity for visibility, connection, and explorations of desire, is the story “Brown Sugar and Honey” by captainafroelf in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fandom.⁸ Out of the twenty-eight films in the MCU (as of June 2022), only one centers a Black protagonist (Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*) and none feature a Black woman in a starring role. While there are Black characters with important roles in several other MCU films (e.g. Colonel James “Rhodey” Rhodes in the *Iron Man* films, Sam Wilson in the *Captain America* films), these characters mostly exist to support the white protagonists and rarely have significant storylines of their own (Coker and Pande, 2018).⁹ As a means of responding to the overwhelming whiteness of the MCU, the story “Brown Sugar and Honey”

⁸ The author of “Brown Sugar and Honey” is an adult, however, many of her readers self-identify in the comments to the story as teenagers.

⁹ Sam Wilson (aka The Falcon) recently co-starred in a mini-series entitled *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* in which his character took over the role of Captain America, but he has yet to appear in any MCU films under that title.

was written, in the author's own words, with the aim of "putting beautiful black women in your very white universes" (captainafroelf, 2022).

The summary of "Brown Sugar and Honey" reads "'black women were created of brown sugar and warm honey. the sweetest thing to bless the earth. be wary of anyone who tells you otherwise" marvel reader-inserts for black girls with our brown skin and curls" (captainafroelf, 2022). It is a type of fanfiction known as a prompt-fic where readers will provide short story ideas (or "prompts"), often with a specific character or pairing in mind, which an author will then use to write a full-length story. The author of "Brown Sugar and Honey" specifically solicited ideas for stories featuring Black women reader-inserts in relationships with a character from the MCU. The process of creating and writing the story was thus an innately collaborative one between captainafroelf and her readers, resulting in stories that contain a mix of ideas and desires from both author and readers. In the genre of reader-inserts in which the reader *is* the protagonist of the story, soliciting prompts from readers further enhances the connection readers feel to the story. For example, one comment from a teenage reader who had requested a story in which Sam Wilson washes a Black reader-insert's hair, reads:

I haven't even finished reading the first chapter and I see Bantu knots and I literally have tears in my eyes. It's kinda dramatic but I'm seriously touched because it's a style that I as a black female use on a regular basis and it's never really talked about in fictions. The fact that as black women in particular that not many people realize is our hair is something we for the most part have to style and manage ... The lack of diversity hurts, and it's why many black people want to see characters that are accurate and look like them : natural, brown/dark skin, not just the stereotypical black people accepted by the media. So to put

a long short, thank you. From the bottom of my heart, this story no matter where you take it touched me (C_2 in captainafroelf, 2022).

Although the story itself is fairly straight-forward – the reader asks Sam to wash her hair, he does, and they then have sex – by centering the care of a Black woman’s hair as the source of intimacy and connection, the author intervenes into a long and complex history of racist rhetoric that positions Black hair as unhygienic and undesirable (Prince, 2009). Instead, by making haircare the center of the story, the author makes Black women’s hair the *source* of intimacy and desirability, a move that clearly resonates with the commenter who has “tears in their eyes” after reading. As the comment makes clear, it is these small moments of connection that are so rarely present in mainstream media – in this case, the inclusion of Bantu knots – that are so meaningful in providing an opportunity for readers to not only recognize themselves in the narrative, but also to see themselves as desirable.

Particularly as Black women are often characterized in mainstream media as both hypersexual and undesirable (Hill-Collins, 2004; Chisolm, 2020), the opportunity for Black teenagers to see themselves as both desiring and desired cannot be underestimated. In another chapter of “Brown Sugar and Honey” in which the reader-insert develops a relationship with the character of Loki from the *Thor* films, another teenage commenter further explains how meaningful it is to see themselves as the object of desire:

... like so many other reviewers have mentioned as a black woman, I get yanked right out of the story with those mentions of "pale, porcelain skin" and "long flowing blonde hair". My skin is neither pale nor porcelain and my 3C curls spiral, they don't flow. It was such a pleasure to read this. To identify with Mel. To see a black woman be the object of Loki's desire and obsession. Marvel's Asgard is by no means as white-presenting as some

people write it and it's so nice to see him around some color. And also to just see him rolling with her speech. Like that's a minor thing and all but when she was like "You ok, fam." and he replied with " I'm quite alright. Yourself?", I don't know, I just loved it ... I can't wait for more and honestly, you make me want to write some of my own Loki fic! (Maribor_Petrichor in captainafroelf, 2022).

Again, it is the inclusion of “minor” details like speech patterns and hair styles that allow the reader to connect with the reader-protagonist of the story, and it is specifically the reader-insert’s *desirability* that resonates so strongly with the commenter. Zanele Chisholm (2020) explains how Black girls often grow up feeling undesirable:

Growing up as a Black girl, I invested so much of my self-worth into dreams of being loved. I was afraid of his fingers getting caught in my hair, and what he’d say when they did. I was afraid he’d never call me beautiful and of unrequited love (n.p.).

Fanfiction like “Brown Sugar and Honey” can provide an opportunity for Black girls to see alternative stories of intimacy, connection, and desire – stories that move beyond white beauty standards and the white gaze to portray Black women as desiring and desirable. The enthusiastic comments from Black teenage girls in response to “Brown Sugar and Honey” clearly demonstrate the power of this sort of narrative as well as the deep desire and longing for more of the same.

Yet, in spite of the potential offered by the genre of reader-insert fic and its authors and readers, it is sometimes the actual structure of online fan communities that prevents all fans from equal access to this space of worldbuilding potentiality. The things that attract many queer authors and readers to the genre – its potential for exploring diverse experiences, identities, and voices – are

often foreclosed by the structure of fanfiction archives that make searching for particular types of reader-insert characters all but impossible. For example, while the Archive of Our Own (Ao3) is one of the two largest fanfiction archives that allows reader-insert fanfiction (the other being Wattpad), many Black fans express frustration and disappointment in attempting to search for reader-insert stories that focus on a Black reader specifically. In order to rectify this and make it easier for Black fans to find Black reader-inserts, many Black authors have begun tagging their stories not just with gendered tags like “Female Reader,” but with tags like “Black Reader” or “Black Female Reader.” And yet, because of the structure of the Archive of Our Own’s tagging system, knowledge of, and access to this tag remains limited. To explain why requires an understanding of how Ao3’s tagging system functions.

When creating the Archive of Our Own, the founders were highly cognizant of the enormous potential use the archive might see, and the attendant challenges of organizing all those stories so that they would be accessible and searchable. They were not wrong to be concerned. In 2020, daily traffic on the archive, already at over 30 million page views per day, skyrocketed to over 50 million page views per day and remained at that level throughout 2021 (“Ao3 Statistics”). To meet the need for archival organization, the creators of Ao3 devised a system that they refer to as *tag wrangling*. Tag wrangling, at its core, is essentially the organization of metadata. Metadata, or data about data, is “structured information that describes, explains, locates or otherwise makes it easier to retrieve, use or manage an information resource” (De Carvalho, Machado Campos & Barreto, 1998, 1), and in the context of Ao3, refers to the organization of the tags attached to each story. It works like this. When an author uploads a story to the Ao3, they are prompted to add tags to it that allow readers to search for it (or exclude it from searches) using a filtering system. Mandatory tags include *rating* (general, teen and up, mature, explicit, not rated), *archive warnings*, and *fandom*, while optional tag categories include *category* (M/M, F/F, F/M, gen,

other, multi), *relationships*, *characters*, and *additional tags*.¹⁰ Other than the rating, category and archive warnings sections, all other tags can be entered freeform. Suggestions are provided as the author is typing in their tags, but the author has complete freedom to enter any tag of their choosing.

However, if fanfiction writers are allowed to tag their stories without restriction, readers searching, for instance, for a particular pairing, would be faced with having to search all possible versions of that pairing in order to find all the stories written for it. For example, a pairing between the reader and Princess Leia Organa from *Star Wars* could be labelled Reader/Leia, Leia/Reader, Reader/Organa, to name but a few possible configurations. This gets even more complicated when characters are known by more than one name or appear in multiple media forms (for example comic book characters who may appear in comics, on television, and in film). Clearly, to make Ao3 functional for readers searching for stories, some form of organization needed to be applied to the tagging system. According to the tag wrangling guidelines posted on Ao3:

Since they're free-form text boxes, there's a lot of variation in what people put in, even when they're talking about the same thing. We encourage that variety! You're always welcome to use whatever form you want on your tags. But while other fans are likely to know that "Gurren Lagann" is the same series as "Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann," or that "SPN" is an abbreviation for "Supernatural," the Archive software doesn't know that automatically. This is where tag wranglers come in! Tag wranglers look at all the new

¹⁰ There are four mandatory archive warnings (Underage, Rape/Non-Consensual, Graphic Violence, and Major Character Death. M/M refers to male/male relationships, F/F to female/female, and Gen to General or no sexual/romantic relationships.

tags that have been added to the archive and link them up under one standardized form so that readers can find all the works on the Archive without having to look separately for all the different variations” (“Wrangling Guidelines”).

