CONFESSIONS OF A FANGIRL: INTERACTIONS WITH AFFINITY SPACES AND

MULTIMODAL, MULTICULTURAL TEXTS AT BOOK CLUBS AND FANDOM EVENTS

by

MARGARET A. ROBBINS

(Under the Direction of Donna E. Alvermann)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, "geek culture" has emerged as a new counterculture. Through geek culture, CONS and book clubs that engage in the study of diverse comics and Young Adult speculative fiction novels have emerged as a way to discuss controversial issues involving still-marginalized texts. This is an autoethnography with narrative inquiry methods in which I study two CONS and one independent bookshop and their literary events, along with congruent online affinity spaces, to improve my engagement with these texts. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, I describe my and others' experiences with these texts in affinity spaces in order to show how these practices can carry over into more traditional school settings.

INDEX WORDS: fandom, comics, YA literature, speculative fiction, book clubs, feminism, affinity spaces

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Sarah Ruffing Robbins, and to my aunt, Patricia Ruffing Killian, who are powerful superwomen to my sister Patty, my first cousins Cindy and Kathleen, and me. They are both educators themselves who have touched the lives of so many and who have lived lives worth writing about. Between them, they've raised four women, one academic, one psychiatrist, one lawyer, and one therapist currently in Ghana serving for the Peace Corps. They sat in the back of the buses in North Carolina during the 1950s to protest the laws of the Jim Crow South, so they too have challenged Patriarchy. May their daughters continue the legacy.

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PROLOGUE

I have known the intense passion of fandom:
the costumes, the fan art, the stories.
People try to put us in a box, as
"fan" derives from the Latin root
"fanaticus": freaks, geeks,
obsessed with mundane media.

Yet we are the new counter culture,
telling stories that push back
against Patriarchy.
Our stories bring new hope to
those confined by Patriarchy's
puppet strings.
The settings may be worlds of magic,
but the conflicts are real.

I too have felt the pain of being
a round peg squeezed in
a square hole.
Maybe the edges of the square
need to soften to better hold us,
not the other way around.

Let the bright shades of
your costumes flicker
as your words and art paint scenes
of a better future.

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH PROBLEM

I first developed my research interest in comics and speculative YA fiction when I was a middle school language arts teacher at a school west of Atlanta that is now labeled as a "Title I" school. As a formerly "twice exceptional" student, labeled as both gifted and "learning disabled", I was intrigued that my students, particularly my gifted, ELL, and special education students, loved to read both comics and speculative YA fiction for independent reading selections and literature circles. The question of why they gravitated toward these texts remained when I started my Ph.D. program; thus, I have continued to explore comics and YA speculative fiction from the perspective of a literacy educator. I am especially interested in comics and speculative fiction with a diverse representation of characters, and I gravitate toward such stories with strong, nuanced female protagonists of various multicultural backgrounds. As a person who has been labeled "twice exceptional," both verbally gifted and with a spatially based learning disability, I also appreciate that diversity comes in many forms and that some groups still remain underrepresented in literature.

Throughout my adult years as a literacy educator, I have gravitated toward literary events at which I can learn about books for both my personal enjoyment and to potentially teach to my students. Since 2005, the MagiCon Young Adult Literature track has been important to my journey as a literacy educator who reads. Over time, I have also started to attend panels with parallels to the YA track, such as the Whedon track, the Fantasy track, the Writers track, and the

Comics/Popular Culture track. But the YA literature track at MagiCon is where my own journey toward literacy development within fandom communities started.

This year, I also went to and presented at FantasyCon, which is a smaller magic fandom focused CON (a shortened term for fandom conventions with multimedia content) in Atlanta, and which has a lot of academically focused panels. The other panelists and I discussed problematic representation of characters, particularly females, within two of the fellow panelists' and my favorite fandoms, Harry Potter and the "Buffyverse", a fandom term used to describe the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* television show/comic book universes combined. Although I thus far have only attended this CON for one year, it proved to be a beneficial place for me to learn about new scholarship related to Young Adult Literature, female representation in fantasy/speculative fiction, creative writing, and Popular Culture. Therefore, I took field notes at this event for the purposes of this study and also conducted an interview with a key informant who has been involved with the CON for several years.

Tangent to my time at Popular Culture and Literary CONS, I have spent the past three and a half years during my doctoral studies attending book clubs at a local independent bookshop in a small suburban university town, Cloud Nine Bookshop. I have dabbled in several book clubs, but the ones at which I have spent the most time are the Young Adult Literature Book Club and the Comics/Graphic Novel Book Club, at which we read and discuss both graphic novels and volumes of serialized comics. These book clubs have been related to my academic and teaching interests and also to my personal interests. They are direct parallels to the literary events I have attended at CONS, only the group settings for discussion have tended to be smaller and more intimate, which leads to book club participants forming a rapport with each other over time.

My study follows participants and me throughout one year being involved with literary events at the two CONS in Atlanta and at Cloud Nine Bookshop. I use autoethnographic and narrative inquiry methods to collect data at both events, including field notes and interviews with participants who have been a part of my journey at these literary events, even though I have only known some of these participants for a short time. I believe in the power of these conversations about literature and accompanying popular culture texts within these in-person affinity spaces and how they have helped me develop as a literacy educator. Some of the practices at these events can and, in my opinion, should be adapted to more traditional educational settings.

In addition to these in-person affinity spaces of literary study, accompanying online spaces became important to work. I frequently read Goodreads before attending the Cloud Nine Bookshop book club sessions, as did some of my fellow book club members, because we wanted to gauge each other's reactions to the book prior to attending the meeting. Frequently, toward the beginning of the meeting, we would make reference to each other's ratings and number of stars, on a 1 to 5 scale. There was discussion of possibly implementing a Facebook group for each of the bookshop book clubs, so we could discuss the novels online before and/or after the book club meetings in another space. This idea did not come to fruition during the course of my data collection, but it remains a possibility for future consideration.

In addition to Goodreads, Facebook and Twitter became important networking tools during the course of my study. Two bookshop book club members attended at least one of my MagiCon panels because of posts I made on Facebook. As a result, both book club members became valuable interview participants in a small focus group with whom I could discuss both MagiCon and our Cloud Nine book club meetings in a semi-structured interview format. I also received the opportunity to both attend and present at FantasyCon as a result of Facebook posts

and connected to my co-panelists through mutual acquaintances with similar interests in fandom, literature, and feminism. Since I had permission to conduct Internet research for this study, I was able to recruit one participant who I initially connected to via Twitter and two through interactions on Facebook. A major theme throughout my study is how social media spaces can serve as important networks on which to discuss literature and to network with people who have common interests. Perhaps because I am within the Oregon Trail subgroup of the Millennial generation, I am an avid Facebook and Goodreads user and moderately active on Twitter, and these networks proved to be helpful for my study.

In order to better connect to these fandom communities of YA literature, comics, and popular culture, I wrote fanfiction for the first time and posted my fanfiction online, so the feedback would give me additional data for my study. Particularly important to my study was the feedback I received on the site known as *Twisting the Hellmouth* as responses to my *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfiction, which became a valuable tool for me not only to better understand fandom and the modern-day counter culture known as geek culture, or nerd culture (Konzen, 2006), but also to improve in my own narrative writing. Therefore, the social networking sites of Goodreads, Facebook, Twitter, and various fanfiction sites (particularly *Twisting the Hellmouth* were important vehicles for data collection and study. As a literacy educator, I will continue to consider how to bring these tools into classroom settings to improve discussion of literature and writing.

Statement of the Problem

My dissertation research involves non-school based educational events that encourage discussion of literary texts, particularly those that are inclusive of diverse, nuanced, and empowered female characters. Specifically, I studied literary events at Popular Culture Cons and

at a local independent bookshop. I chose these organizations because I believe they are doing important work related to texts that are diverse in both form and character representation.

In current school environments that encourage high stakes testing and accountability, I believe the work of nontraditional educational events becomes even more imperative, especially for the study of texts that challenge gender binaries. As someone who has taught in both secondary and post-secondary settings, I also believe there are not enough multimodal texts in classroom settings that challenge gender binaries and that are inclusive of diverse races, ability levels, and mental health states, among other attributes of identity.

Yet in the fandom and book club spaces that I studied, people study such texts in advance and discuss them in depth at the in person meetings. The books and accompanying multimedia, multimodal texts are valued both for their craft and for their character representation. Therefore, based on my personal teaching experiences and my interactions within these spaces both during and before this study, there seems to be a discrepancy between the number of multimodal texts with diverse, nuanced, and empowered female protagonists that exists and those that are discussed in traditional K12 classroom settings. One outcome I hope will result from this study is that educators will gain further exposure to these valuable multimodal texts with diverse characters and, therefore, encourage in-depth discussions of these texts among students and participants.

My experience as a K12 teacher and as a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant have shown me that these text selections are present in media centers and in some classroom libraries, including the one I developed as a middle school language arts teacher, but oftentimes not taught in classroom settings. One reason for the disconnect is that the YA speculative fiction texts and comics of interest, which do tend to have more diverse female protagonists, are not

seen as legitimized in some academic and school settings (Carter, 2008). This disconnect and desire to encourage more exploration of comics and YA speculative fiction in traditional K12 settings is what motivated me to undertake this research project, as valuable intellectual and social work happens in these in-person affinity spaces, such as the ones I studied, that will benefit literacy educators, aspiring writers, aspiring artists, parents, and people of other career backgrounds.

Research Questions

In this study, I used autoethnographic and narrative inquiry methods to explore the following **research questions**:

- Given our identities and individual interests, how are participants' understanding/interpretations of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists influenced by literary events outside of traditional school settings, including CONS, bookshop events, and Fanfiction forums?

- What are the similarities and/or differences, if any, between the past and present literacy education experiences and the discussion interests of persons who participate in CON and bookstore discussions of diverse comics and YA speculative fiction, with empowered female protagonists?

- What role(s) do literacy events at CONs and bookshops play in fostering literacy education through discussions of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists?

As previously noted, the purpose of this study was to explore outside-of-school settings related to the study of literature not always considered canonical, specifically comics and Young Adult literature. The data for this dissertation were collected from September 2016 through

February 2017, which included the time frame of the controversial presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Hillary Rodham Clinton and its aftermath. As a feminist scholar, I found this work particularly important during times that both my participants and I noted as distressing, based on my personal journal records and the interview responses of my participants in individual and focus group settings. My study participants and I were increasingly drawn to these affinity spaces and, for the book clubs, tended to gravitate toward speculative Young Adult fiction and comics. I believe, based on the interactions and the interviews, that we needed escapism from the troubling events around us, as well as each other's emotional support.

Significance of the Study

Studies of fandom communities with autoethnographic and related narrative inquiry methodologies from a feminist perspective are currently lacking. The fandom and book club spaces I studied provided a place for participants not only to discuss comics and YA novels, but also to express their opinions with like-minded people. Therefore, an area for further study would be why comics and speculative fiction texts rise in popularity during times of political turmoil. This study focused on CON panel events that discussed multimodal content with diverse protagonists, including female protagonists, and book club meetings at an independent bookshop where similar texts are addressed.

Although this study was conducted on adults, all of whom were chosen in part because they met the minimum age of eighteen, the educational reflections and pedagogical practices of these spaces can be brought into educational settings. The participants' involvement in the events was by choice, rather than mandatory, which is an aspect that makes them different from literary events and book clubs in more traditional school settings, such as K12 schools and universities. However, the affinity the attendees expressed for the literature and content of study and the

opportunities for discussion and/or written expression could carry over into more traditional school settings.

The next chapter will outline the feminist theoretical perspectives that informed my study and a literature review of work related to comics and speculative fiction in educational studies, as well as perspectives related to fandom studies. Feminist poststructuralism is an important unifying theme of the dissertation as a whole and of the literature review.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the theoretical perspectives that informed my study and the literature review of related research. Feminist poststructuralism and Gee's (2004) concept of affinity spaces, as related to the theoretical concepts of social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1981) and the work of the New Media Literacies group (Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), informed the overall research design of this study. These concepts, particularly feminism, relate to the literature review, as female perspectives are often lacking in the fandom studies. Although female representation in comics and YA literature is improving in quantity and complexity, per discussions and access in the affinity spaces I studied, there is still a lacking representation of diverse and nuanced females in this literature and in the literary canon (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, the theoretical overview and the literature review of this study are interrelated.

As an academic, I am drawn to feminist research, along with feminist theory, because it involves collaboration with participants, rather than researchers in the superior position, so as not to confine research to the traditional scientific method of the positivist paradigm (Prasad, 2005). Feminist situated knowledges "require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and an agent, not as a screen or an act or a resource" (Haraway, 1991, p. 592). Because of feminist theory turned into practice, hermeneutic, interpretive, and literary methods of analysis are becoming more acceptable in research (Code, 1993), including my research designs of autoethnography and narrative inquiry.