So, a story may be labelled “Reader/Leia” but will show up when a user searches for Princess Leia/Reader or any other version of naming that relationship. However, this process only happens when a tag has been made canonical. Ao3’s guidelines explains that canonical tags are those that “appear in the filtering features ... that means they appear in the autocomplete when ... searching or filtering for works” (“Wrangling Guidelines”). Authors are not limited to only tagging their stories with canonical tags – they are also permitted to use “freeform” tags, or tags that have not been made canonical. However, freeform tags do not show up in the filtering and search tools and are thus much more difficult to search for. Tag wranglers are responsible for deciding which tags are made canonical and which remain freeform.

In the case of Reader-Inserts, Ao3 tag wranglers have canonized the tags “Reader Insert,” “Original Female Character,” “Original Male Character” and “Original Nonbinary Character,” yet have not done the same to the tags “Original Black Character,” or “Black Reader.” As I mentioned above, while authors of reader-inserts try not to over-describe the reader character in their stories so as to make their appeal more universal, most assume a white reader. As one frustrated fan explains: “Most readers are coded to be white, or written in a way that only light skinned people with certain features can read themselves into. Black and brown readers – especially ones with curlier, thicker hair or darker skin – aren’t able to visualize themselves in place of the reader because the blank slate is a little too beige” (“Reader-Inserts”). The result is that readers specifically looking for stories about Black reader inserts have to sift through large

amounts of irrelevant data in order to find the stories they are searching for. Stories that focus on Black readers are effectively hidden in the morass of more popular, usually white, reader-inserts.

The Archive of Our Own was formed with the specific intent to create a fan-owned space that was open to any (legal) fan content as a direct response to previous instances of mass-deletions and censorship in other fan archives. However, creating a space with the goal of archiving content as objectively as possible often has the effect of replicating normative power structures and narratives. Indeed, idealized notions of egalitarian communities often have a tendency to legitimate normative hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality (Joseph 2002). In this case, by not specifically attending to race and racism in their archival design, the creators of Ao3 ended up creating a space that replicates normative power structures that value white narratives and white characters above any others. White readers have an abundance of choice when searching for reader-insert stories, while Black Readers are left searching through pages of stories about a supposedly universalized reader who, in reality, only serves to alienate Black fans further in fandom spaces. While reader-inserts may offer a space for adolescent readers and writers to explore relationships and sexuality, without a digital space that mitigates the overwhelming effects of online white supremacy, this potential is often reserved only for white readers and authors.

In this chapter and the preceding one, I have attempted to work through the complicated and constantly-evolving spaces of worldbuilding potentiality that exist in fandom for teenage fans. Fanfiction, as a literary genre that prizes collaboration and creativity, provides fertile ground for teenagers to explore aspects of their identities they may not be ready to contend with in offline physical spaces. Yet, fandom, on both a community and structural level, often makes access to this space of queer worldbuilding potential difficult, painful, or even impossible for racialized

characters and fans. Even when Black fans attempt to carve out a space that centers Black narratives, fandom structures, still overwhelmingly managed and controlled by white fans, make this all but impossible. Given its place of importance in exploring my own identity, desires, and sexuality, I have long held a vested interest in protecting fandom spaces and reading them as important spaces of queer potential, as do many other adult fans who spent their teenage years in fandom. However, this vested interest, alongside white privilege, results in adult fans actively, and often vitriolically, denying any presence of racism in fandom. Fans who attempt to critique fandom structures, like the Archive of Our Own's tagging system, are routinely shouted down and dismissed as "too sensitive" in order to downplay their critique. In recent years, these fans have begun to be called "antis" (a reference to a particular movement of fans who want to limit the sexual content available on Ao3) in an attempt to equate their critiques with censorship or puritanism and thus discredit them. This has had the simultaneous effect of broadening the divide between adult and teenage fans while conflating a variety of different critiques under one label, the "anti," and it is to these debates I turn in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Clutching Their Pearls: Anti-Fans, Complex Relationality, and Queer Temporality

When we talk about teenagers, we adults often talk with an air of scorn, of expectation for disappointment. And this can make people who are presently teenagers feel very defensive. But what everyone should understand is that none of us are talking to the teenagers that exist now, but talking back to the teenager we ourselves once were – all stupid mistakes and lack of fear, and bodies that hadn't yet begun to slump into a lasting nothing. Any teenager who exists now is incidental to the potent mix of nostalgia and shame with which we speak to our younger selves (“Episode 33 – Cassette,” *Welcome to Night Vale*, 2013).

Several months ago, I was having a discussion on Discord with a fandom friend about how strange it can be when a teenager comments on an explicit story that you have written. While we both readily admitted to reading (and writing) explicit stories when we were teenagers, my friend also asked a question that I have been mulling over ever since: “Why don't they just lie about their ages like we used to?”

During my teenage years in fandom during the late 1990s and early 2000s, I recall lying about my age to access explicit or adult stories more times than I can count. At the time, fandom was significantly less centralized than it is today and most fanfiction was published on private websites, individual blogs, or fandom-specific archives, many of which disappeared when Geocities shut down in 2019 (Mackinnon, 2022). The majority of these sites, if they hosted explicit content, required an age verification before entering. This usually took the form of a checkbox or agreeing to a statement affirming your age, but sometimes involved messaging moderators to prove that you were over the age of eighteen. Some sites, like AdultFanfiction.net, had legal statements on their front pages declaring that access to their sites was reserved for legal

adults and redirecting minors to their sister site, Fanfiction.net (which, as I have outlined in a previous chapter, banned all explicit stories).

But, of course, statements can be easily faked, and I was far from the only teenager who regularly accessed and read explicit stories on sites banning children and teenagers. I made false age statements so often, in fact, that I had an alternate birthday picked out and ready to go if I was ever questioned (January 19, 1981, the birthday of Buffy Summers from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). And I am hardly the only adult fan to have fond memories of lying about my age to access explicit stories and discussions, as my conversation with my friend clearly attests. Yet, at some point in the intervening time between my teenage years and modern fandom, a reversal of sorts has taken place wherein many teenage fans have begun to insist that all fans clearly and accurately state their ages on their blogs, websites, and fanfiction profiles. During my time researching and writing this dissertation, one of the questions that has preoccupied my thoughts has been *why* this shift has taken place and what this means for adult/teenage relationality in online fandom.

Given the apparent discrepancy between adult fans' recollections of the benefits of adult/teenage interactions in fandom and the more contemporary push towards age segregation, in this chapter, I explore the shifts that have taken place in online fan communities between my teenage years and today. Specifically, I return to 2007 to trace fandom's mass-migration to Tumblr from the blogging site Livejournal, alongside the creation and development of the Archive of Our Own to argue that these two significant shifts in online fan space caused a concurrent change in the way adult and teenage fans come into contact and interact with each other. These shifting dynamics have given rise to a group of fans dubbed anti-fans, anti-shippers, or simply, antis, who are invested in ridding fandom of stories and representations they deem harmful.

Anti-fans position adult fans, particularly those that are supportive of the Archive of Our Own's liberal content policies, as potentially dangerous threats who are encroaching on online spaces meant primarily for teenagers. Yet, simultaneously, adult fans use the label of anti as a quick, easy way to dismiss the concerns of teenage fans as unimportant and unreasonable. I argue that both sides of this debate are reliant on a conceptualization of growth that positions childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as three separate life-stages with adolescence as the primary stage of sexual development and identity formation. An understanding of adolescence and adulthood as discrete life-stages results in teenage fans being suspicious of adults who remain in fandom long after they are "supposed" to have grown out of it, and adult fans being dismissive of teenage fans for their supposed immaturity and lack of experience.

However, in the final section of this chapter, I argue that by shifting from a teleological framework of growth and development to a queer temporality in which adulthood and adolescence are co-inhabitants of the same self, online fandom can be read not as a space for the age category of "teenagers" but as a space of ongoing adolescence. Put differently, reading fandom as an adolescent space regardless of the ages of individual fans reveals how fan spaces can be avenues for identity exploration at any life-stage.

An Archive of Our Own and Anti-Fandom

During the early 2000s, fandom was under siege on many fronts. Alongside the attempts at external censorship like Strikethrough '07 which I discussed in chapter two; fandom's prolific creativity had begun to attract attention from a number of profit-driven ventures that wanted to monetize creative fanwork. Domains like fandom.com and fans.com were registered by companies like Fandom, Inc. and Fandom Entertainment, LLC, unnerving fans invested in the communal nature of fandom and wary of capitalist exploitation (Coppa, 2013). The moment that

galvanized fandom into taking action was the 2007 creation of FanLib.com, another profit-driven website that billed itself as providing “the world’s greatest fan fiction by popular demand” (Coppa 304).¹¹ The company began reaching out to popular fanfiction authors and offering to host their stories on the website. When fans investigated further, they discovered marketing materials created for investors and sponsors that promised a website that was ““managed and moderated to the max” with fan activity taking place “in a customized environment that YOU” – the corporate sponsor – control” (304). As the materials made clear, FanLib.com was not interested in sharing, archiving, and preserving fan creative work, but in “*packaging* fans for corporations” (305, emphasis in original).

As a result of these multiple threats to the nonprofit and communal nature of fandom, “a number of fans ... began to have a conversation on Livejournal about not just resisting the commercialization of fan culture, but about creating a positive alternative: a large, visible, nonprofit fanfiction archive run by and for fans” (Coppa, 2013, 305). Livejournal blogger and professional author, Naomi Novik (who uses the online pseudonym astolat in fan spaces), proposed “a central archive of our own ... that would NOT hide from [G]oogle or any public mention, and would clearly state our case for the legality of our hobby up front, while not trying to make a profit off other people’s IP [Intellectual Property] and instead only making it easier for us to celebrate it, together, and create a welcoming space for new fans that has a sense of our history and our community behind it” (astolat, 2007). She delineated the necessary features as including the archive being “run BY fanfiction readers FOR fanfiction readers ... with a simple

¹¹ FanLib was founded in 2002 by veteran filmmaker Craig Singer, internet pioneer David B. Williams, and former Yahoo! executive and film producer Chris M. Williams as a division of their production company My2Centences (“FanLib”).

and highly searchable interface and browsable quick-search pages ... allowing ANYTHING – het, slash, RPF, chan, kink, highly adult ... allowing the poster to control her stories (ie, upload, delete, edit, tagging)” (astolat).¹²

Hundreds of fans commented on astolat’s post and the idea spread like wildfire. Fandom, as it usually did, worked fast – by June 2007 a board of directors had been assembled (including both Naomi Novik and Francesca Coppa) and the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), an all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization, was founded. The OTW was (and is) dedicated to “providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture” (Coppa, 2013, 306). The use of *transformative* in their name is a political statement in response to those who argue that fanfiction is copyright infringement based on the idea that it is *derivative* work.

Contrastingly, it is the OTW’s (and most of fandom’s) position that fanfiction is transformative in that it “says new things, often in ways that wouldn’t be acceptable or desirable in the marketplace” (306). Along with a legal advocacy team, an academic journal (*Transformative Works and Cultures*), and fan wiki (Fanlore), the OTW also founded the Archive of Our Own (Ao3). As with the OTW, Ao3’s name makes a political statement. It is based on a famous quotation from Virginia Woolf in which she states that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). As Coppa suggests, “the “Archive of Our Own” therefore evokes the importance of owning space – albeit virtual space today, *server space* – for women writing in particular, and also serves as a reminder that fanfiction was (and still is) written overwhelmingly by women” (307).

¹² RPF means *real person fanfiction* and is, as the name implies, fanfiction written not about fictional characters, but about real people (actors, musicians, politicians, celebrities, etc.). Chan, meanwhile, is a term used to indicate stories containing underage sex.

As Novik mentioned in her first post about a potential archive, one of the founding tenets of Ao3 was that it would “accept ANYTHING,” including content that involved abuse, rape, torture, and underage sex. To organize the archive as well as protect its users by informing them about any sensitive or difficult content in a particular story, Ao3 developed the tagging system I discussed in the previous chapter. To summarize, Ao3 works on a system wherein users tag their stories with metadata and tag wranglers organize these tags so that they are searchable and accessible. One of the mandatory categories of tags that users must use is *archive warnings*. The *archive warnings* category provides the option to warn for the inclusion of underage sex, graphic depictions of violence, rape, and major character death. There is also an option to “Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings” which signals that an author makes no promises that their story is free from the above topics, while still making readers aware that they may encounter this material if they choose to proceed. Remaining true to its anti-censorship roots, the Archive of Our Own places only two restrictions, both legal mandates (according to US law), on content involving underage writers, readers, or characters:

1. Illegal and inappropriate content ... Content may not be uploaded to OTW's servers if it contains or links to child pornography (images of real children);
2. Archive Age Policy ... Children under the age of thirteen (13) are therefore not permitted to have an account or upload Content of any type to the Archive (“Frequently Asked Questions”).

Many fans celebrate Ao3’s liberal content policies, particularly in the wake of the multiple instances of mass deletions, content restrictions, and corporate encroachment I have previously discussed. However, fandom is not a hive mind and there is a significant number of fans who

object to the kind of content hosted by Ao3, especially its acceptance of sexually explicit stories involving underage characters. Today, this group of fans are most commonly known as antis.

Originally known as anti-shippers, the term “anti” first arose in the *X-Files* fandom in the 1990s where it referred to fans who wanted the relationship between the main characters Fox Mulder and Dana Scully to remain platonic as opposed to developing into a romantic relationship (hence anti-shipper). It quickly crossed fandom boundaries, becoming a more generalized term for fans who *actively* opposed shipping a particular pairing (“Anti-shipper”). The term *actively* is important here because anti-shippers are often not simply uninterested in a pairing, but instead, make their opposition to a pairing a foundational part of their fandom identity and activity. This might involve, for example, writing meta about why the pairing is wrong or bad, drawing fanart showing the toxicity or incompatibility of a pairing, or authoring fanfiction that depicts a particular pairing breaking up.¹³ The key criterion here is that the anti goes beyond ignoring or disliking a ship, and instead spends a significant portion of their fandom time in active opposition.

While, for some, the idea of a supposed fan spending much of their leisure time discussing and creating art about a pairing or character that they dislike might seem counterintuitive, Jonathan Gray (2007) offers some insights into the attraction of anti-shipping. He argues that “[studying] the anti-fan could also provide further insight into the nature of affective involvement, for many of us care as deeply (if not more so) about those texts that we dislike as we do about those that we like” (73). There is pleasure in hating or disliking something, especially if that hatred/dislike

¹³ Meta is any piece of fan-authored non-fiction that discusses fandom, fanworks, or a source text. It might involve discussing characters, pairing, tropes, an event from canon, or might be focused on fandom, discussing fan events, fan activity, fanworks, etc. (“Meta”).

can be shared with a community. As a result, Gray suggests that fandom and anti-fandom, rather than being diametrically opposed to each other, can instead be seen as simultaneously existing on a kind of Moëbius strip with “many fans and anti-fan behaviours and performances resembling, if not replicating, each other” (845).

Francesca Haig (2014) suggests that anti-fandom can offer a distinct sort of pleasure wherein “the criticisms aren’t incidental to the pleasure taken in the texts; they appear, in large part, to constitute that pleasure” (14). Another framing of anti-fandom argues that the vehemence and passion of anti-fandom might mask a sense of guilt for experiencing enjoyment from a media text that a consumer believes they *should not* be enjoying. For example, Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones (2013) suggest that the significant anti-fandom surrounding E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy might, in part, be made up of those who believe that the consent/abuse issues in the book are unacceptable, yet still find certain pleasures in the text anyway. Some of these readers/viewers might fall into anti-fandom in order so that they can continue to engage with a story that gives them pleasure, while still assuring themselves that they are not supporting a “problematic” media text.