As a feminist qualitative researcher, I look at stories, interviews, document analysis, my own blog posts, and observations for data, rather than numbers and hard facts, and I am a collaborator with my participants in terms of how I collect data through interviews and participant-observer field notes. Feminist poststructuralist theory is appropriate for my qualitative research that combines spaces that involve the study of diverse multimodal texts with the study of self through autoethnography and the study of my fellow participants of these spaces through narrative inquiry.

Feminist Poststructuralist Theoretical Perspective

As St. Pierre (2000) noted, "poststructural feminists…serve as eloquent models-savvy bricoleurs-women who, having duly struggled with the schizophrenia of language, move resolutely toward faint intelligibilities they hope will enhance the lives of women" (p. 479). This definition of poststructural feminism applies to literature and education. It draws on both women's rights and the nuances of language, as described in Foucault's theory of discourse and Derrida's ideas on deconstruction (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Weedon, 1997). Weedon (1997) noted, "feminist poststructuralism makes the primary assumption that it is language which enables us to think, speak and give meaning to the world around us. Meaning and consciousness do not exist outside language" (p. 31). Therefore, language and discourse play a crucial role in the formation of our worldview and our ability to give voice to our meaning making.

Foucault's ideas of the Death of Man and Roland Barthes's ideas of the Death of the Author continue to play an important role in analyzing literature from a feminist poststructural perspective (Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997). With these Poststructural philosophies in mind, the reader is encouraged to question whether an author's true life is reflected in the text he or she writes, whether or not the text is fiction. Are the author and the text related, or do they exist

separately? Because this movement came after humanism, we no longer have to subscribe to traditional binaries. Therefore, the text and the author may be interrelated, yet still separate (Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997).

Also pertinent to Poststructural theories is the idea of deconstruction, which does not mean erasing a theory or an idea, but questioning it. Weedon (1997) stated that deconstruction "theorizes the discursive context as the relationship of difference between the written texts, and…does not sell out the social power relations within which texts are located. However, a feminist poststructuralism must pay full attention to the social and institutional context of textuality in order to address the power relations of everyday life" (p. 25). Which texts are read and canonized in school is largely a result of power relations, in addition to how these texts are interpreted.

Part of deconstructing literary texts effectively involves thinking about how race and gender dynamics, along with other aspects of identity, affect the power relations of the characters. Feminist poststructuralism also encourages scholars to question reality based on social implications, such as the Marxist ideas behind sexual division of labor. Specifically, feminist poststructuralism questions the idea that psychoanalysis alone can account for gender relations constituted by patriarchy (Weedon, 1997), a question first raised by second wave feminists who challenged Sigmund Freud's ideas on sexuality (Friedan, 1997).

Feminist poststructuralism questions heavily the idea of subjectivity and how it affects our reading and understanding of texts. Weedon (1997) defined subjectivity as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p. 32). Therefore, because the self is something that is in flux rather than steady, it is a site of "disunity and conflict that is always in process and

produced within power relations" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 52). For women, our sense of self can shift in response to those who are around us, showing the fluid nature of identity. Therefore, subjectivity is important to consider when studying literature and also when doing autoethnographic work.

There are definite overlaps that I show between myself in academic communities and myself in fandom communities, but depending on the formality of the event, that self can change. The emerging discussion of fan academics (Duffet, 2013; Hills, 2002) intrigues me because I am a scholar who initially had a personal interest in fandom, which has turned into a professional one. As I navigate these spaces, particularly the more academic panels at fandom events I attend, my fandom and academic identities are no longer separate, but fluid and intertwined. I believe I have an additional perspective to add as a female fan academic, or "fan-ac" as a shortened version of fan academics (Duffet, 2013; Hills, 2002), because the female perspectives on fandom studies as applied to literacy education remains underexplored.

Related to subjectivity and the fluid nature of identity, Weedon (1997) also noted, "In all poststructural discourses, subjectivity and rational consciousness are themselves brought into question. We are neither the authors of the ways in which we understand our lives, nor are we unified rational beings" (p. 31). It is our interaction with language itself, more so than the history of the text or the author, that helps us to make meaning, and we have to consider our "conflicting forms of subjectivity based on different aspects of our identity" (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). Additionally, feminist poststructuralism calls for a re-examination of the literary canon to further explore the untold stories of women, including women of color.

Congruently, Weedon (1997) argued that, "It is important to see subjectivity as always historically produced in specific discourses and never as one single fixed structure" (p. 87). Since

poststructuralists would argue that one does not have a fixed identity, or an essence, I could have a completely different reading of a text ten years later than now because of my new experiences and opinions, even though ten years from now I will still be an educated White middle class woman.

It is important to consider how aspects of my identity will affect my subjectivity; however, my race, gender, social class, ability level, education, and spiritual convictions alone will not determine how I interpret texts. My ideology has formed not only based on my identity, but also based on such ideological state apparatuses as the schools I have attended, churches, my authority figures, and my family (Althusser, 1971; Weedon, 1997). Although certain constructs of my identity are socially constructed, such as my race and my gender, they still affect my interactions with texts and with other people.

As a feminist researcher, I need to acknowledge that ideological state apparatuses have influenced my identity, in addition to my race, gender, social class, and other aspects of my identity (Althusser, 1971). In my opinion, one issue with critical theories, although I appreciate their emphasis on social justice, is that they tend to focus on limited aspects of people's identity, whereas poststructuralism focuses on how many aspects of our identities influence our text analysis and power relationships. These many aspects of identity affect the different discourses we use to interact with others. Discourses are "more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern" (Weedon, 1997, p. 105). My discourse is the way I speak, but also my thought process, both unconscious and conscious. Our discourses, both written and verbal, form from multiple components of our identities, along with our

interpretation of visual and written texts. Every act of reading is meaning making, yet meaning making is political (Weedon, 1997).

Butler and Gender as a Social Construction

Particularly crucial to the development of feminism and emerging feminist viewpoints of gender is the work of Judith Butler. In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble,* Butler (1990) argued, "a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women" (p. xiv). Butler (1990) also drew a distinction between gender and sexuality, as sex is assigned to a person at birth, and gender is more so performed and constructed by society. Because of binaries established by humanism, females tend to be positioned as Objects rather than Subjects. Yet according to Butler (1990), "for feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women" (p. 2). Discourse and language from the point of view of women will let our voices be heard; yet ideally, we will continue to question the gender divisions that society currently imposes upon us.

Butler (1990) discussed some of Foucault's observations of power, as Foucault "point(ed) out that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (p. 2). Moreover, Althusser's (1971) analysis of ideological state apparatuses shows that as citizens, we have created a society in which straight White European men still have control. The idea of gender as a performance began during second wave feminism and has taken a stronger hold during third wave feminism and the period of feminist poststructuralism. For instance, Butler (1990) noted that Simone de Beauvoir (1952) suggested in *The Second Sex* that "'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one'" and that "For Beauvoir, gender is 'constructed', but implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and

could in principle, take on some other gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 11). We can therefore perform a gender that is different from the one we are biologically assigned.

Additionally, Butler (1990) noted that Rubin's (1975) essay "The Traffic of Women: The 'Political Economy' of Sex" also questioned gender roles well before Butler herself did so. According to Butler (1990), "Rubin had already envisioned an alternative sexual world, one which is attributed to a utopian stage in infantile development, a 'before' the law which promises to reemerge 'after' the demise or dispersal of that law" (p. 102). Rubin (1975) challenged such status quo practices as not allowing incestuous relationships and the practice of giving away women at marriage to their men, and she argued that such practices maintained patriarchal power. Particularly, the act of giving women away at marriage signifies a capitalistic practice that conveys women as property (Rubin, 1975).

Butler (1990) also pointed out how Rubin's (1975) essay drew a distinction between sex and gender, which began the conversation that continues in poststructural feminism and third-wave feminism days. For instance, many women, including me, wear make-up and do our hair to perform the female role, but this is a conscious choice we make, in part because of society's expectations of us. The issue of performing gender roles frequently arises in YA speculative fiction and comics, as well as the literary events of my study.

In her well-known essay "Contingent Foundations", Judith Butler (1995) also critiqued the idea of a universal subject. She noted, "To perform this kind of Foucauldian critique of the subject is not to do away with the subject or to pronounce its death, but merely to claim that certain versions of the subject are politically insidious" (p. 47). The problematic aspect of a universal subject, along with universal feminism and a universal definition of the word *woman*, is that we only consider one side of the perspective. Media portrayals of wars are an example, as

we tend to see the American Subjects' perception of wars, rather than the people in Asian and Middle Eastern countries who we fight against, as they are in the Object position of the binary (Spivak, 1988).

As Foucault (1978) explained in his chapter of *History of Sexuality* entitled "Method", power is not fixed, but is fluid and moveable. However, when there is a person or an entity that is in the Subject position of the binary, it is more difficult for the power to shift in a fair manner. For example, the literary canon consists mainly of work by White European men, and only recently have we considered more women and minority characters. With this expansion of the literary canon, I believe we are challenging the notion of White men as the subject position of literature and the arts, although I do not think that power dynamic has entirely shifted yet. The issue of power as fluid became very important to my study, as many of my participants become more involved with in-person and online affinity spaces with the goals of further empowering themselves as writers, educators, and consumers. Some participants also had the goal of broadening their own understandings of the multimodal literacies canon, as it is gradually becoming more inclusive.

Gender as a social construction is one of the foundational thoughts of feminism, particularly the current feminism that begins with the third wave. Leavy & Trier-Bieniek (2014) explained that "the social construction of gender is significant and perhaps the single agreed upon principle in feminism, an expansive field constituted by diverse thought" (p. 3). Many people believe that biology influences gender, when it reality, it determines our sex, yet gender is more so a product of nurture than nature. This is important to consider in a world where many people, including one of my study participants, choose to express a gender that does not fit the

male or female binary. Gender, from this perspective, is a socialization process and a social construction, rather than something assigned at birth.

Gender Performance and the Cyborg

The goal of this section is to show how feminist poststructuralist perspectives have influenced speculative fiction, particularly stories involving female cyborg figures who are part human, part machine, with superhero stories being a prevalent example. Donna Haraway (2000), like Butler (1990) and Gayle Rubin (1975), wrote about gender as a social construction, along with race and class: "Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism" (Haraway, 2000, p. 295-296). Those in power often have the privilege of deciding who is on the right side of the binaries and who is able to obtain more power within capitalistic institutions.

For instance, the coined phrase 'women of color', although it is considered politically correct in today's times, arguably "constructs a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference and specificity. The postmodernist identity is fully political, whatever might be said about other possible postmodernisms" (Haraway, 2000, p. 296). It is during the postmodern, poststructural era that we as scholars have begun to question how both race and gender affects one's identity, and also how these identities were constructed in the first place. Although it can be nearly impossible, and yet also important, to acknowledge these categories and how they affect one's life experiences, it is crucial to do so with a questioning mind and with an understanding that race and gender are social constructions rather than biological realities of difference and otherness, along with such subjective identity notions as (dis)ability.

Haraway (2000) also argued that White European women, who in the past have primarily made up the feminist category, "discovered the non-innocence of the category 'woman'", yet "cyborg feminists have to argue that 'we' do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole" (p. 297). Socialist feminism and radical feminism made important contributions to feminist thought by considering class and gender structure, yet race and other elements of identity were not taken into full consideration as much as they should have been, which affected the thought processes of feminism of the third wave and beyond.

Haraway's specific work on the cyborg has important implications for superhero stories and YA speculative fiction, both of which are key literary forms and genres to the spaces I have studied. In her 1991 essay "Situated Knowledges", Donna Haraway expressed her belief that feminism and science were alike in their re-envisioning of the future. She noted that feminism was appearing in science fiction stories and that embodiment, objectivity, and situated knowledges were the points "where science, science fantasy, and science fiction converge" (p. 596). Haraway (1991) stated the following about the relationship between feminism, science, and speculative fiction: "Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turn on re-visioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse" (p. 596).

Speculative fiction, superhero stories, and science have the common link of envisioning and portraying a better version of our future world, which is a central idea that resonates throughout my study. Speculative fiction, like feminism, envisions a better world. Haraway's (2000) essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" explained in more detail how science fiction and fantasy connect to feminism. Haraway (2000) argued that a cyborg is "a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to

organic wholeness through the final appropriation of all of the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (p. 292).

The cyborg, like many speculative fiction figures, defies traditional gender expectations, as many cyborg figures are androgynous. Therefore, speculative fiction stories explore and question gender binaries from a poststructural perspective, as many cyborg females are figures of great power in the superhero and speculative fiction novels. Additionally, the imaginative realm provides a world of liberation from binaries:

> Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experiences that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. There is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway, 2000, p. 292).

The speculative fiction/science fiction world creates a place of possibility for women and their bodies, an idea that some of my participants referenced in their interviews. It is interesting that thus far, these issues have been explored in science fiction more so than in fantasy, as many fantasy books have traditionally been written by White European men. Yet through cyborg bodies, including female superheroes, women can be in a world where the fight for liberation is more tangible than the one in which we currently live.

Haraway (2000) also argued that in our society, the relationship between organism and machine is relevant, and all humans could potentially be a form of a cyborg. In a society of male-dominated capitalism, the desire for progress sometimes overrides the interests of the individual. Yet the cyborg in speculative fiction stories can "contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in utopian tradition of imagining a world

without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end"
(Haraway, 2000, p. 292).