In recent years, anti-fans (now typically shortened to just “antis” in fandom parlance) have become notorious in many fandom spaces for not just hating or disliking a particular pairing, but for actively and publicly calling out authors who write that pairing and the Archive of Our Own for hosting it. In other words, being an anti has taken on a certain moral stance – one that opposes problematic pairings, specifically those they see as endorsing abuse, unequal power dynamics, and pedophilia. Pairings and ships that involve one or more underage characters are of particular concern to antis who argue that fanfiction about these pairings can be read as a form of “grooming” children and teenagers. For example, one teenage fan who identifies as an anti

equates the production of fanwork involving “adults and children” to abusive grooming practices:

Just so those “anti-anti” types who claim to be the real allies know, as a minor I have always felt so, so wary around you. You remind me so much of creepy people, especially men, who I have met IRL, and your attitude toward my objections about the work you produce (especially stuff involving adults and children and noncon) is flippant, disrespectful, and just plain shitty. If you’re a grown adult and think that consuming content that outright romanticizes p**ophilia is okay, take a long and hard look in the mirror and ask yourself why you’re facilitating a culture that tried to groom me (“Anti-shipper”).¹⁴

It is the equation between the production of fictional creative work that involves “adults and children and noncon” and *real-life* grooming, abuse, and pedophilia that characterizes the objections antis have to Ao3’s content policy. Put differently, antis argue that stories that involve underage characters in sexually explicit scenarios are akin to pedophilia and that Ao3 should be held liable for distributing child pornography for hosting them. Antis often hold the stance that teenage readers and writers of fanfiction are highly susceptible and can be heavily influenced by the fictional content they consume. Accordingly, antis believe that many adult fans who produce sexually explicit content involving underage characters are trying to normalize adult-child sexual

¹⁴ The terminology around antis has become complicated over the years, but basically an ‘anti-anti’ (also often known as a pro-shipper) is someone who is opposed to the activities of antis. Non-con is short for non-consensual, a fandom abbreviation used to warn for the presence of non-consensual sexual contact/rape/sexual assault in fan creative work.

relationships and thus “groom” teenage fans. As another anti-fan using the pseudonym Weirdcourse wrote in 2020:

we bring up our trauma when it comes to ‘shipping discourse’ is because we want people to realize just how fuckin serious what they’re doing is. ‘it’s just fiction!!!’ no, it’s [not] just fiction, it’s the romanticization/fetishization of childhood trauma that’s created for the sole purpose of getting off to (“Anti-shipper”).

In many ways, the concerns raised by antis can be read as the latest iteration in a series of moral panics about youth and technology. The last two centuries have seen panics about the “vice of the telegraph” and the dangers of “illicit wooing” (Cassell & Cramer, 2008, 60) over the telephone. Teenagers, particularly young women and girls because of their presumed innocence and naiveté, have long been positioned as at-risk by new and dangerous forms of corruption made possible by advances in communication technology. As with these earlier forms of technology, the Internet, and more recently social media, has been framed as a “conduit to contagion to be contained or countered through traditional salves to vice and violence, such as the family, the church, or earlier (meaning more wholesome) forms of media consumption” (Gray, 2009, 125). The primary source of this contagion – again, as with the telegraph and the telephone – is not the technology itself, but rather *who* that technology allows young people to encounter. Often in the discourse of the moral panic, teenagers become unwitting (and unwilling) victims of adult predators set on exposing them to obscene content in order to groom and manipulate them into harmful and dangerous sexual contact and sexual narratives (Fisk, 2016).

Even when the danger does not come from adults, but rather other teenagers, as with recent moral panics about the dangers of “sexting” (Hasinoff, 2013), the risk is nearly always framed around sexual knowledge or sexual experience that is inappropriate, too much, or happens too

soon. As Justine Cassell and Meg Cramer (2008) reiterate, “[the] internet allows for tremendous potential of creative expression – expression that has not necessarily first been vetted by adults. Ultimately, it is when young women construct sexualized images of themselves, or contact strangers, that communication technologies are felt to become dangerous” (68). It is not the internet itself, but rather its conduit to sexual knowledge and experience, that is the danger.

The basic structure of a moral panic – that advancing technology allows youth to come into contact with dangerous adults intent on introducing them to sex and sexuality – is clearly evident in the narratives espoused by anti-fans. For example, in a piece of meta entitled “The Problem with Fiction ≠ Reality” an anonymous fan made the following argument about why Ao3’s content policies that allow stories about underage sexuality are dangerous:

Behavior that receives positive feedback and reaffirmation is behavior that will stay. Just so you’re aware, **non-offending pedophiles are still pedophiles**. And just what happens when there is a lack of accountability and self-awareness because the internet loves to normalize sexualizing kids? They offend. That’s the pro, and con, about the internet. Identity is anonymous. There is no way to know what people do on their own time. Why would you rather subject children to possible endangerment to satiate your, and other sick adults’, wants and fantasies of fictional children? (“Anti-shipper”, emphasis in original).

Again, the anonymous writer equates danger and harm to real children with fictional pornography. Here, adult readers and writers of sexually explicit underage stories are characterized as potential predators and allowing these stories to be published subjects children to “possible endangerment.” As I discussed extensively in chapter two, this characterization is based on an understanding of childhood as sexually innocent and adulthood as the source of a potentially corrupting sexuality.

Part of the reason that anti-fans find fanfiction spaces that both allow underage users and that host sexually explicit content so jarring is that most forms of literature written for teenagers comes with an assumed responsibility to educate and protect. Jacqueline Rose (1984) calls children and young adult literature “impossible” as it hangs on the “impossible relation between adult and child [and] sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (1). This literature is often dependent on a philosophy that fixes the child as a “pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality, and the state” (63), and the adolescent as an audience at-risk and in need of guidance. Consequently, children’s literature becomes a “form of investment by the adult in the child, and to the demand made by the adult on that child as the effect of that investment, a demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place” (60).

Relatedly, young adult and adolescent literature written by adults is, as Rebecca Seelinger Trites (2000) argues, “often an ideological tool used to curb teenagers’ libido” (85). While young adult literature has become more explicit in depicting sexuality, “there is still a strong imperative towards pedagogy – inculcating correct attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of an education” (Tosenberger, 2008, 188). Whereas the child is fixed in the immovable position of non-sexual innocent, “[the] cultural construct of adolescence and its literature does, albeit grudgingly, allow a space for sexuality, and the discourse shifts from blanket condemnation to strategies for containment” (188). As the content policies of the Archive of Our Own do not offer the same “strategies for containment” and instead, offer free access to sexually explicit stories, including those about children and teenagers themselves, it disrupts the dynamic of educator/student that young adult literature tends to rely on. Instead, adults and teenagers exist in a space where age is often obscured, and education is not a priority. As a result, teenagers have full access to sexually explicit material that is written to arouse and entertain. In a framework

that positions teenagers as sexually precarious and in need of proper guidance, this free access becomes not only a threat, but also characterizes the adults who write and host this content as dangerous predators.

Unsurprisingly, many adult fans push back against the narrative that they are predators engaged in grooming practices in ways that further disrupt the relationality between adults and teenagers in fandom. As a result of the more extreme nature of some of the claims of anti-fans (e.g. that explicit stories about fictional underage characters are the equivalent of actual child pornography), antis are often broadly dismissed as young, naive, ignorant puritans, regardless of what they are critiquing and why. Adult fans, often deeply defensive, tend to conflate multiple different critiques of fans and fan spaces as all under the banner of “antis.” Any critique of Ao3, from the idea that they host “child pornography” and thus enable pedophiles to the presence of racist narratives and stories on the archive all tend to get characterized as complaints from antis. The result is that the term anti becomes a quick, easy way to discredit fans offering critiques of online fandom spaces.

This defensiveness, however, also allows for white fans to use the history of fandom and of Ao3 to argue for continuing to allow racist fanworks on the site and against the push to do something about racism in fandom. For example, in a 16,000-word meta essay on Ao3 entitled “Your Vagina is a Bigot; My Vagina is a Snake” a fan named Franzeska argues that activism around racism in fandom is suppressing fanfiction’s creativity and puts fan spaces like Ao3 at risk. In her own words:

First, I am calling this anti bias out because I don't like bullies, and this kind of parasitic "activism" typically goes after the most vulnerable, easily-cowed targets. Second, I am

calling it out because much of it depends on an ignorance of fandom history, and I love fandom history and want to share it with everyone (Franziska, 2016).

By conflating anti-racist activism with bullying, using the term anti, and positioning activist fans as ignorant of fandom history, Franziska creates an image of aggressive and hysterical anti-fans who want to undermine the Archive of Our Own and its content. Rather than engaging with the critiques of anti-fans disturbed by the racist content on Ao3, Franziska and other white fans can easily dismiss these concerns by calling upon the label anti to conjure an image of a young, impressionable, unreasonable fan who does not understand how fandom is supposed to work. As a result, conversations about Ao3's content policies tend to collapse all manner of critique under the label of anti, limiting productive discussion about features that might protect racialized fans from encountering racist material on the archive.

While anti-fans have existed for decades in online fan spaces, they have not always been as active as they are now and the relationship between adult and teenage fans has not always been as contentious. So, why has that changed? I argue that the explanation can be found in shifting social media platforms coupled with an understanding of fandom as primarily a space for teenagers. Accordingly, in the next section, I return again to 2007 to trace the migration of fandom from blogging sites like Livejournal to the social media website Tumblr to discuss the impact of this move on fan communities.