With Haraway's (2000) analysis in mind, I do not believe it is accidental that many
dystopian Young Adult novels and current superhero stories have strong female protagonists
who have traits of cyborgs, or non-gendered beings that defy traditional definitions of both
gender and sex. Many of these dystopian stories tell cautionary tales of what our future world
will be like if we do not set firmer boundaries between human and machine.

Related to this trend of empowered female protagonists, Haraway (2000) argued the
following about alternative universes in speculative fiction stories:

A cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the

final abstraction embodied in a *Star Wars* apocalypse waged in the name of defense,

about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war. (p. 295).

As more current examples, the new *Star Wars* (2015) film, the first one to air after Haraway's
(2000) essay, along with the accompanying YA novel *Lost Star* (2015) have empowered female
protagonists who do not fit the traditional mode of female sidekicks or romantic interests. One
major character, Ciena from *Lost Star* (2015) is a woman of color, and Rey from the new *Star
Wars* (2015) film falls in love with a man of color. Haraway (2000) also stated, "a cyborg world
might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint
kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory
standpoints" (p. 295). A world of the future may be one with fewer boundaries related to gender
and race.

In a modern-day "cyborg feminist" world, Haraway (2000) encouraged the consideration
of the needs of Third World Women, in addition to the middle class white women who first

engaged in feminist theories. Haraway (2000) also argued that such speculative fiction writers as Octavia Butler, Minique Wittig, and Vonda McIntyre explore issues of embodiment in high-tech worlds and, therefore, are theorists for cyborgs. Audre Lord, Adrienne Rich, and Susan Griffin have also contributed to this conversation by producing work that questions political imaginations, political language, and the female body. In terms of representation, Haraway (2000) also made the following related argument:

> Literacy is a special mark of women of color, acquired by US black women as well as men through a history of risking death to learn and to teach reading and writing. Writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. (p. 311).

Literacy, both oral and written, has been a mode of escape and the key to empowerment for marginalized groups in the United States and other colonized nations. Hence why cyborg authors "subvert the central myth of origin of Western culture," as we have been colonized and influenced by western myths, and "cyborg writing is about the power to survive" (Haraway, 2000, p. 311).

In these feminist superhero and cyborg stories of the speculative fiction genre, women and men alike are re-writing history and myth. Women of color in particular can use language and language politics, as described by poststructural theorists, to tell their stories (Haraway, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Cyborgs have powers that current modern-day women do not. They represent different political possibilities in their fictional universes, and they "might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be a global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth" (Haraway, 2000, p. 12).

These cyborg figures through speculative fiction and superhero stories question current binaries related to gender and race. Language, along with cyborg embodiments and fictionally created universes, give speculative fiction writers permission to do so, which may be why female writers and writers of color are further exploring speculative fiction universes to convey political agendas and messages of social justice. For example, Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" paved the way for a "post human" approach to disability (Alaniz, 2015, p. 113). Some (dis)ability scholars have been critical of this approach because they believe Haraway is overly focused on technology, power, ability, and not focused enough on the real experiences of disabled people, which are different from those of cyborgs (Alaniz, 2015). Regardless of the criticisms, Haraway's work on the cyborg has opened up scholarly discussions about power, feminism, and embodiment as related to speculative fiction.

Derrida and Texts

Because of my research designs of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, along with spaces that involve the study of multimodal literacy texts, a conversation about what constitutes the word "text" is important to this theoretical section and literature review. As previously stated, a useful theoretical viewpoint to consider within feminist poststructuralism and my study is Derrida's concept of deconstruction, particularly as related to texts.

In *Grammatology,* Derrida (1967) pointed out that the concept of deconstruction could unsettle texts as well as institutions. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) stated that deconstruction is about "the preservation of traditions through a constant engagement with the tensions and omissions" in a way to understand how dominant interpretation and ideologies have been produced without question (p. 15). Only through the deconstruction process can we as scholars

and educators better understand how institutions such as patriarchy have influenced texts as well as people's interactions with them.

For Derrida, "there is nothing outside the text. We can think of a text literally in the form of transcripts and books, but to limit the 'text' to those spoken or written words is to limit our understanding of what *counts* as data" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 19). In other words, texts can include situations and events within our research sites and that which is both implicitly and explicitly communicated, ideas that are pertinent to data gathering and data analysis. For my study in particular, the costumes people wear at MagiCon can count as "texts," in addition to the actual books and comics that we study and discuss there.

MagiCon, FantasyCon, and Cloud Nine Bookshop are research sites that have very distinct personalities and character, and especially since they are both growing spaces and "fields of play" (Richardson, 1997) for my participants and for me, they have powerful emotional significance. As a scholar with literary roots, the best pieces of writing I have read of all genres describe the settings as if they are characters in the novel. Therefore, the physical settings of MagiCon, FantasyCon, and Cloud Nine Bookshop, along with what people wear and the explicit and implicit interactions of the place, are important to study as texts, in addition to our written literary texts. Both the texts of study and the places, particularly the popular culture CONS with their carnival-like atmospheres (Bakhtin, 1984; N. Wolf, 2002), deconstruct literature and the ways in which we can study multimodal texts.

When looking at data from the Derridean perspective of deconstruction, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) discussed the tensions that existed in the dialogues of their interviews, the moments when their participants were grappling with constraints of institutions. They stated that they did not use deconstruction "merely to expose the hierarchal structures of patriarchy, class

inequality, racism, etc." but also "to catch sight of how the presence of first-generation women in the academy…prevents a closure of knowledge" (p. 17). For instance, one of the studies that Jackson and Mazzei (2012) undertook focuses specifically on early-career females in academia who were the first in their families to be in academia and who were struggling with constraints that went beyond those typical of early career faculty due to their backgrounds and life experiences; as is the case with my study, they were operating from a feminist poststructuralist viewpoint.

A deconstructive stance is "to both use and trouble categories at the same time" so when using categories of race, class, and gender, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) did "not do so without caution" (p. 20). I adapted a similar stance for my study because although I realize that labeling people in such a way can be problematic from a poststructural perspective, knowing this background information about people can be helpful in understanding why they interpret texts in the way they do.

When analyzing data from a Derridean perspective, imparting a feminist poststructuralist perspective, it is important to think of written texts as well as the events and places surrounding the study. Additionally, when looking at interview transcripts, one should look for moments of tension, when "the interviewee recounts disruptions that unsettle what has already been said or remembered" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 22). Also, for the purposes of my study, I paid particular attention to moments when my participants and I deconstructed notions of what texts should be, according to Patriarchy and academic institutions, and what they are becoming.

Foucault and Power

As previously noted, poststructural feminism also explores power dynamics as related to literature and work places. Jana Sawicki (1991) explained that an important claim in Foucault's

description of power is "the stronger claim that wherever there is a relation of power it is possible to modify its hold" (p. 25). Therefore, power is fluid, and who has the power can shift over time. Feminist poststructuralism "concerned as it must be with power, looks to the historically and socially specific discursive production of conflicting and competing meanings" (Weedon, 1997, p. 82). As explained in more detail in Chapter Three, when reading literature as well as field notes and interview transcripts from a feminist poststructural perspective, I posed questions about power dynamics and how they have changed during different periods of time, along with how the meaning of a text can change according to the time period in which it is read and the identity of the person who reads it.

In Foucault's foundational text *Discipline and Punish* (1979)*,* power takes the form of disciplining and assessing individuals, which has carried over into prisons, schools, workplaces, the military, and even university settings (Weedon, 1997). These habits and assessments carry over into how we socialize boys and girls, as we give people "specific perceptions of their identity and potential, which appear natural to the subjected individual, rather than as the product of diffuse forms of power" (Weedon, 1997, p. 118). For instance, although men are often taller and physically stronger than women, the idea that men are more suited for some jobs than women is, in most cases, socially constructed more so than biologically constructed. Only in recent times have we seen families where the mother works and the father stays home with the kids, and even now, that family structure is sometimes looked down upon. Therefore, Foucault's theories of power ask us to examine sexuality and how it has affected the power dynamics of gender (Weedon, 1997). This strategy offers a perspective different from those of Sigmund Freud, which some feminists consider to be sexist (Friedan, 1997).

In utilizing Foucault's ideas in data analysis of a research project, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) explained how their data analysis process related to Foucault's ideas on power and knowledge, since "power and knowledge constantly articulate one another in the practices of people" and Foucault did not heed the common belief that the two are the same (p. 49). In fact, Foucault (1990) stated the following about knowledge and power: "their *relation* is precisely my problem. If they were identical, I would not have to study them" (p. 43). He questioned their direct connection because oftentimes, those in power disseminate knowledge, and power is fluid rather than fixed and stable.

Foucault investigated "the productive effects of power as it circulates through the practices of people in their daily lives" to go beyond the traditional questions of "what is power?" and "where does power come from?" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 49). He also critiqued "not only the idea of power as a possession, but also the belief that those who 'have' power intentionally control and wield power over subjects with no agency" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 51). From my perspective as a literacy educator, these ideas indicate that educational settings with fewer fixed power structures are beneficial to students of all ages.

Knowledge, rather than equating power, "is an activity that produces subjects and the ways in which they interact within and against their material worlds. A knowing subject, then, is an acting subject" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 51). Power produces knowledge, in addition to subjectivity and resistance, but power alone does not equate knowledge (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). As elaborated on in Chapter Three, data analysis from this Foucauldian perspective, therefore, involves examining the interaction between power and knowledge, which can include the process of writing. These ideas became crucial components of my data analysis during this

research project, which is why I chose to utilize this Foucauldian analysis of data suggested by Jackson and Mazzei (2012).

Foucault believed the idea of power as intentional was problematic because of the danger of assuming that subjects have universal characteristics, rather than acknowledging their fluid attributes resulting from their subjectivities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). When analyzing data from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, with Foucault's ideas, it is important to consider power, but as a fluid construct, especially when studying affinity spaces, at which leadership is porous.

Yet Foucault found it necessary to examine "how it is possible for subjects to understand themselves in relation to others, and how subjects use knowledge constructed within relations and practices to transform themselves" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 60). Thus is the task of the feminist autoethnographic and narrative inquiry researcher is to understand how she interacts with her research participants and how the knowledge exchanged in the process transforms her and assists her in writing her narrative representations of data.

While recognizing the insights Foucault provides, I also understand that a feminist researcher studying Foucault's ideas of power must be cautious about his dominant position on the side of many binaries, such as race and gender. In that context, Hartsock (1990) stated, "efforts to change the subordinate status of women require a consideration of the nature of power" (p. 157). This perspective justifies and explains the reasoning of studying the philosophies of White European men in order to consider how power issues affect women, along with others who are not on the more powerful side of binaries. In order to change our subordinate status, "we (as women) must understand how power works, and this we need a usable theory of power," which Foucault's work provides (Hartsock, 1990, p. 157).

Foucault, along with Lyotard, Derrida, and other poststructural theorists, "argue(d) against the faith in a universal reason we have inherited from Enlightenment European philosophy" and therefore reject hard and fast *Truths* about the texts and the universe as a whole (Hartsock, 1990, p. 159). Because of their rejection of truth versus untruth, these postmodern theorists are intriguing to study from a feminist perspective, even though they are White European men on the powerful side of binaries, because their theoretical ideas encourage us to move beyond binaries. Hartsock (1990), moreover, does not claim that women are a unitary group, but points to a worldview "characteristic of the dominant, white, male, Eurocentric ruling class" and considering how poststructural theories can offer alternative perspectives (p. 161).

Additionally, Hartsock (1990) discussed colonizers who accept versus colonizers who refuse and argued that Foucault is "a colonizer who refuses and thus exists in a painful ambiguity", in part because he does not provide "an epistemology which is usable for the task of revolutionizing, creating, and constructing" (p. 164). Yet the point of Poststructural theories is not to change, but to deconstruct traditional notions, as a criticism of critical theories is that the emancipators are also the oppressors.

While not providing an action plan for change, Foucault's (1978/1979) ideas on power question establishments in which people on the right side of binaries tend to have power. Foucault's theories also emphasize the idea that where there is power, there is also resistance (Hartsock, 1990). Therefore, so long as our literary canon continues to be dominated by European White Men, there should be a resistance movement to make it more inclusive. As previously noted, this is the goal of the spaces I study, to encourage further exploration of diverse literature in which female protagonists play a powerful and proactive role. Thus, Poststructural theories of power for women serve as "a call for change and participation in

altering power relations" (Hartsock, 1990, p. 172), which I believe relates to relationships, events, and representation in the literary canon.

Representation in the Literary Canon

As pertinent to my study of in-person and online literacy spaces in which participants study diverse multimodal literature, a key component of feminist poststructuralism is the desire for a re-examination of the literary canon to further explore the untold stories of women, particularly women of color (Weedon, 1997). Texts that are read, canonized, and analyzed in school are a result of power relations. Also key to third wave feminism is the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Mann, 2013), and many characters in the texts of interest face issues regarding many aspects of their identities. Both Weedon (1997) and Butler (1990) noted the importance that third wave feminism places on intersectionality.

African-American feminists have described the concept of "multiple consciousness" or "intersectionality," which is "the idea that distinct systems of racism, sex, and class oppression interact simultaneously in the lives of women of color in the United States" (Kelly, Parameswaran, & Schneidewind, 2012, p. 13). Therefore, feminist poststructuralist theory, a theory in which the discussion of intersectionality and fluid components of identity are key components, is appropriate for my analysis of comics and YA speculative fiction because of its analysis of gender as a social construction, its emphasis on discourse and language, its call for re-examination of the literary canon, and its emphasis on power relations.

Weedon (1997) explains how intersectionality has played a role in the feminist movement, since the days of radical feminism:

> Many feminists place a strong emphasis on particular groups of women with shared forms of oppression speaking out, for example working-class, Black and lesbian women.

This position acknowledges that our experience as women is not innate but is determined by a range of forms of power relation. (p. 78)

As aforementioned, one criticism toward earlier forms of feminism is that they tended to focus more on white middle class women; yet third-wave feminism and feminist poststructuralism aim to address the concern of women of different genders, creeds, and religions (Freedman 2002; Prasad, 2005; Weedon 1997)

Lack of Female Representation

As related to intersectionality and representation issues, Estelle B. Freedman (2002) noted that females are still underrepresented in the areas of writing and art, particularly women of color, in part because women with families often still have to do the majority of the housework and childcare. Yet Freedman (2002) argued that this paradigm is starting to shift, thanks to the efforts of such organizations as Guerrilla Feminists and such artists as Faith Ringgold. Yet the question remains "if gender itself is historically constructed, a kind of performance that can be transformed and interrupted, is there any basis for a distinctively *women's* art" (Freedman, 2002, p. 323-324).

While I understand Freedman's (2002) concerns on this topic, I would argue that the representation of females in the arts, including literature, film, and other forms of media, is still an issue that needs attention and that for the time being, we still need such anthologies devoted to women's writing because women continue to be underrepresented. For instance, the Black Girl Nerds online movement, in which my research participant Jessica has been involved, strives hard to acknowledge works with diverse female protagonists of color. Although comics and speculative fiction are thought to be the form and genre of the future, I think there are still fewer women who write in these areas than men, based on my own reading experiences. Even taking

such constraints into account, feminist poststructuralism is largely concerned with more authentic experiences of women shown in literary texts and in a broader representation of female writers and characters (Weedon, 1997).

Feminist Poststructuralism and Speculative Fiction

In order to better understand the relationship between feminist poststructuralism and these literary spaces and their texts of study, it is important to the literacy education researcher to understand how these theories have impacted and shaped female representation in speculative fiction, as well as comics, particularly superhero comics set in alternative universes. Although scholarship on the speculative fiction realm is still emerging, scholars have differing definitions of fantasy versus science fiction. William L. Godshalk (1975) contended that science fiction is a subgenre of fantasy and falls under the umbrella of "realistic fantasy", and that the other umbrellas include pure fantasy, philosophic fantasy, and critical fantasy. However, Amy Goldschlager and Avon Eos (1997) distinguished science fiction and fantasy by stating that fantasy is, "A genre not based in reality presupposing that magic and mythical/supernatural creatures exist" whereas science fiction is "a genre that extrapolates from current scientific trends" and that tends to predict the future."

Goldschlager and Eos (1997) described several subgenres within this realm, such as urban fantasy, hard science fiction, and historical fantasy, yet they consider speculative fiction to be the "catchall term for science fiction and fantasy". Concurrently, in the chapter "The Only Lasting Truth: The Theme of Change in the Works of Octavia E. Butler," Due (2015) argued that the speculative fiction umbrella term "refers to science fiction, fantasy, and horror--the fiction of fantastic scenarios and world-building" (p. 260), which is the definition of speculative fiction that best fits my work and philosophies. In my opinion and based on discussions at the literary

events of my study, fictional speculative worlds give us room to consider what might one day be, and the findings of my study correlate with this viewpoint. Fantasy worlds, while traditionally more male dominated, are a world with non-human creations and also worlds where we can explore possibilities. With these definitions in mind, and because these genres sometimes blur together, I prefer to use the more all-encompassing word speculative fiction to describe related literature, when possible.

Early and Modern-Day Speculative Fiction Influences

Estelle Freedman (2002) discussed the importance of Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman's (1998) important utopian fantasy *Herland*, which was first published in 1915 and "depicted an all-female world that was close to nature, balanced, and nurturing, in contrast to men's violence, competition, and jealousy" (Freedman, 2002, p. 69.) In her important seminal work *Herland,* Gilman (1915/1998) drew upon Darwinian ideas, but brought them to service for women.

Gilman argued that "life-giving women were naturally superior to men, whose behavior reflected a primitive aggression" and envisioned a world where women advanced civilization (Freedman, 2002, p. 69). Therefore, Gilman's dystopian novel "reversed evolutionary theories of natural male dominance" (Freedman, 2002, p. 69). The world she imagined is very similar to those described in Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," and Gilman was in some ways ahead of her time. Yet her depiction of African civilizations versus Teutonic cultures was problematic and showed racist feelings (Freedman, 2002).

As it was among the first works of dystopian feminist literature, I would argue that Gilman's (1998) book was a first step in presenting speculative fiction worlds in which women have more power; more modern-day women of different races are now painting visions or worlds that are more culturally sensitive and appropriate, but Gilman might have paved the way. Now,

such films as *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay-Part I* (Lawrence, 2014) make slight variations of the books to make female protagonists even more prominent, such as the decision to make President Snow a female.

I would argue that many superhero stories fit into science fiction more so than fantasy, if distinguishing between the two, because they predict an imaginary world and/or a future in which extraterrestrial life exists. However, many novels and comic stories I have read blur the lines between science fiction and fantasy, such as Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005) and Walidah Imarisha's (2015) short story "Black Angel." As previously stated, this blurring of lines is one reason why I prefer to use the more all-encompassing term of speculative fiction to describe the works of this study.

Additionally, I would argue that female superheroes are cyborgs that challenge traditional roles and perform roles traditionally assigned to men. Although second wave feminism insisted on the use of the pronoun "woman", the third wave feminist generation "is transforming the meaning of girl" with such movements as punk rock (Freedman, 2002, p. 324). This idea transfers over to female superhero stories and the debate about whether to describe a female hero as "woman" or "girl." For instance, in the television show series *Supergirl* (2015), Kara (Supergirl's alias) advocates with her boss to change her name to "Superwoman," but her boss keeps the name for branding purposes. Ironically, while Kara's mannerisms are more indicative of third wave feminism and her boss's are more indicative of the second wave, the second wave feminist is the one who insists on keeping the term "Supergirl".

Representation of Women of Color in Speculative Fiction

Currently, congruent with the call of feminist poststructuralism to expand and diversify the literary canon, there is a specific movement to publish more speculative fictions and social-

issues-focused works by females, including authors of color. In her introduction of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* Imarisha (2015) argued, "All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds--so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories" (p. 3). The anthology is named after speculative fiction writer Octavia Butler, who "explored the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and--most important--hope" (Imarisha, 2005, p. 3).

Imarisha and her co-editor Brown (2015) wanted to coin a new term called visionary fiction, which "encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice" (p. 4). Their rationale for coining this term is the following:

This space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. (p. 4).

Fiction, especially speculative fiction, can be an avenue to explore a more fair and just world. This book, therefore, matches the visions that Donna Haraway (2000) described in "A Cyborg Manifesto." Imarisha and Brown (2015) asked several African-American writers to contribute to their anthology because they wanted to honor the legacy of Octavia E. Butler, who was ahead of her time in depicting visionary worlds and who was one of the only African-American speculative fiction writers of her generation.

The anthology *Octavia's Brood* (2015) includes several short stories that will be important to studying superheroes and strong female protagonists of color. The worlds of the

short stories in this book bring into reality the ideas of Butler (1990/1993) and Haraway (1991/2000), both of whom were ahead of their time in their visions of gender and sexuality. Feminist poststructuralism is a useful perspective when reading these stories, along with Butler's (1990), Crenshaw's (1991) and Weedon's (1997) discussions of intersectionality. Secondary students, particularly at the high school level, would benefit from discussions of these texts using such interpretive lenses.

The anthology *Octavia's Brood* (2015) includes writers of color, many of whom are female, who will be the voices of our future through speculative and visionary fiction. I believe these writers, like the organizers and presenting authors of the book clubs and CON events I studied, are doing the important social justice work that Stan Lee and other great comic writers did after World War II, only they are also expanding the canon of writers and characters.

Gender Representation Issues in Comics

The X-Men comics "were one of the first Marvel comics [series] to consistently sustain female superheroes as leads, and a diverse population of female superheroes" (Housel, 2009, p. 85). Although Rogue and Storm did not have solo comics until later, featuring them in key characters was a step forward on the part of creators (Housel, 2009; Lee, 2015; Nama, 2011). Storm first appeared in the X-Men comics in 1975, and Rogue first appeared in 1981. However, well before their existence, creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby included such female characters as Marvel Girl a.k.a. Jean Grey, Rachel Summers, and Wanda Maximoff in the 1960s. Other creators in the future would pick up on this trend of creating female characters, but Lee and Kirby had the initial idea (Housel, 2009). Lee and Kirby "co-created an unprecedented world of gender equality, beginning in 1963 in the midst of the civil rights movement and women's liberation" (Housel, 2009, p. 85).

The futuristic worlds that speculative fiction authors have envisioned might become reality. We now live in a time in which the popular current *Star Wars* (2015) movie insinuates that a young female will soon take Luke Skywalker's role as a great Jedi warrior and will fall in love with a man of color. We do not yet live in a world where a man can consistently feel accepted for wearing high heels and a dress, yet we seem to be moving in that direction, as the journal for which I was on the editorial board has adopted the use of the gender neutral pronouns.

Ms. Marvel and Representation

As another primary example of diverse comics discussed and referenced within my spaces of study, Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American teenage girl of the new *Ms. Marvel* series, is in a comic/graphica narrative in which she fights next to her mentors and Marvel superhero greats such as Captain Marvel, Wolverine, and Spiderman. Kamala is a primary example of a character that is fighting against the categories people give her based on her gender, ethnicity, and age. Kamala's female and feminized identity plays a major role in her emergence as Ms. Marvel, but so do her age and her racial identity.

Kamala's story relates to Butler's (1990) ideas on gender and identity, as do many comic and speculative fiction narratives:

> Because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively identities...it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and sustained" (p. 5).

Her story, therefore, is one in which intersectionality is of paramount importance.

Like earlier comic superheroes such as Superman, Kamala Khan is dealing with issues pertaining to assimilation. Kavaldo (2009) explained that during the Golden Age of comics (the late 1930s through the mid-1950s), many comic writers "drew directly from the unique character of the American Jewish immigrant experience to create a powerful 'assimilationist fantasy'" (p. 41). Superman, one of the original superheroes, served and still serves as an example of this duality of being a superhero with the last name "man" and having the very Americanized name of Clark Kent and appearing to be a bumbled newspaper reporter (Kavaldo, 2009). Kamala is also trying to navigate pleasing her strict Muslim parents with their expectations of their young female daughter with trying to fit in with her peers.

The comics/graphica medium is appropriate for Kamala's narrative, as well as other marginalized voices. Many of the original creators of comics were Jewish, such as Stan Lee, Superman's Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, Batman's Bob Kane and Bill Finger, Will Eisner, and Jack Kirby, among others (Kavaldo, 2009). These writers often directly and indirectly included narratives of the Jewish struggle in the 1940s-1960s, as many original comic heroes were of alien descent and had to assimilate onto our planet (Kavaldo, 2009). Kamala, like Superman, finds out that she is partly of extraterrestrial descent.

In my opinion, it is not an accident that, about fourteen years after 9/11, a Pakistani-American Muslim woman has a narrative that tells of struggles that parallel superheroes with Jewish male traits from an earlier given some of the anti-Muslim sentiments that still prevail in this country and in light of our current political climate. Kamala faces the same struggles of most American female teenagers, yet with the added struggles due to being a minority race and religion in this country. Her partial-alien identity may parallel feeling like an Alien in this

country, just like the Jewish creators of foundational comic narratives must have felt estranged and marginalized during the World War II era and initial post-war years.

At some of the panels I have attended at popular culture CONS, including at MagiCon 2016 the year of my study, the discussion of how immigrants are treated emerged, in the context to how this Kamala comic and YA narratives apply to American history and current events. The imaginary worlds of comics and YA literature provide an avenue for discussing such controversial issues. As some of my participants will narrate in vignette form in Chapter Four, related intersectionality issues were major driving forces behind conversations at CONS during the course of my study, particularly at MagiCon.