Shifting Platforms and Failed Adolescence

Along with the attempted introduction of FanLib.com that led to the creation of the Archive of Our Own, 2007 was also the year of Strikethrough '07, the mass deletion of blogs on Livejournal that were deemed dangerous or inappropriate for minors. After the events of Strikethrough '07, many fans had serious concerns about the sustainability of Livejournal as a fan platform and

these concerns were exacerbated when the site was sold to SUP Services later that year. SUP Services is an international online media company that was founded in Moscow in 2006. Given the Russian government's condemnation of homosexuality, fans worried that the sale would only compound censorship attempts and began actively searching for a new platform (McLevy, 2017).¹⁵

That platform would turn out to be Tumblr, a social media website that would not only change the *location* of online fandom by its very form and would also transform the relationship between adult and teenage fans. Tumblr differs from Livejournal and other early fandom platforms in several significant ways. On Livejournal, users have their own private blog on which they can post whatever content they desire (as long as it fits into Livejournal's Terms of Service). A user can "friend" other blogs to create their "friend list" (or "flist" in fandom parlance) – these other blogs can be private blogs or Livejournal communities, which are run by a moderator and to which any member can post. There are two important things to note about this structure. One, as with social media like Facebook and Instagram, users and community moderators have the ability to control who "friends" them. This is particularly important for communities that allow pornographic content like *Pornish Pixies* (which I discussed in an earlier chapter), because it allows moderators to restrict access by age. This is not to say this system was perfect – teenagers have been lying about their age in order to access adult content online for about as long as the Internet has existed. But it did allow for a strong, unambiguous signal that a community or blog would contain content that is meant for adults, meaning that even if teenagers

¹⁵ They were not wrong to be concerned - in 2017, SUP changed the Livejournal Terms of Service to require compliance with Russian laws banning political solicitation, criticism of the Russian government, or promotion of homosexuality (McLevy, 2017).

lied about their ages, they did so with the awareness of what content they might encounter on a particular blog or community. The second important thing to note is that users on Livejournal *only* see content from the blogs and communities that they have set as “friends.” Livejournal is thus highly curatable – every user has control over which content producers show up on their flist and can easily add or remove content as they see fit.

Livejournal fandom has often been conceptualized using Benedict Anderson’s (1990) idea of an “imagined community,” or a socially-constructed community imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of a group. Framing online fandom as an imagined community emphasizes a sense of collective belonging and shared interests, jargon, and values. Many adult fans who spent a significant amount of time in the Livejournal era of fandom are thus heavily invested in the idea of fandom as a community and in a sense of collective belonging. The shift to Tumblr, however, changed this. Unlike Livejournal, Tumblr doesn’t operate as a set of discrete, private blogs that can friend each other. Instead, it is more akin to platforms like Twitter in which users are considered content producers that other users can “follow.” At the same time, Tumblr operates on a system of reblogging (similar to retweeting), a mechanism in which users can repost another user’s content with full credit still going to the original producer. So, if I were to reblog a post from Person A, that post would show up on my personal Tumblr but still be attributed to Person A. This structure means that Tumblr differs from Livejournal in several important ways. One, users have significantly less control over who friends or follows them, meaning that many people that the user does not know might be following their blog. Secondly, the reblogging mechanism encourages the viral spreading of posts far beyond a particular Tumblr’s followers. This means that content that might once have been curated for a small community on Livejournal now has the potential to reach every user on Tumblr, many of whom

might not be in fandom or might have very different ideas of what a fandom experience should be. It also means that content meant for an adult audience can easily reach users of all ages.

One significant implication of this change of structure and form is that the idea of fandom as an imagined community no longer accurately describes online fan communities (if it ever did). Instead, fandom might more accurately be described as what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) calls a “contact zone” which she defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). Tumblr may still be curatable in the sense that a user can choose which blogs they follow, but because of the “reblogging” mechanism, the chance that content from a blog a user does not follow will end up on their Dashboard is far more likely. What this means is that segments of fandom that might have been quite separate in the Livejournal era are now encountering each other and “meeting, clashing, and grappling.” And this includes adult and teenage fans. Whereas once a teenager would have to actively choose to follow a Livejournal that contains pornographic content, they now might come across that content simply by virtue of following a blog that follows another blog that posts adult content. The content a user might encounter on Tumblr is thus far less predictable and curatable than it was previously, and this has significant implications on a number of levels, but particularly for teenagers running across adult/erotic/pornographic content.

While anti-fandom has existed since the advent of fandom itself, online fandom’s shift to Tumblr and Ao3 had a profound transformative effect on anti-fans. Whereas before, anti-fans would usually create their own communities and online spaces, the move to Tumblr and the subsequent breakdown in search functionality meant that fans and anti-fans began to come into contact far more often than ever before. Teenage fans who may not want to see sexually explicit material have a far greater chance of accidentally running across it than they did in the day when most fan

activity was undertaken in a series of discrete communities that required an age-statement to enter.

All of this is exacerbated by the long-standing beliefs that fandom is primarily an adolescent space, that most fans who read and write fanfiction are teenagers, and that adult fans are anomalies who have failed to “grow out of” fandom. While fan studies scholarship has always understood the wide age variation in fandom communities, mainstream media articles often conceptualize fandom as a space primarily composed of teenagers and young adults, with adults as the outliers – and often suspicious and threatening ones. For example, in an article written for the Irish online magazine *thejournal.ie*, author Stephen Downes (2014) states:

My second concern also involves younger writers, who of course make up the majority of FanFic users; the sexualisation of fictional works written originally for children is currently one of the most popular genres of FanFic. Explicit heterosexual, homosexual and violent sexual versions of books such as *Harry Potter*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, films like *Star Wars* and *The Hobbit*, as well as TV shows from sitcoms to *Star Trek* are all being shared in the fantasy world of FanFic. There are no controls as to who can read this material and also no controls as to who can write it; children are learning age-inappropriate terminology from reading each other’s work and the work of older, largely anonymous, authors (n.p.).

Alongside the discourses of protectionism and risk that echo those I discussed in chapter two, embedded in this quotation is a common misconception about online fandom – that it is, “of course,” made up of predominantly “younger writers.” It is unsurprising that Downes takes it as self-evident that the majority of fanfiction is written by younger fans, given how closely fandom is tied with teenage girls in mainstream discourse. The abundant use of terms

like “fangirls” when discussing online fan activity works to create an idea of the average fan as young, immature, and hysterical, an image that can be traced back to mainstream coverage of “Beatlemania” in the 1960s. As Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Heiss, and Gloria Jacobs (1992) argue, media coverage portrayed Beatles fans as hysterical and out of control to the point that they were considered to have an affliction for which the “only cure” was age and that Beatles fans would eventually “[grow] up to be responsible, settled” individuals (87).

The idea of fandom as a temporary stage that one “grows out” of is a pervasive one and can be found within all manner of mainstream discussions about fandom, from those that frame fan-writing as “practice” for future original writing (Grady, 2016) to those discussing the potential of fanfiction for sexual education and development (Banaszczuk, 2016). The result of this framing of fandom as made up predominantly of teenagers is that adult fans are perceived to be anomalous and thus as somehow having failed to properly grow up.

In a study about fans of the band One Direction, Hannah McCann and Clare Southerton (2019) argue that in “maintaining the object of their obsession” (54) past the point at which they were supposed to set it aside, adult fans threaten normative ideas about temporality and development. In another study about fans of the television show *Sherlock* who are over the age of fifty, Line Nybro Petersen (2017) argues that the “predominant mode of understanding aging in fandom” is that “[people] over a certain age are considered too old to participate in what is often, particularly in popular media, considered predominantly a youth culture” [para. 1.5].

However, even the most cursory demographic studies of online fandom belie the idea that fandom is a predominantly teenage space. Informal fan surveys of fan demographics reveal

that teenagers make up no more than 30% of online fandom (centrumlumina, 2013). While these surveys are limited in scope and a large-scale study of fandom demographics has, to my knowledge, not yet been undertaken, they strongly suggest that teenagers do not make up the majority of fanfiction readers and writers as many mainstream articles assume. And yet, the idea that fandom is predominantly made up of teenagers remains pervasive and has even taken hold within certain segments of fandom itself, along with a concomitant suspicion of adult fans as potential threats. For example, in a 2018 discussion of adults in fandom, a fan using the pseudonym lovewitch2016 made the following argument:

Like I get the concept but the fact is getting older means changing how you interact with things that aren't necessarily meant for you ... the entire issue with "fandom moms" and such is that they still interact with teenagers and kids as if they are close to them in age ("Look I Don't Wanna").