Affinity Spaces and Social Semiotic Spaces

Both the virtual and in-person spaces I have studied, as they invite discussions of diverse multimodal literature with female protagonists, have many attributes of affinity spaces. James Gee (2004) coined this term as a way to more specifically describe spaces that have some elements of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice and that explore literary practices voluntarily and in more informal settings, either virtual or in person. Gee's (2004) belief is that these affinity spaces have many of the same elements as communities of practice, only membership tends to be more fluid.

Because the membership is more fluid than in traditional communities of practice, the affinity space "can serve as a 'place' where…knowledge is dispersed among the participants and the tools provided within the space, and in which participants use it as a 'strong generator' to develop new, creative products and projects" (Duncan & Hayes, 2012, p. 8). Gee (2004/2005) argued that the problem with communities of practice, or communities of learners, was the idea

of putting labels on people, in terms of who was inside or outside of the community, which goes against the idea of an affinity space.

When he described these affinity spaces, Gee (2004/2005) began with the notion of semiotic social spaces, or SSS. He used this term because he was concerned with "the way in which people get and give meanings to signs within them" (Gee, 2005, p. 216). He noted that affinity spaces are a particular type of social semiotic spaces with very specific attributes. Semiotics is defined as "the science of the life of signs in society" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 1; Saussure, 1974).

In looking at social semiotics, "everything in a culture can be seen as a form in communication, organized in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 1). Such spaces are intriguing to study in autoethnographic and ethnographic work, as the researcher sees how the cultural groups interact and with what discourses. Many of the philosophies surrounding social semiotics have roots in Marxism, as the interest is in "inequalities in distribution of power and other goods" in capitalist societies (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 3).

All social semiotic spaces, including affinity spaces, start with content. The content is known as the SSS's generator (Gee, 2005). In addition to the generator, participants must have at least one portal to offer them access to the space and to the signs with which people will interact. The signs are the language involved with the place, or the texts. In most cases, the signs of the affinity spaces are the books and media texts of study, but signs can also be such non-written language as costumes. Therefore, the generator(s) of an SSS "gives us a set of signs and possible relations among them" and portal(s) "offer access to signs and interactions with them" (Gee, 2005, p. 221). In some cases, a generator and a portal can be one in the same, since the portal

provides access and the generator provides content, but in some cases, the two are separate entities. In traditional classroom settings, textbooks oftentimes serve as both portals and generators (Gee, 2005).

Examples of Portals and Generators

Based on my autoethnographic and narrative inquiry data, in the case of MagiCon, tangible items that serve as portals into the space are the pass to the event and the costumes that people don while there. Oftentimes, people go to daytime panels and games dressed in jeans and nerdy t-shirts, but over the years of attending MagiCon, I have found that it's an unspoken, unwritten rule that one should go to night events dressed in costume. Some people put more time into the costuming aspect of MagiCon than others, as there's an implicit understanding that some attendees have more time and money to devote to costuming than others. As an educator and a writer, I have had less of both than some attendees. Yet one way to have an "in" with other MagiCon attendees is through costume.

To put my narrative research methods into practice, I have also found that the umbrella tattoo on my lower right arm has helped me to forge bonds with people in fandom communities, both on a personal level and for research interests. The tattoo, for me, serves as a portal of entry into these fandom communities, since the tattoo derives from a specific story reference from the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997) that only true fans would understand. Yet the tattoo can also serve as a generator for me, along with my costumes, because it is grounds for early conversation around *Buffy,* a television show that is largely about female empowerment.

At MagiCon, the comics, films, television shows, and books that the other participants and I discuss at panels are the generators, as they are the content that brings us all there. To me,

the CON as a whole is a social semiotic space, and the Young Adult Literature, fanfiction, and comics/graphic novel panels I attend are the affinity spaces at which we can explore our individual interests.

Since FantasyCon is a smaller CON, the whole space to me was an affinity space because of our specific interests in *Harry Potter* fandom, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and other magical fandoms. Since the CON started off as specifically a *Harry Potter* Con, most of us who attended wore the scarves and colors of our house of choice, especially since much of the reward for contributing to panel discussion involved chips to contribute to your house for the "house cup" award at the end of the convention.

To use another personal example, my Ravenclaw attire was a symbol of pride, as Ravenclaw is known for being the most intellectual house of Harry Potter. There are a total of four Harry Potter houses: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin. In the books, students are placed into these houses based on a sorting hat, and fans take quizzes online to determine the house of our belonging on Pottermore and other online avenues. Therefore, the Harry Potter house you are sorted into is a source of pride, and costumes at this event are both a portal of entry, indirectly, and a generator of discussion, directly.

At Cloud Nine Bookshop, the book club events are free and do not require a purchased pass. Therefore, the books we discuss serve as both portals and generators. They are portals because obtaining the book in advance, either from the store or from the local library, provides access to the event, and the books are also generators of content. Yet in order to fully participate in the book club conversation, one must have read the book in advance. Also, particularly at the comics/graphic novels book club, we often speak in discourses related to comics and reference other common geek culture fandoms, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Feminist Affinity Spaces

The spaces of my study, I would argue, are feminist affinity spaces because of the texts of study and also what is discussed regarding the books and content. An important aspect of affinity spaces is that people can participate regardless of race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of identity (Curwood, 2013; Gee, 2004). Therefore, congruent with the feminist poststructuralist theory I have previously referenced, I argue that the affinity spaces I have studied are deconstructing notions of traditional school settings and troubling capitalistic power structures through many of their attributes, such as shared leadership and more inclusive settings where people can discuss interests of their choice, rather than those mandated by traditional school settings with set academic agendas. Additionally, the comics and YA literature discussed in these spaces, particularly of the speculative fiction genre, are conducive to study from a feminist poststructuralist theoretical viewpoint, particularly in affinity spaces open to participation from people of all backgrounds. As forms of literature, they deconstruct traditional notions of what literary works should be canonized.

These particular spaces do involve having to obtain books and/or an event pass. Therefore, privilege is an issue to an extent, as people need to have access to funds and/or educational resources to obtain the necessary goods to participate. However, the expense of attending these spaces is relative in comparison to many academic conferences. In addition to in-person affinity spaces, online affinity spaces, which can be accessed without cost, can further motivate people to read the text of study and to interact with others to better understand the text (Curwood, 2013). The participants of my study interacted with the literature under study both in the book club meetings/panels and accompanying online spaces.

Attributes of Affinity Spaces

Gee (2004) listed the following attributes as describing an affinity space (pp. 85-87).

- Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary

- Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space

- Some portals are strong generators

- Content organization is transformed by interactional organization

- Both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged

- Both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged

- Dispersed knowledge is encouraged

- Tacit knowledge is encouraged and honored

- There are many different forms and routes to participation

- There are lots of different routes to status

- Leadership is porous and leaders are resources

In video games, the portals are the online spaces for entry. For in-person affinity spaces, portals can be other modes of entry, such as the textbook, the pass needed to attend a CON event, and a novel of study. Some portals, online or not, serve as discussion generators, as the generators represent the content studied in the affinity space (Gee, 2004/2005). As a literacy teacher, I am interested in how socialization within these in-person spaces, along with their related online affinity spaces, impacts literacy learning, and "for Gee, an important feature of the affinity space is that its content is mutable, and evolves through social interactions and practices that take place in the space" (Duncan & Hayes, 2012, p. 9). While a major role of attending the affinity spaces of my study is to gain knowledge, there are other reasons, such as the opportunity to socialize with others in conjunction with a shared passion.

Many studies on affinity spaces thus far have focused specifically on online affinity spaces, such as role playing games and blogs. My study is unique because it focuses on in-person affinity spaces that, both in the past and in the present, have been influenced by the interactions of online affinity spaces. Also, Gee (2004) explained that affinity spaces can be both online and in-person, even though most studies thus far have focused more on the online spaces. In my opinion, both are very important when considering the future direction we want to take in bringing the aspects of affinity spaces into more traditional school settings. Additionally, I am taking feminist theory into account within my analysis here because I believe the particular affinity spaces I am studying are feminist in nature by virtue of being open to anyone who is able to and wants to participate, as well as the topics that are discussed and by virtue of the topics.

In one of James Paul Gee's more recent books on affinity spaces entitled *Good Video Games & Good Learning* (2013), Henry Jenkins and James P. Gee discussed at length in the first chapter the inclusivity aspect of affinity spaces. Henry Jenkins noted the following in his interview questions:

> The part of your argument for affinity spaces that gets the most pushback from my students is your claim that a "common passion-fueled endeavor—not race, class, gender, or disability—is primary." To many, this seems like a very utopian claim for these spaces…Yet surely, inequities impact participants at all levels. (p. 7).

Henry Jenkins's question, along with Gee's answer, became pertinent to the spaces of my study. Gee (2013) noted in response, "The statement that passionate affinity spaces are focused on a shared passion…and not race, class, and gender…is not an empirical claim; it is a stipulation…Such spaces become a goal and an ideal, and we can talk about how close or far away from that goal and ideal we are" (p. 7). In other words, people of all classes, genders, and

races must be welcome to attend these spaces, and these must not be gatekeepers that keep people from being involved with them.

However, as the findings of my study show, some affinity spaces based on passion are more diverse in terms of participation than others. One conversation point in my findings chapters of 4 and 5 is what elements of Gee's views on affinity spaces hold true at the CONS and the Cloud Nine book clubs and in what areas these spaces might be falling short in their goals, based on what my participants and I noticed during my data collection period.

Affinity Spaces and Fandom

Because of the shared community space and exchange of ideas and passions with like-minded people, affinity spaces can give people a sense of passion and belonging, especially for people who attend other events associated with their comic and/or books of choice and the associated television shows and films. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) in particular discusses affect theory in relation to fandom communities. He noted, "Affect is not the same as either emotions or desires. Affect is closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life" (p. 56).

As the Chapter Four narrative vignettes will show, many interview subjects in this study talk about feeling happy and elated at the fandom and book club events because of the overall connectivity with other members of the community. Affect, in these cases, "determines how invigorated we feel in particular moments of our lives. It defines the strength of our investment in particular experiences practices, identities, meanings, and pleasures" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 57).

The combination of the love of the books and other forms of media and the connection of talking with others who love the same things gives attendees of the literary events a strong feeling of affect, and this is something that I as an autoethnographic researcher can relate to personally. Grossberg (1992) also discussed mattering maps, which we as participants construct,

even if only within our own minds, based on where we place our investments. Fans and Cloud Nine readers choose to invest our time in these forms of media because we care about them and the people we meet at these events. These mattering maps, therefore, give fans control over how they invest their time and emotional energy. Grossberg's (1992) concept of affect helps explain why some people are continually drawn to their respective affinity spaces.

A History of Fandom Culture and Gender Issues

Based on the numbers increase at MagiCon and other popular culture conferences and conventions, speculative fiction texts and comics appear to be more accepted than in the past within mainstream popular culture and academia. MagiCon now includes a Pop Culture Conference, which is held at MagiCon but separated to a degree and includes academic papers about comics and pop culture. Fandom scholarship by such media scholars as Jenkins (1992/2006) and Gray (2007) shows how fandom culture has changed and evolved and continues to do so through such contributors as the Internet, local book clubs, author visits, and Con events. In academia, scholars are paying more attention to comics because they are now being seen as a legitimate form of literature (Robbins, 2015b). As a literacy education researcher, my hope is that the same shift will continue in speculative fiction literature and film.

Sansweet (2014) noted that science fiction, fantasy, and comic fans had begun meeting up as early as the 1930s to discuss their passion. However, Sansweet (2014) posited that it was the 1977 release of the first *Star Wars* film that gave such fans public forums for their fandoms, such as fan fiction websites and Con events. Since the *Star Wars* series is a "space opera" (p. 2) that does not follow all of the usual conventions of hard science fiction, additional fans became enticed into the culture. He argued that "fandom today is all about popular culture, mass media,

and the ability to instantly connect with like-minded others" (p. 1), which could not have happened in the earlier days of fandom.

With the emergence of fan culture into the social media and popular culture scene, Sansweet (2014) argued that some of the stigmas against science fiction/fantasy hard-core fans have started to dissipate. Congruently, Tanya Cochran (2008) noted that the term "fan" comes from the Latin word "*fanaticus*", which means "insane, mad, or possessed by the gods" (Barton, 2014, p. 5). Therefore, people have had the perception that only people far outside of the mainstream and/or emotionally troubled were "fans," although that perception appears to be changing due to more media portrayal of Cons, fan fiction websites, and other fan-related events and online gatherings. Additionally, Cochran (2008) noted that fans, particularly "Browncoat" fans of *Serenity* and *Firefly*, have gotten involved in the philanthropy scene, in addition to the fanfiction writing scene. Through these activities, fandom might be becoming more normalized.

Recently, character representation has also started to change. Sansweet (2014) pointed out that when female fans started to populate the *Twilight* panels at San Diego Comic-Con panels, the assumption that geek culture fans were all male was shattered. Therefore, "some attempts are finally being undertaken to make genre projects include more diverse characters to match the diversity of the audience, although there's still a lot of work to be done there" (p. 4). I believe attempts to make children's and YA literature more diverse began well before the release of the *Twilight* films, along with comics, such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's work in the *X-Men* series (Housel, 2009). However, I agree that Hollywood's attention to female fans increased because of the *Twilight* series.

I would argue that it is disconcerting that a movie and book series that portrays such a problematic situation of an emotionally dependent female character and her relationships to men,

albeit men in the unconventional forms of vampire and werewolf, is the one that got Hollywood's attention to increase female representation in comics and speculative fiction books and films. I believe the *Twilight* series, while entertaining, depicts a teenager girl who has an unhealthy emotional dependence on both her boyfriend and her male best friend.

I see a more hopeful site of transformation in recent YA narratives. In my opinion, the past trends of less empowered female protagonists in paranormal romance YA novels such as the *Twilight* series are why such works as the new *Ms. Marvel* are so important. In addition to being a primary character rather than a love interest or a secondary character, Kamala conveys behaviors and attitudes that are the opposite of Bella from *Twilight,* thereby functioning as an anti-Bella Swan figure in this regard. Part of my desire to do the work of this study stems from my hope that *Twilight* will not continue to be the series that most captivates so many female fans, although I believe that paradigm is already starting to shift.

Fanfiction and Education

Several helpful studies have linked fanfiction, writing that remixes (Jenkins, 2013a) and retells original stories associated with popular culture and popular fiction, with literacy education (Jenkins, 2013a). Fanfiction is considered a valid literacy practice in the context of multiliteracies and involves fans using "media texts as the starting point for their own writing" (Kerr, 2015, p. 34). Jenkins (1992) has studied this practice in depth as related to fan culture, and it usually involves television show or movie fans elaborating on plot lines, further developing characters, and perhaps shifting the story's ending to a degree to better fit the writer's expectations or desires.

Kerr (2015) also pointed to the self-reflection space that fanfiction domains provide for students, given that students and fanfiction writers in general (myself included) insert aspects of

our self-narratives into the fanfiction stories, since fictional characters allow a safe space to do so. The act of writing, particularly when paired with getting advice from others in the process, can provide the writer a space to self-reflect, imagine, and advise oneself (Foucault, 1997; Kerr, 2015). Additionally, students must learn the discourse of a fandom and the ability to show an understanding of this discourse through writing (Kerr, 2015).

Congruently, Bahoric and Swaggerty (2015) noted that fanfiction writing tends to occur in many genres, and it therefore affords an opportunity for writers to experiment with different genres, such as horror, science fiction, and letter writing. To fully engage with a fanfiction story, a reader must activate prior knowledge of the novels and/or films involved, and prior knowledge activation is a very important literacy skill. Another rationale for using fanfiction in educational settings is that writers of fanfiction tend to also read in the genre, and students would have a variety of genres and interests to choose from within the fanfiction realm. Since students tend to be more invested in reading and writing if it suits their more personal interests, fanfiction is a logical choice. Additionally, 21st Century Common Core Standards encourage students to write and share digital stories, and fanfiction gives them an opportunity to do so. Writers and readers can also learn media literacy skills through engagement with fanfiction.

In evaluating fanfiction for its merit, readers consider such elements as plot, characterization, and consistency, all of which are important for students of all ages to learn (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015). In the practice of writing my first fanfiction story, I found these elements to be true in the feedback that I received from readers. The positive feedback was that my plot was engaging and interesting, along with my dialogue, and my readers could really see how events of my characters' past affected them.

To use a personal example, the only constructive feedback I received from one reviewer stated that some of my characters seemed "out of character," although he acknowledged that it could have been partly because the story was set approximately ten years after my two central characters last saw each other in the "Buffyverse". Therefore, my personal interactions with fanfiction were congruent with Bahoric and Swaggerty's (2015) statements that fanfiction readers will allow you to divert from the central characters and plot lines of their fandoms, but only so much, because they are activating on their prior knowledge of the characters and events. These findings could make for interesting discussions in educational settings.

Additionally, Bahoric & Swaggerty (2015) noted that writing fanfiction provides students with opportunities to have critical media literacy conversations and to explore personal issues in the safe environment of creative writing. I would also argue that the process of writing crossover fanfiction, including both stories I wrote for the site known as *Twisting the Hellmouth,* requires the writer to synthesize information from more than one story, a skill that is required in college courses as well as the real world. Fanfiction also gives student writers opportunities to explore and write about social issues that sometimes do not get addressed in mainstream popular fiction (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015).

When I wrote my own *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfiction stories within feminist online affinity spaces, the process was cathartic for me because, through my story, I explored issues that had been troubling me personally. Fanfiction gives writers and readers a chance to collaborate and to give each other feedback that is constructive and helpful, and I believe it is important for students to learn the skills of online feedback, including etiquette. Also, for me personally, joining Buffy "fanfic" (a shortened version of the word fanfiction) gave me a chance to feel more a part of the fandom community, because "a fandom is a group of fans that is actively engaged

with a work of media…and its bodies of fanfiction" (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015, p. 25). Fanfiction, therefore, is an online affinity space (Gee, 2004) that allows writers to explore characters and their worlds in a virtual space.

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Fanfiction and Female Representation

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A female archetype that has emerged from science fiction and fanfiction stories is the "Mary Sue." The original Mary Sue was the youngest officer ever on the *Enterprise* ship of the Star Trek universe and a brilliant teenage girl who was also tall, slender, part Vulcan, and attractive (Bacon-Smith, 2014). Now, within the fanfiction communities, a Mary Sue character is one who is considered too perfect and therefore not well developed because she fits society's ideals of intelligence as well as physical beauty. Many publishers of fanzines and fanfiction have rejected stories in which the lead female character seems too much like a "Mary Sue" because people want more developed, original characters (Bacon-Smith, 2014). However, when writing stories with strong female protagonists, it seems to be difficult for creators not to fall back on the Mary Sue prototype, as she is both intelligent and capable and fits the societal definition of physical attractiveness that will appeal to the traditionally male audience of science fiction.

Based on my in-person interactions at fandom events, I know that there is some concern that Rey, the new female protagonist of the *Star Wars* films, will become a Mary Sue character. I personally think that is a possibility, but I also think it is not fair to say so definitively this early in the series, as there is plenty of room to develop Rey's character further in the second film, when she goes through Jedi training. Rey was, in fact, one of my costumes at MagiCon 2016, at which I served as a panelist for the Gender and YA Literature and Superpowered YA panels. I believe part of the movement to portray more female protagonists in comics and speculative fiction is to include more women who do not fit the societal ideals of Mary Sue characters.

Additionally, at one of the fanfiction panels I attended at MagiCon this year, attendees confessed to writing "Mary Sue" characters in their early works and discussed how they try to push themselves past this practice, which tends to be indicative of writers new to the genre.

Another archetype character in fandom stories is the *lay* character, a more matriarchal female who develops a sexual relationship with the male hero (Bacon-Smith, 2014). In this case, it is interesting to note that sexuality is a women's route to power. Is this a more ideal female archetype than one who is able to use her intelligence to gain power and influence? Perhaps the current goal is to have more of a range of characters, not just ones who are either perfect and independent or able to obtain power through sexuality.

Currently, a colleague and I are working on a project about female heroines in fantasy stories who tend to have much older, wiser male advisors and/or romantic partners. We have noticed that in many of these stories, the fairy tale trope of a princess with a wise advisor remains true to an extent, even when the female characters are empowered to a degree. Many late twentieth-century narratives with female protagonists, such as the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* narratives, both fall back on archetypal myths and fairy tale stories and push back against these traditional tropes by providing the female characters with more agency (Wilcox, 2005; Wilcox, 2008).

Fandom and Self-Narrative through Story

Related to narrative theory from a feminist perspective, Rebecca Williams (2015) explains how fandom can contribute to people's self-narratives. Williams (2015) argued that "fans often use their fan objects to understand their own life trajectories" by making sense of the fandom stories in relation to the drama of their own lives (p. 23). Therefore, the connection fans feel to the characters of the television show, movie, comic, or other form of media proves to be

important in creating a sense of self-identity. A fan community "often provides validation of a fan's established self-identity by virtue of the fact that others share their interests, reinforcing the 'appropriateness' of these choices" (Williams, 2005, p. 25). Even when these fandom choices are not considered popular or acceptable by mainstream society, fans can find reaffirmation in online or personal affinity spaces at which people discuss these various forms of media.

Correlating with feminist poststructuralist theory, self-identity is not stable; rather, it is a fluid process that requires the writing of self-narratives, or an "ongoing narrative of the self" (Williams, 2015, p. 28). Therefore, when a show or other form of media ends that has provided a sense of connection, the fan might go through a period of grieving due to a loss of a connection with the object. Just like any other grieving or loss period, it is important for fans to cope with the "loss of the beloved object (whether a person, a text, etc.) and to incorporate this demise into their self-narratives" to avoid long-term damage to the psyche (Williams, 2015, p. 28). Because of their affinity and passion for the fandom of choice, some fans may have such a strong connection to a television show or another form of media that the relationships, to them, are like relationships with people.

As an example from my study, this year at MagiCon, when I attended the *Firefly* panel at MagiCon, I gathered that some fans felt that strong sense of loss when the show went off the air and that attending the panel felt like a high school reunion: you might not engage with these people/objects regularly, yet reconnecting with them gives you nostalgia and fills a hole that the loss of the experience initially gave one. *Firefly* and other fandoms not only connect fans to each other, but also give the people involved a chance to help story their experiences through a connection to the characters within the comic, television show, novel, or film.

Comics, Speculative Fiction, and Educational Settings

Gerard Jones's (2002) book *Killing Monsters* deconstructs some of the earlier studies and viewpoints that claim that comics were considered too violent for children to read and to process. In his graphic novel autobiography, Stan Lee (2015) noted that the Comics Code Authority (CCA) used to have to label comics as "safe" in terms of content, meaning that they did not have excessive references to drugs and violence, because people used to assume that comics were not always safe for children to read. Yet Jones (2002) claimed the following in regards to entertainment and violence:

> Young people who reject violence, guns, and bigotry in every form can sift through the literal contents of a movie, game, or song and still embrace the emotional power at its heart. Children need to feel strong. They need to feel powerful in the face of a scary, uncontrollable world. Superheroes, video-game warriors, rappers, and movie gunmen are symbols of strength. By pretending to be them, young people are being strong. (p. 11).

Now a successful comic book artist and writer, Jones (2002) recounted his own childhood experiences of being unmotivated and even troubled at school. However, the stories of comics gave him an emotional outlet for some of the pain and frustration he was experiencing. He claimed, therefore, that some of these stories provide a safe place for children to explore emotions within the world of the imagination.

Jones (2002) encouraged using play and fantasy entertainment found in games, comics, and other forms of media as a safe avenue of exploring issues of right and wrong:

> Exploring, in a safe and controlled context, what is impossible or too dangerous or forbidden to them is a crucial tool in accepting the limits of reality. Playing with rage is a valuable way to reduce its power. Being evil and destructive in imagination is a vital

compensation for the wildness we all have to surrender on our way to being good

people. (p. 11).

Therefore, Jones (2002) argued that rather than causing children to be more violent, comics and

video games may have the opposite effect: They give children a creative outlet to express the

fears and frustration that would otherwise be kept within. Jones (2002) described a joint

statement on July 26, 2000, by officers of the American Medical Association, the American

Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological

Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of

Children and Adolescent Psychiatry stating that there was a correlation between media violence

and aggressive behaviors in some children. The problem with this study is that it spoke

pointedly of "some children" and did not explore the positive sides of such characters (Jones,

2002, p. 27).

Additionally, several respected psychologists and psychologists, such as Dr. Helen

Smith, Dr. Edwin Cook, and Dr. Lynn Ponton, have questioned the findings of this study (Jones,

2002). Specifically, Dr. Jonathan Freedman of the University of Toronto notes that "according

to every meta-analysis of the research, including those conducted by supporters of the media-

aggression hypothesis, there have been not 1000 but about 200 studies, and many of those have

contradicted the conclusion of the Joint Statement" (Jones, 2002, p. 29).

A specific concern that I have with these studies is that they do not address, from what I

understand, gender disparities in the portrayal of violence and how female children might

benefit from the portrayal of strong female protagonists in these so-called violent forms of

entertainment. However, Jones (2002) addressed the role of a female protagonist in a superhero

story in his discussion of the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* which first aired in 1997, five

years after the 1992 film. Jones (2002) noted that Buffy uses both her sexuality and humor to diffuse certain violent situations with vampires and demons. Perhaps because of the central character being a female, Jones (2002) stated, "The humor and violence were toned down in favor of plots emphasizing Buffy's cleverness at manipulating relationships and situations" (p. 151). The character development of the show is complex, and Buffy's on-again, off-again romance with the brooding, dark, tortured soul vampire Angel becomes an important sub-plot of the show (Jones, 2002).

Some of the psychiatrists and students that Jones (2002) interviewed expressed a certain amount of ambivalence about the show and its accompanying comics. They appreciated Buffy's power and fully realized that some of it derived from her sexual appeal. However, developmental psychologist Dr. Carla Seal-Wanner believes it is important that adults help young girls to process some of these images and what they mean (Jones, 2002). In my opinion, Jones's (2002) chapter "Vampire Slayers" and his findings emphasize the importance of studying such TV shows and comics as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in classroom and/or book club contexts, so people can work together to process both the visual images and the words to fully understand what they say about the story and about society.