In this quotation, lovewitch2016 succinctly sums up several of the assumptions underlying suspicions about adult fans, namely that online fandom is not "necessarily meant for" adults and that the "entire issue" with adult women in fandom is that they interact with teenage fans as equals. In this framing, if fandom is supposed to be something one grows out of, adult fans who linger in fan spaces past their adolescence become deviant figures who have failed to achieve full adulthood and thus figures of suspicion. The age difference between adult and teenage fans outweighs any other potential similarities and cross-generational fan interaction becomes a problem in need of a solution. Yet, given that an understanding of adolescence as a particular life-stage is a relatively recent phenomenon, as I argued in chapter two of this dissertation, here I want to take a step back and reexamine fandom as a teenage space

through a different lens. Specifically, I want to consider fandom as an adolescent space in its capacity and potential for growth and transformation.

Fanfiction and Queer Temporality

In early 2021, one anonymous fan reached out to another long-time fan on Tumblr to ask for, as they put it, “a history lesson of how new fans, especially minors, were received and integrated into the community in the past” (nottonyharrison, 2021). The question sparked a several-thousand-word comment thread that turned into a debate about the responsibilities of adult fans when it came to minors interacting with explicit material. One response, from a fan using the pseudonym nottonyharrison, reads:

What I do know is that actively engaging in discussions about what can be construed as pornographic content, with people who are not of age in their country, is a very dangerous line to cross. I accept that people will lie about their age, how could I not? I’m the poster child! ... I don’t want kids to feel shame like I did, I want them to learn from others who have had lots of experiences of negative culture, or hear stories about what people have learned. But I also do not want to be responsible for fucking up someone’s idea of sex and relationships. I’m not an expert in relationships, or young adult development, and I don’t want that responsibility put on me.

The contradictions in this comment are striking. The commenter understands why teenagers would lie about their ages to access pornographic content and they do not wish for teenage fans to have the same experience of shame about it as they did. Yet, simultaneously, they are concerned about “fucking up” young fans’ understandings of sex and relationships. In many ways, this comment gets at the essence of the insoluble problems of relationality between adults and teenagers. Existing as it does in the liminal, unsettled space between childhood and

adulthood, adolescence is a threat – adolescents are children who must grow up, but by doing so unsettle the edifice of adult subjectivity. In her study of sex education, Jen Gilbert (2007) draws on Julia Kristeva who “troubles the epistemological distinction between the adult and adolescent and considers ‘the term “adolescent” less an age category than an open psychic structure” (48). Adult sexuality is “inhabited by the memories, fantasies and experiences of adolescence” (47) – this inhabitation is what puts adult subjectivity at risk. Gilbert explains that each stage of development, including the move from adolescence to adulthood, involves a concomitant loss. As a result of this loss, adults have an ambivalent attitude towards youth that they attempt to resolve by positioning themselves at the endpoint of linear sexual development which has the effect of creating “an unbridgeable gap between children and adults ... [that] constructs children and youth as deficient and not yet fully human” (50).

Gilbert (2007) further draws on D.W. Winnicott’s (1992) theories of adolescence and risk in which he posits that risk-taking is a challenge to adults and a response to deprivation. Winnicott argues that deprivation is “an ordinary and devastating experience” (Gilbert 58) of growing up, or, as he puts it “things went well enough and then they did not go well enough” (Winnicott, 1992, 91). For the child or adolescent, this deprivation results in a feeling of hopelessness for which risk-taking is an attempt at mitigation. Put differently, risky behaviour in adolescence is an attempt “to reach back over the deprivation area to the lost object” (577) in order to repair what went wrong. As the experience of deprivation was initially “a failure of the facilitating environment” (Gilbert 57), in acting-out the adolescent is looking for the adult’s ability to survive and tolerate their revolt. In the context of sex education, approaches like abstinence-only education confront adolescent sexual exploration with a vindictive morality that condemns any sort of sexual activity and leaves no space for adolescent acting-out. As a result, teenagers

engage in more extreme risk-taking behavior like interpreting anal sex as permissible in an abstinent lifestyle (Gilbert 59).

To respond to revolt, adults must tolerate the risks inherent in recognizing that adolescence “does not go away” (Gilbert 60). Put differently, adolescents require space to act-out in the service of sexual exploration, and have conversations about sexual pleasure, “and it is the adult’s responsibility to acknowledge the losses that make development and to endure these tests” (58). Rather than meeting adolescent risk-taking with vindictiveness, what is required is “the unwitting, but hopefully compassionate, participation and care of adults” (59). If adults are able to tolerate risk-taking with concerned compassion, adolescent revolt can “fail successfully” paving the way for “hope [to] return as a possibility for the future” (59).

In the post above, nottonyharrison (2021) is attempting to reconcile their teenage self who actively sought out and enjoyed “smutty fanfiction” while simultaneously grappling with the urge to protect teenagers from any potential harm that might befall them by accessing sexual narratives too soon. In other words, they are attempting to reconcile a remembered moment in which their acting-out was allowed and facilitated by adults with their urge as an adult to prevent and control adolescent risk-taking. The urge to not “fuck up” teenagers’ perception of sex and relationships overpowers nottonyharrison’s remembered explorations and risk-taking leading them to attempt to shut down spaces of exploration for current teenagers. The contradictions in the post thus arise not from a debate between the adult commenter and a teenage fan, but between the incommensurability between the commenter’s adult self and their remembered teenage self. As Nat Hurley (2011) puts it, “the child looks forward; the adult looks back. It is the adult who can’t bear the point where the gazes meet” (9).

In nottonyharrison's struggle to reconcile their memories of being a teenager in fandom with the responsibility they feel to protect teenage fans, they inadvertently reveal how much of adult subjectivity is an attempt to reckon with our own adolescent selves. And it is here that I want to suggest that the particular queer temporality of fandom provides a potential space for this reckoning and a place for adults and teenagers to co-exist outside of protectionist impulses.

Jen Gilbert (2004) asks us "what would it mean to see reading as a shared experience of interpreting the world, where one's ideas would bump up against and be touched by the interpretations of others" (236)? I suggest that fanfiction offers precisely this sense of a "shared experience" – one where fans with diverse experiences, backgrounds, and – crucially for this chapter – ages converge on a shared interest about which they create an archive of creative work that analyzes, reinterprets, and reimagines that interest. Consequently, in this section, I want to take a moment and ask what would happen if we shifted the conversation away from the age of individual fans and instead consider fandom space as one of growth, interpretation, and transformation, or, in other words, as a space of adolescence. Reading fandom and fanfiction through the lens of queer temporality can potentially offer new insights into the insoluble problems of adolescence as well as the complex psychological relationship between adults and adolescents/adolescence.

Thinking about time and temporality queerly can allow for a different and more expansive understanding of life experiences that are not beholden to heterosexual life-stage markers. As Jack Halberstam (2005) explains,

Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or

immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity (182).

Growing up in a small, homophobic, predominantly Christian town, writing fanfiction online opened up a space for me to imagine myself differently. Before I entered fandom in my early adolescence in the mid-nineties, the narratives available to me in young adult literature, which I devoured voraciously, were limited to those that were considered age-appropriate. These “appropriate” literatures rarely, if ever, contained queer life experiences. Fan spaces, alternatively, allowed for experiences of queer growth that are often unthinkable or untellable in mainstream narratives. However, as I discussed in chapter three, that growth did not end when my teenage years did. My return to writing fanfiction in my mid-thirties coincided with another period of growth and exploration wherein I discovered both my nonbinary gender identity as well as my autism. While this secondary stage of change and self-discovery does not fit neatly into teleological conceptualizations of development that view childhood and adolescence as the primary life-stages in which growth and transformation occur, considering fandom through the lens of queer temporality makes room for multiple periods of change that do not have a particular goal or endpoint. Put differently, I suggest that for many fans, fandom is not a place we grow out of, but instead a space we grow *with*.

While discussing the representation of queer girlhood in film, Whitney Monaghan (2019) asks, “Do [queer girls] hold onto their queerness or is this subsumed into normativity, leaving queer girls to grow into homonormative or perhaps heterosexual adults?” (153). I argue that adult fans, who subvert expectations about growing up by maintaining the object(s) of their obsessions –

long after they are supposed to have left them behind – resist being “subsumed into normativity” and instead offer an example of queer growth and temporality. As Hannah Dyer (2020) argues,

[queer] temporality does not register a dramatic rupture between childhood and adulthood because the remnants of childhood experience are a queer presence in adult emotional and social life. Accepting the queerness of temporality makes room for notice of what David Eng calls “affective correspondences,” which are “emotional analogies” that join the “present with forgotten moment from the past, carving out a space for what-could-have-been in the now” (58).