According to Jones's (2002) studies, male students are able to consume such media to discuss and consider how gender relationships are changing in society. My father, who grew up in the 50s and early 60s, has pointed out that now, he sees many TV shows and movies where women physically assert themselves over men, and he does not recall watching such TV shows or reading such books when he was a child. Therefore, such shows as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), although they have problematic aspects, pave the way for discussions about gender roles. Jones (2002) claimed that "Entertainment provides the essential function of play for kids

who feel too old to play openly: it enables them to manipulate and master ideas and feelings that concern them until they feel ready to grapple with them in reality" (p. 155). It is interesting to note that in this book chapter, written over ten years ago, the film, TV show, and comic series of *Buffy* are lumped together as forms of entertainment. Although the chapter certainly advocates for the study of these media forms with a critical media literacy perspective, I believe that had the book been written later, the comics might have been approached from more of a literary standpoint, rather than labeled solely as entertainment.

Fantasy and the Development of Readers

Richard Beach (1993) also discussed the role of fantasy stories in the cognitive development of children. Beach (1993) argued, "The young child's intermittent grasp of the boundary between fantasy and actuality...yields to the older child's sense of control and identity" (p. 72). Adolescents come to understand that romance is only one aspect of life (Beach, 1993). During the early stages of childhood, such practices as creating an imaginary friend show the child's desire to practice social situations within a safe context. Beach (1993) referenced Bruno Bettelheim's (1976/2010) book *The Uses of Enchantment,* which focuses on the children's' internal desires and fears and the way they play out in fantasy and fairy tales.

Bettelheim (2010) drew upon the theories of Sigmund Freud, a controversial figure in feminist scholarship (Friedan, 1997), and claimed that fairy tales can help children confront the challenges of good and evil through the fictional fantasy fairy tales they read and watch. Bettelheim (2010) claimed that because a child's life is bewildering and complex, s/he needs to be able to understand tumultuous emotions in order to cope, and fairy tales provide an opportunity to do so in a safe context.

Because in fairy tales, good always triumphs over email, fairy tales can give the child a sense of reassurance (Beach, 1993; Bettelheim, 1976). As a child, I personally took comfort in Tolkien's stories because I felt the underdog hobbit characters triumphed over larger forces of evil. As an adult, I understand that "good and evil" are not always as black and white, but for children, I think these divisions can be easier to process, and they can discuss the good and evil spectrum more as they get older. As related to younger children and their relationship to superhero and fantasy stories, Anne Haas Dyson (1997) did an ethnographic study on elementary school aged students who brought superheroes into their written stories and their time for unstructured play. Her work shows the importance that imaginative superhero stories play in young children effectively learning how to structure narratives, which can potentially include our ability to re-write narratives of good and evil for the sake of psychological well-being.

As children get more into the late elementary and middle school years, they tend to gravitate toward romantic quest and hero stories, such as the *Harry Potter* series (Beach, 1993). In hero stories, the main character has to overcome obstacles, while enjoying a journey and friends along the way. During this phase, "students begin to experience a sense of emotional self-consciousness, leading them to focus more on the character than simply the story's action" (Beach, 1993, p. 73). Therefore, they can relate to these characters, particularly in fantasy and superhero stories, because they go on a quest, achieve a goal, and serve as a role model figure along the way.

When students become adolescents, they grow into the "reader as thinker" phase and start to look at the tensions and complexities of characters as they construct their identities (Beach, 1993, p. 73-74). In late adolescents and college, many students begin to perceive texts

as problematic and work to interpret them more deeply (Beach, 1993), although as a teacher, I found that some of my more advanced students came into this phase sooner. I would argue that fantasy, superhero, and speculative fiction stories afford students opportunities to analyze texts productively because of their emphasis on tragic heroes, obtaining a goal, and fighting greater forces of evil.

The Role of the Imagination

In addition to scholarship specifically related to fantasy and speculative fiction, work related to imaginative thought is important in considering why such genres and forms can be useful to educational settings and to literacy development. Specifically, Maxine Greene (1995) discussed the generative role the imagination plays in the education of students. Superhero comics and speculative fiction tell stories that entice the imagination and challenge what is considered normal. By tapping into the imagination through reading, readers "become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished" and to consider new possibilities for experience (Greene, 1995, p. 19). In the process, a person "may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet" (Greene, 1995, p. 19). Through literature with both imaginary and realistic elements, readers can imagine a better version of the future, which is a common theme in comics and speculative fiction.

Greene (1995) argued that in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), a fiction novel that I believe has autoethnographic elements, the central character Celie is able to use the imagination and her writing process to make sense of her experiences. Through her writing and her interactions with blues singer Shug Avery, Celie can use language to "interpret what she sees; she can interrogate; she can imagine" (Greene, 1995, p. 25). To me, Celie's process is similar to Marijane Satrapi's (2007) in her well-known autobiographical graphic novel *The*

Complete Persepolis. Through her story, Satrapi (2007) makes sense of her marginalization due to her country of origin and her gender, in addition to her mental health issues associated with depression, conveying intersectionality issues that parallel Kamala's in the new *Ms. Marvel* series. Comics and graphic novels are a popular forum for telling such stories, perhaps because of their emphasis on the power of the imagination as conveyed in both pictorial and written word form.

In particular, People who have been marginalized because of their race, religion, gender, and/or (dis)abilities may benefit from these forms of literature and the opportunities to discuss them. Greene's (1995) scholarship parallels the work that Imarisha and Brown (2015) did in their recent anthology *Octavia's brood: Science fiction stories from social justice movements.* I believe that if students of all ages do not see themselves in literature and other texts, they will not develop a passion for using their literacies.

As a learning (dis)abled person who has struggled with associated anxiety issues on and off throughout my life and who had a temporarily disfigured face, I find comfort in reading comics and speculative fiction stories in which marginalized hero figures become successful not only in spite of obstacles, but also because of them. Part of why I am academically successful is because I have educated parents who knew how to help me cultivate my potential. However, another key reason for my academic success has been falling in love with reading, writing, and other forms of text. Therefore, my passion in doing research, including this study, is to encourage more people who have felt marginalized at various points in their lives to find solace through alternative forms of literacies, their accompanying events, and the resulting personal connections.

Comics and Graphic Novels: Definitions and Legitimacy Issues

Will Eisner defined comics as "sequential art" (McCloud, 1993, p. 5). Cary (2004) subscribes to *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* definition: "A narrative form containing texts and pictures arranged in sequential order" (p. 11). *Comic* is an umbrella term, and comic books and graphic novels have varying definitions within this umbrella (Robbins, 2015b). Thompson (2008) differentiates comics and graphic novels in the following way:

> Comics tend to carry the story line from one month to the next…Graphic novels follow a format similar to that of comic books but differ in that they tend to have full-length story lines, meaning that the story starts and ends within the same book. (p. 9).

Weiner (2012) defines graphic novels as "book length comics that are meant to be read as one story" (p. xi). Comics and graphic novels encompass a form rather than a genre, as they both have stories of many genres, including superhero, mystery, fantasy, and nonfiction, among others (Carter, 2008).

Over time, due to the evolving definition of comics, people have started taking them and their stories more seriously. Therefore, the academic community now explores how they can be used in educational settings and how they can convey important societal and social justice messages (Robbins, 2015b). Now that many comics are being bound together as volumes, I believe that the definition of graphic novels versus comics is beginning to blur. The *Buffy Omnibus* comics, for instance, have many comics in each volume, and although the story lines are not completely linear, they can be read as individual graphic novels. Given this trend, over time, more scholars have started to use the more all-encompassing words comics and "graphica" (Thompson, 2008) to describe this medium, rather than graphic novels.

(Dis)ability Representation in Comics and Graphic Novels

Marilyn Irwin and Robin Moeller (2010) have analyzed how young adult graphic novels and comics portray characters with disabilities. Several studies that they cite came to the conclusion that overall, characters with disabilities are not portrayed positively, that a lack of morality often accompanies a physical deformity, and that a character with a disability often has to convey himself or herself as exceptional in order to overcome the challenges that a disability brings. One specific example that resonated with me is the portrayal of Arkham in the Batman comics, and also in the *Gotham* (2014) television series I have watched. The characters at the asylum tend to be one-dimensional and only to convey the negative side effects of mental health issues. However, as a point of contrast, most of the X-Men "mutants" are portrayed in a positive light (Kavaldo, 2009).

As a person with a diagnosed learning disability, ADHD, and a diagnosed anxiety disorder, I believe a continuing conversation in academia will be about how people with both physical and mental disabilities and also with mental health issues will be portrayed in graphic novels and comics, and these conversations did take place at the MagiCon panels I attended during the course of my study. For instance, Cece Bell's (2014) recent novel *El Deafo* is an example of a graphic novel with a female protagonist who uses both imaginary superhero stories and real-life coping strategies to be successful. Although she is deaf, many of her struggles are ones that "normal" adolescent girls face, such as having unkind female friends and finding the balance between being a good student and having the approval of one's peers.

Female Representation in Comics for Adolescents

Rosenberg (2013) has done work related to the representation of Wonder Woman and Buffy as they address adolescents and young women. The first well-known female character to

have her own comic is Wonder Woman, who is fascinating because of her gender and her ethnicity. Because of her background as an Amazonian woman of Greek descent, Diana a.k.a. Wonder Woman's identity is largely based on her ethnicity (Rosenberg, 2013).

Diana, like many American children, has an ethnic identity that varies from her national identity, and her quest to make it in America depicts an immigrant narrative that many Americans can identify with, similar to Superman's quest to adjust to the planet Earth from Krypton (Kavaldo, 2009; Rosenberg, 2013). Rosenberg (2013) also argued that Wonder Woman has three traits that psychologist Ellen Winner associates with gifted children: precocity, an insistence on marching to their own drummer, and a "rage to master" (p. 89). Therefore, adolescents can relate to Diana's realization of her gifted powers, along with her desire to find the American dream. Wonder Woman's narrative is particularly relatable to immigrant children and first-generation American adolescents.

Due to the high popularity of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film, television show, and comics, Rosenberg (2013) also chose Buffy Summers as a character of focus. Initially, Buffy, like many heroes on a journey, hesitates in her calling to be the Slayer because she would rather be a normal teenage girl. Rosenberg (2013) argued that her reasoning "is very self-centered, as is typical of teens and in some adults: 'how will this affect me?' as she thinks in terms of a short time horizon, not long term consequences" (p. 148). Therefore Buffy does not initially think about her gifts and her ability to use them to help people, but of how it will affect her privileged life of being a Valley girl in Los Angeles.

Buffy's reaction, though, is appropriate for the age and life phase she's in. As a psychologist, Rosenberg (2013) stated the following about teenage development as related to Buffy's habits:

An interesting facet of teenagers' psychological development is that they think they're at the center stage in the play of life, referred to as *adolescent egocentrism.* One aspect of this egocentrism is a teen's belief that he or she has special abilities and privileges (and this belief sometimes persists beyond adolescence!) referred to as a *personal fable.* (p. 148-149).

Throughout the *Buffy Omnibus* Volume 1 (2007) and Volume 2 (2007) books, Buffy presents the conflicting desires of being special and blending in and being normal. Even during her parents' divorce, she tends to think more about how the divorce and the move affect her and not as much about how they affect other people. In spite of her emerging superhero powers, Buffy is a typical teenage girl in terms of her personal and psychological development, which makes her story resonate with teenage and young adult women (Rosenberg, 2013).

Rosenberg (2013) also noted, "One of the reasons we can resonate with Buffy is that all of us have felt saddled with burdens that we didn't pick" (p. 155). Buffy is ultimately an admirable character because she decides to face her burdens rather than to ignore them. Her internal conflict is what makes her realistic, especially to adolescent audiences.

Feminist YA Dystopian and Fantasy Literature

Dystopian societies in literature and film "reflect and examine current power structures that create and maintain social organization" (Sutherland & Swan, 2008, p. 91). These worlds often appear to be improved versions of our current world, but they turn out to be our modern day world gone wrong. Therefore, the writer has an opportunity to be critical of some elements of our world's political systems and people's behaviors. With the implications for political and social concerns that tend to be addressed in dystopian literature, there are two primary themes, feminist dystopia and cyberpunk (Sutherland & Swan, 2008). Feminist dystopia "is distinguished

by a focus on tenderized power structures and repression" (Sutherland & Swan, 2008, p. 94),

whereas cyberpunk focuses more on concerns with technology.

For instance, if one studies *Firefly* (Whedon, 2005) as a feminist dystopia, both as a

television show and as a graphica narrative, River could be considered a young female character

that a repressive, patriarchal society fails (Sutherland & Swan, 2008). As a parallel, Donna

Haraway (2005) described science fiction's tendency to be critical of political and social issues

surrounding gender, and I believe these stories have implications for how women are treated in

our own society. At one of the MagiCon panels I attended this year pertaining to science fiction

Young Adult Literature, one of the panelists referred to dystopian literature as "social science

fiction." In my opinion, the tendency of YA dystopian literature to discuss issues related to

power and social justice is one reason why diverse female character representation is increasing

within this genre.