Reading fandom through the lens of queer temporality, therefore, suggests that adult fans in fandom are not simply encountering teenage fans in online fan spaces, but, in many ways, they are also encountering their own teenage selves. Particularly for queer fans for whom traditional notions of growing up into heterosexual adulthood are impossible, fandom offers a space to revisit or reinhabit childhood and adolescence and experience, as Dyer (2020) puts it, “what it must have felt like to have a queer childhood” (293). For example, in another Tumblr post discussing the presence of adults in fan spaces, a fan using the pseudonym *codenamecesare* (2017) defends their writing of sexually explicit stories about underage characters:

No one has the right to ask older writers to cut themselves off from their own past just because young’uns don’t want to acknowledge that people in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, *all* of them, were also young once. I’m 41, but I remember vividly what it was like to be 14. If I write a high school AU, it’s about *my* high school experience, even if I were to set it in the present day and decorate it with some (probably comically out of touch) Stuff The Kids Are Into Now. If I write a high school AU with sex, it’s because I remember that too! I’m not thinking about kids today, why would I– I have my own

experiences to draw on. And honestly, sometimes there are things about being young that you don't really understand until you're much older and have some perspective— and that's worth writing about.¹⁶

Cornel Sandvoss (2005) argues that fandom can be understood as “an extension of self” and that fans often unconsciously perceive fan objects (specifically characters) as part of themselves. For codenamecesare, their writing about underage sexuality does not arise from an attraction to teenagers or an attempt to groom teenagers but is rather driven from their own memories and experiences wherein the characters they write about are extensions of themselves. Writing a “high school AU with sex” thus becomes a way of reprocessing adolescent experiences through a creative lens. As codenamecesare argues, some experiences are difficult or impossible to understand without the benefit of time – my own teenage reckonings with my queerness that I discussed in chapter three are case in point. Writing through the lens of teenage characters can thus become a mechanism by which adult fans revisit their teenage selves and process adolescent experiences.

Again, thinking about fandom as a space of “play” can be useful in making sense of how adult fans use fanfiction to process and reprocess adolescent experiences. Melanie Klein explains that children's play does not involve a straightforward repetition of experiences but rather “a repetition with a difference that offers a horizon for new planes of thought” (Dyer, 2020, 43). As Hannah Dyer (2020) explains,

¹⁶ A high school AU, or alternate universe, is a story in which the setting of a piece of media is changed to that of a high school. Typically, the characters are also aged down to high school students.

In fantasy-building, “fresh elements” are added to their realm of experience. The repetition that occurs in children’s play does not necessarily manage compulsion but can also be an occasioning of newness in which tradition breaks open to allow new understanding to be made. Play is a way to work through experience and to insert newness into a chain of losses and restrictions that propels development (43).

For codenamecesare, writing a high school AU as an adult fan thus allows them to return to the potentially difficult or traumatic time of adolescence to play out familiar experiences “with a difference” and thus reprocess or reconcile those experiences with that of their adult self. In Hannah Dyer’s words, “[in] the act of play, a queer temporality can be summoned where time moves differently and revisions to injustice can be made” (29). For many adults, particularly queer adults, returning to a time fraught with confusion and uncertainty through the lens of play allows for new understandings and often, increased compassion, for their/our younger selves.

Accordingly, rather than seeing all adult fans writing sexually explicit stories about children and teenagers as pedophiles and groomers, understanding that many adults are speaking first to their own teenage selves suggests that underage fanfiction can potentially offer fans of all ages a mechanism to process adolescent experiences and reconcile the sense of loss that accompanies each stage of development.¹⁷ For example, in a series of *Captain America* fanfiction titled “an early name used for videophones,” fan author easyforpauline (2022) traces the development of the BDSM relationship between the characters of Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Bucky Barnes from childhood explorations, through a seventy-year traumatic separation and into a new

¹⁷ I am not arguing that pedophiles and child abusers never read or write underage fanfiction, but rather I argue that the assumption that pedophilia is the *only* or primary reason is unproductive and detrimental to the relationality between adult and teenage fans.

relationship configuration after their reunion. Through the use of flashbacks and stories set in multiple time periods, the author juxtaposes Steve and Bucky's early experiments with power exchange with their attempts to rekindle their relationship after Bucky had been captured, tortured, and brainwashed for decades. In so doing, *easyforpauline* challenges notions that adolescence is the primary life-stage of growth, development, and identity formation, and instead demonstrates how we are revisited by the transformative effects of adolescence throughout our lives. In one scene where Steve and Bucky are negotiating revisiting a particularly risky kink that they experimented with as teenagers, Bucky says,

“I was smaller. Weaker. Younger. Stupider.” He shrugged. “You were that stuff too, but—I don’t know. You’re pretty constant in my head. A lot more constant than I am.

Details like that are negligible when it comes to you (*easyforpauline*, 2022).

This line, and the scene as a whole, has Bucky remembering Steve – whose body changed dramatically when he became Captain America in his early twenties – as consistent over the passing of time, while seeing himself as irrevocably changed by the passing of time. Over the course of the story, Bucky continues to flashback to memories of his teenage years in an attempt to grapple with his pervasive sense of shame about his desire to be sexually dominated. While he is never able to fully reconcile his shame, near the end of the story, Bucky has a dream in which he first confronts, and then thanks his teenage self for being brave enough to voice his desires to Steve. The story as a whole demonstrates a queer temporality in which Bucky is in ongoing conversation with his teenage self and the boundaries between adulthood, childhood, and adolescence are continually eroded. By not eliminating Bucky's shame by the end of the story, but rather having him reach a sense of peace where he can coexist with his shame, *easyforpauline's* story demonstrates how we are continually inhabited by our teenage selves.

Rather than by trying to eliminate the ongoing psychological traces of adolescence, it is by embracing and acknowledging their presence that we might begin to reckon with them.

Current moral panics about teenage fans, adult fans, and sexually explicit material, however, threaten the queer temporal space of fanfiction and fandom. As I finish writing this dissertation during June of 2022, I am deeply concerned with the rise of homophobic and transphobic rhetoric, particularly in the United States, that is attempting to equate teaching and acknowledging queerness with “grooming” and “pedophilia” (Romano 2022). For many adult fans, including myself, watching the alt-right co-opt the meaning of the term “grooming” to mean educating children about sexuality and gender is deeply reminiscent of anti-fan rhetoric that equates writing pornographic fanfiction with grooming and pedophilia. While I do not claim that anti-fans are responsible for the current emboldening of homophobia and transphobia, I do argue that a similar logic about growth, temporality, and risk underlies both instances.

In an article about moral panics about sexting, Lara Karaian and Katherine Van Meyl (2015) argue that “[these] fears about teens’, and in particular certain girls’ futures, are reliant on a heteronormative, gendered and raced and classed “logic of reproductive temporality” (31). Moral panics about queer sex education, sexting, and teenage fans accessing pornographic fanfiction are all reliant on a worldview in which “fears about childhood sexualization ... infantilize adolescents and women and fail to theorize the pleasures of sexuality and its expression alongside its possible dangers” (32). In other words, these moral panics all take the view that risk is something that adolescents must avoid at all costs or risk falling off the path to proper heterosexual development. Adults who do not work to keep teenagers from risk, therefore, are guilty of facilitating risk-taking and are thus suspicious and potentially dangerous.

Inadvertently or not, anti-fans have been part of the growth and popularization of this narrative regarding risk. By equating adult fans with “groomers” and decrying any fanfiction about underage characters written by adults, anti-fans have contributed to a moral panic that is today threatening the legality and existence of queer and trans children, teenagers, and adults in many countries across the globe. The paranoid pathologization of intergenerational communication and friendships that myself and many other adult fans found so important when we were teenagers works to strengthen the idea that children and teenagers are innately innocent and at-risk of corruption while adults, especially queer adults, are the source of a dangerous pollution.

However, as Katherine McKittrick (2021) asks, “What if we read outside ourselves not for ourselves but to actively unknow ourselves, to unhinge, and thus come to know each other, intellectually, inside and outside the academy, as collaborators of collective and generous and capacious stories?” (16). While McKittrick may have been speaking about academic writing, I want to pose the same question about fan creative writing. What if, instead of reading for evidence of danger and threat as many anti-fans do, fans instead read for cross-generational connections that allow us to “actively unknow ourselves”? By imagining online fandom not as a space made up of fans of different age categories and instead considering it as a space of growth and exploration, we can catch a glimpse at a more hopeful vision of fan relationality, one that allows fans of all ages access to “capacious stories” in which we can reckon with the teenager we once all were.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Drawing Desire Lines of Hope

Scrolling through Tumblr several months ago, I came across a particular term that I have not been able to get out of my head: the desire line. On the surface, a desire line is a strange concept to introduce in the conclusion of a dissertation about fanfiction – it is a term that originated in urban planning and describes “paths and tracks made over time by the wishes and feet of walkers, especially those paths that run contrary to design or planning” (MacFarlane quoted in Bramley, 2018). We have all seen them – dirt paths worn by the passage of thousands of steps, often cutting through a field or a grassy patch by a street corner. The original post that I stumbled across described how urban planning initiatives use desire lines to create more accessible, walkable cities. The idea is that by paying attention to where people *want* to go – the paths people want to take – we can design urban environments that support their dwellers. Andrew Furman, a professor of interior design and architecture, explains desire lines as arising from “the endless human desire to have choice. The importance of not having someone prescribe your path” (Furman quoted in Bramley, 2018). As he puts it, desire lines are about “not following the script” and instead molding and modifying an environment based on the desires of its users.

It was that idea – a path, created by thousands of feet that want to go somewhere the road does not take them – that has been rolling around in my head during the weeks and months of finishing this dissertation. Fanfiction is a kind of desire line – stories that show us where readers *want* to go. While mainstream media might be the sidewalks and roads designed by urban planners – logical, square corners that fall out in a neat and tidy grid – fan fiction takes shortcuts, cuts across lawns, darts through backlots, and gives us a glimpse at the innermost desires of readers. As Henry Jenkins puts it, “[fanfiction] is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk”

(Jenkins quoted in Harmon, 1997). In a world in which “contemporary myths” are based on what can make the most profit while being the least objectionable to the most amount of people, fanfiction offers space to tell stories that are not beholden to the bottom line – stories that are about people, places, and ideas that corporations do not want to touch.

Not that these desires always, or even often, represent a utopian vision. Frequently desire lines lead to places we might not want to acknowledge – places where racism flourishes, even, or especially, among those who might want to try to deny its existence. They might lead us to deserted lots full of sexism or to an abandoned building covered in the kind of pornography many people would like to pretend does not exist. But they can also take us to the kinds of places we wish normal streets would get to faster.

For teenagers, and the rest of us who are trying to figure out who we are and how we fit into the world we live in, having access to the plurality of stories that fanfiction offers, no matter what their quality, can be an invaluable resource. Queer teenagers in particular, who continue to be given mainstream stories about queerness that are steeped in pain, struggle, and oppression with happy endings few and far between, deserve a richer, fuller set of stories about their lives and experiences. For me, writing this dissertation has been a journey of discovery of just how crucial fanfiction was, and continues to be, in providing me space and a creative outlet to explore my own identity and desires. Without access to the strange, queer space of fandom and fanfiction, it may have taken many more years for me to discover the kinds of stories and characters that allowed me to imagine myself differently. Stumbling across fanfiction for me, was like walking down a familiar street and deciding to take a dirt path off to the side – one that led me to a world I could never have imagined existing.

As I finish writing this conclusion in June of 2022, the world has changed immeasurably since I wrote the first words of this dissertation. Just as it did with nearly every other community, COVID-19 changed the face of fandom and fanfiction irrevocably. The Archive of Our Own (Ao3) saw its traffic increase from 39 million daily page views in February 2020 to over 48 million by April 2020 (“Ao3 Statistics”). Faced with the disruption of normal life and a cessation of nearly all social activities, people flooded into fandom spaces. Some of this influx were former fans who were rediscovering a hobby, but many more were new fans, young and old alike, who were discovering fandom for the first time. In the midst of a world-altering event, fandom provided a space of connection and escape from the deluge of disorienting and terrifying news.

There are many reasons people flocked to fanfiction as the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world around us, ease of access chief among them. While libraries and bookstores were closing their doors, fanfiction remained free and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. For many teenagers suddenly under much closer parental observation, fanfiction likely became one of the few sources of entertainment they could easily access. In a rapidly changing and uncertain world, fanfiction also offers a sense of stability and familiarity, even when reading new stories. As fan studies scholar Lynn Zubernis put it, “[there] are so many people I know right now who don’t try to go to bed at night until they at least read one fic, just to put themselves in a different headspace and have that burst of emotional resonance and familiarity” (Zubernis quoted in Romano, 2021). After a day of being bombarded with new information and changing guidelines, retreating to a story full of familiar characters and settings can be like a balm. Each story is different enough to be interesting, but without having to make mental room for entirely new worlds and characters.

While ease of access and the lure of familiarity likely drew many people to fanfiction in the early days of the pandemic, one of the reasons I think so many people stayed in fandom even once the world began to reopen is a simple one. Fanfiction offers hope. Not just hope for an end to lockdowns and quarantines, but a hope for a different kind of world – a queerer kind of world. One in which all you needed to enter was a computer and Internet access and to which anyone could contribute. Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, I think this is the ultimate lure of fanfiction – a world in which I can find, read, and write fully-formed queer life experiences.

For years, I would say about mainstream science-fiction and fantasy media that “I just want gays in space!” What I meant by that, was that I wanted queer stories that were not only about being queer. Growing up, even the most positive queer narratives were typically focused on queerness as the major conflict/plot of a story – these were stories about coming out, dealing with homophobia and bullying, HIV/AIDS, etc. While I do not mean to suggest that these stories are not important, I always craved more. Especially since so many of these stories ended with the queer character(s) side-lined, relegated to comic relief, or dead. Finding a mainstream story about a gay rebel pilot fighting an evil galactic empire, or a trans student going to a magical academy was next to impossible. And while these examples might be more fantastical, it was also almost impossible to find stories about queer characters living more mundane lives that were not defined by oppression or homophobia. Fanfiction gave me the stories I was craving. It gave me lesbian vampire slayers, bisexual superheroes, and nonbinary aliens. It also gave me stories about growing up, discovering yourself, falling in love, and having sex while queer without feeling like I was reading a tragedy or an after-school special.

Ultimately, that is what this dissertation is about – fanfiction as a creative space for queer and different forms of storytelling and relationality. Writing it has been a personal journey – one that

has led me to new realizations about myself, but also new understandings about the potential of fanfiction, particularly for teenagers. Fan studies scholar Anne Jameson (2013) writes about the influence of fandoms like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* on the sexual education of younger generations in her book *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, saying:

Harry Potter slash helped shape and challenge attitudes toward sexual diversity among the generation that grew up reading it and arguing about it (a lot) online ... Where previous generations may have looked to parental porn stashes and the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, today's teens increasingly find such information in fanfiction (2).

As Jamison implies, the queer world of fanfiction provides teenagers with space to explore relationships beyond heteronormative expectations. For queer teenagers, this can mean giving them space to explore, be messy, and not have it all figured out while still reassuring them that they are not alone. For non-queer teenagers, fanfiction can open up their ideas about what is normal and provide alternate life paths beyond rigid heteronormativity.

None of this is to imply that fanfiction is a utopian genre as the many debates, critiques, and arguments I have laid out in this dissertation reveal. Like nearly every other online community, fandom has a white supremacy and racism problem, one that many fans do not wish to acknowledge or address. Fandom has not escaped the growing influence of purity culture, transphobic rhetoric, and fascism. Even websites like the Archive of Our Own, owned and operated by fans, have been subjected to homophobic and transphobic attacks.

Desire lines do not always, or even often, lead to utopian worlds. But they can offer a glimpse at a better one. Or, in the case of fanfiction, a glimpse at the better story. The better story, as Dina Georgis (2013) argues, is not one where we erase the signs and traces of trauma, suffering and

loss, but one that makes way for relationality and queer affect, which “unsettles meaning, creating the conditions for change within the story” (11). Fanfiction “unsettles meaning” not just by adding queer narratives and queer characters, but by returning stories to the hands of individual people rather than multinational media corporations. It provides a plurality of voices, ideas, and experiences that add richness even to worlds and characters who are deeply familiar to us. Ultimately, that is where fanfiction’s potential truly lies – in the space it offers for stories that are not corporate controlled and sanctioned. For teenagers in particular, whose access to stories, education, and information is often carefully controlled, having a space to explore, be messy, and make mistakes is invaluable. Fanfiction did not make me who I am, but it gave me the space to find myself – and then to find myself again twenty years later. It is my fervent hope that fanfiction continues to be that space for generations of teenagers yet to come.

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