Over time, speculative fiction has had an increasing number of strong female

protagonists, particularly in YA dystopian novels. For instance, Marissa Meyer's *Lunar*

Chronicles novels feature fairy tale retellings that begins with "Cinder", an ethnically part-Asian

Cyborg who later discovers that she is related to the tyrannical Lunar Queen. The first novel

Cinder (2012) is a retelling of the traditional Cinderella story with the same basic plot elements,

only with a female protagonist who is the best mechanic in New Beijing and is willing to fight

both physically and emotionally for her desires and to save her people. She falls in love with

Prince Kai, yet he feels betrayed when he finds out about elements of her past, and Cinder finds

herself locked in prison at the end of the first novel. In follow up novels in the series, Cinder

escapes from prison and meets up with such characters as Little Red Riding hood, a.k.a.

"Scarlet," who help her in her quest to defeat the Lunar Queen. As a nontraditional woman with

queer attributes, Cinder serves as an example of a character that can be studied from queer and poststructural feminist lenses.

Although *The Lunar Chronicles* is one of the better-known dystopian and speculative fiction YA series that include strong female protagonists of color, others are beginning to get attention, such as Sherri L. Smith's (2014) *Orleans* and Alaya L. Johnson's (2014) *The Summer Prince.* In my opinion, speculative fiction is an ideal genre to explore issues related to gender, race, and politics because in imaginary worlds, the political climate can be thought of and imagined as better for people of minority race and gender, particularly in the futuristic worlds that dystopian, science fiction, and superhero stories posit for their readers. By making the setting an imaginary and/or futuristic world, writers can raise questions about equity and political issues in a way that may be safer than writing the setting in a realistic world, just as Bettelheim (2010) and Beach (1993) noted that children can do when reading and retelling fairy tales.

Additionally, the recent YA novel *The Young Elites* by Marie Lu (2014) takes place in a fantasy world of the past and has a strong female protagonist of color who has superhero powers as well as mutant-like traits similar to characters in the *X-Men* series. Adelina, the central character of Lu's (2014) captivating novel, must overcome the challenges of being a gifted female who is ostracized in a way that mimics how people with disabilities and mental health issues are sometimes treated in today's society. In these stories, very much like Marisa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles,* the authors are taking genres of fantasy and fairy tale that often have been more patriarchal in their portrayal of women and rewriting these stories with strong female protagonists.

In years past, many high fantasy stories have had male authors. However, some more recent comics and YA fantasy and fairy tale stories, such as the *Niobe* comics by Amanda

Stenberg and Sebastian A. Jones (2015), present shifts in this trend. The *Niobe* comics are high fantasy rather than urban fantasy because they are set in the past with mythic creatures (Goldschlager & Eros, 1997). However, they feature an African-American female protagonist charged with saving her kingdom. Interestingly enough, she is one of the only women of color who serves as a main character. Yet, the fate of her kingdom rests with her, so she has much of the power in the story.

Because of White European men previously being the primary writers of the fantasy genre, fantasy in particular is in a period of being re-written and re-examined as a genre, with an increase of diverse female protagonists and writers. Over time, I believe it will start to follow the trend of dystopian, science fiction, and comic superhero stories of becoming more inclusive. Some of my interviews for this study referenced the mixed reaction to the Hugo Award winners being more diverse this year. Although people sometimes tend to resist change, the current of change is continuing within speculative fiction and comics in terms of representation.

Closing Thoughts

Since the in-person and online affinity spaces of my study are feminist in nature and involve the study and writing of multimodal stories with diverse characters, the goals of this chapter were the following: to give the reader an understanding of the literature of study and the relationship of my analysis to feminist poststructuralist theory, to expand upon the understanding of Gee's (2004) affinity spaces, and to give the reader understanding of past and present fandom culture and how it affects the spaces of research study. Overall, this chapter also suggests, as power dynamics have begun to shift in terms of literary representation in the canon, more diverse multimodal literature inclusive of nuanced female protagonists will be studied, both within and beyond traditional school settings, joining the interpretive work I begin in this project.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the research design of my study, including an overview of my theory and methods, my participants, site selections, data collection processes, data analysis, and materials utilized. The research design for my study involved a combination of autoethnographic methods and narrative inquiry methods. My goal was to better understand the CONS and book clubs I studied from both my own perspective and from the perspective of participants of various backgrounds who experienced these events with me and to consider how we benefit from these affinity spaces.

As referenced in Chapter One, the **research questions** for this study were as follows:

- Given our identities and individual interests, how are participants' understanding/interpretations of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists influenced by literary events outside of traditional school settings, including CONS, bookshop events, and Fanfiction forums?

- What are the similarities and/or differences, if any, between the past and present literacy education experiences and the discussion interests of persons who participate in CON and bookstore discussions of diverse comics and YA speculative fiction, with empowered female protagonists?

- What role(s) do literacy events at CONs and bookshops play in fostering literacy education through discussions of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists?

The theoretical perspectives and concepts I utilized were feminist poststructuralism and affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), a concept within the theoretical realm of social semiotic spaces. These theoretical perspectives matched with the spaces I studied as well as the diverse multimodal texts of discussion, especially since the event participants and I often discuss issues related to gender performance and intersectionality and choose texts accordingly. As a participant-observer of the study, I obtained my own copies of these diverse texts and read them ahead of time to participate in the book club discussions. Similarly, when participating in CONS, I paid my own registration fees, covered such costs as hotel and per diem, and prepared ahead of time for specific activities (such as joining some costumed events or joining a panel discussion).

Within the realm of feminist poststructuralist theory, using analysis methods that Jackson and Mazzei (2012) outlined in detail in their book on qualitative research, I specifically considered Weedon's (1997) perspectives on the literary canon, Foucault's (1978/1979) viewpoints on the fluid state of power and its institutional constraints, Derridean perspectives on deconstruction and texts, and Butler's (1990) ideas on gender as a social construction. The data analysis section of this chapter will further explain how these research questions and theoretical perspectives also informed my data analysis of transcriptions and field notes, as I looked specifically for moments in the interview transcripts and field notes in which participants grappled with issues of power relationships, representation of gender, deconstruction of texts, and the literary canon. Conducive to the narrative research design of my study, I also found narrative arcs within the interview transcriptions.

Chapters Four and Five will give narrative vignettes of my participants and me that contributed to the answering of these research questions, after collecting data and conducting analysis. Also, Chapters Four and Five will detail the complex findings of my qualitative study,

with Chapter Four focusing on findings from my participant interviews and field notes and Chapter Five focusing on my autoethnographic findings. Chapter Six will review the research questions and explain in depth how they were answered throughout the course of the study, and also what implications the study has for educational settings.

For the data collection process, as further explained later in this chapter, I considered the theoretical implications carefully as I conducted my semi-structured interviews with an interview guide of questions, based on my research questions of the study and appropriated to my methodology, and analyzed my data, which were a combination of individual interviews, focus group interviews, field notes, photo artifacts, blogs, and fanfiction posts and commentary. My data collection period took place over a period of four months; having insider status within both of these spaces made it relatively easy for me to recruit participants for my study.

Autoethnographic Methods

The primary research methods I used in this study were autoethnographic. Autoethnography "is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I chose these methods because they give researchers an avenue to explore their personal connections and investments in "identities, experiences, relationships, and/or cultures," as these ideas can interrelate (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 15-16).

Additionally, as referenced in Chapter Two, these methods are appropriate for feminist qualitative researchers who wish to gather data through storied experiences and therefore utilize such avenues as interviews, blogs, and ethnographic field notes, rather than from numbers and statistics, and who value the importance of relationships with participants. Over time, the boundaries between autoethnography, autobiography, and memoir have blurred, along with the

techniques employed. However, the research-based focus on the self as related to a cultural group is what makes autoethnography distinct from creative nonfiction (Chang, 2008; Narayan, 2012).

In regard to the differences between autoethnography and creative nonfiction, Narayan (2012) stated, "Both creative nonfiction and ethnography mix stories and ideas, but creative nonfiction often highlights the storytelling, while conventional academic ethnography more closely follows disciplinary conventions for citation and argument, with more emphasis on engaging ideas" (p. 12-13). Between the two, Narayan (2012) suggested, are many possibilities, including autoethnography. For this project, I studied my participants and myself in relationship to "geek culture" (Jenkins, 2006; Konzach, 2006). Through this autoethnographic writing and the accompanying data collection experiences of this study, I was better able to understand my own relationship to geek culture, my passion for comics and speculative fiction that are discussed in the spaces I attend, and how these connections have helped me as a literacy educator and as a writer. Autoethnography, along with the additional methodology of narrative inquiry, allowed me to write and present my data in narrative form while still employing methods of social science researchers.

Autoethnography is a research approach "in which we as an author draw upon our own lived experiences, specifically in relation to the culture (and subcultures) of which we are a member" (Allen-Collinson, 2013, p. 283). Therefore, autoethnography has elements of postmodern ethnography and postmodern autobiography, which has advantages because autoethnographers do not have to put the groups they study in the object position (Allen-Collinson, 2013). For this study, I was also able to bring in past artifacts from CONS, book clubs, and online forums into my data analysis process, even though the data collection period

for obtaining field notes from interviews was over six months. Therefore, through my observations, field notes, and analysis of past blogs and artifacts, I was a participant-observer of this study in addition to a researcher, which is congruent with the feminist methods and philosophy I described in Chapter Two.

One rationale for utilizing narrative inquiry methods as well is to make sure I have other perceptions of the events and others' interactions besides my own, so my fellow participants of these events have a chance to let their voices be heard. On a related note, another factor I had to consider throughout the course of my study was how much self-disclosure I felt comfortable with invoking without doing psychological harm to myself (Allen-Collinson, 2013). Although I realize my privilege as a White middle class researcher may have affected the self-disclosure element of the study in relation to that of my participants, I strived to find a balance between professionalism and encouraging the trust of my participants during the interviews.

Narrative Inquiry Methods

My second research design for this study was narrative inquiry, in order to analyze the stories of other attendees of literary and pop culture events. Narrative inquiry is "the story of experience as a story" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13) and "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). Narrative inquiry, particularly autobiographical narrative inquiry, bears similarities to autoethnography (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry and autoethnography both often receive credit "with further legitimizing the subjective role of the researcher in the research process" and encourage qualitative researchers, particularly feminist qualitative researchers, to further consider "the form and quality of our writing" (Leavy, 2013, p. 33).

The intention of choosing this research design was to tell the stories of my participants' experiences at CONS, in addition to my own, as well as our participation in book clubs and within online communities, and to analyze these experiences through the perspectives of feminist poststructuralism and the social semiotic spaces known as affinity spaces. Since these research designs are both centered on storytelling, Chapters 4 and 5 will highlight the vignettes I use to represent my data, as well as the theoretical analysis that accompanies them.

Site Selections

My research is inclusive of texts and events that challenge gender binaries and texts with limited representation of females of color. Through encouraging these texts, Cloud Nine Bookshop, FantasyCon, and MagiCon as organizations, along with similar conventions and independent bookshops, are doing important work of expanding the literary canon to be more inclusive of works with diverse authors and characters, as congruent with feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1997). They serve as in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) at which participants can discuss topics of interest in spaces less structured than traditional school settings. By doing work in these circles, I learned what motivates people to attend these events and become engaged with the literature. I also learned about how and why participants select and remain engaged in particular online literacy communities linked to reading texts depicting diverse characters.

Cloud Nine Bookshop and Thick Description

One site for my research study was Cloud Nine Bookshop in a small southeastern university town. Over the past few years, I have attended the comics/graphic novel book club, the YA book club, and Star Wars book club, all of which take place at Cloud Nine Bookshop. Cloud Nine employees, most of whom are also writers, facilitated the book club meetings. The

meetings are comprised primarily of adult university employees and graduate students. Because of their topics and novel selections, the book clubs are indicative of "geek culture" (Jenkins, 2006; Konzach, 2006) and also of a YA literature culture typified by such authors as John Green and David Levithan.

Due to the interests of the book club attendees, many of the novels chosen for the YA book club during the time of my study are of the speculative fiction genre. Typically, the facilitator suggested books to the group and then let us as members vote on the book choice of the month. As aforementioned, my study specifically focused on the YA book club and the comics/graphic novel book club, in part because the *Star Wars* book club had discontinued prior to my data collection period.

I once heard a town resident describe Jane Jones, the Cloud Nine Bookshop owner, as a younger version of Meg Ryan. She was in her thirties during this study, and most of her employees were in their twenties. The bookshop sits on the outskirts of a downtown area of our small Southern university town, and it has the pleasant slightly musty, but nonetheless clean smell of your local library, along with pages and pages of books. The lighting of the bookshop gives it a warm feeling, and there's always someone to greet you at the front counter as you walk in.

To me, Cloud Nine Bookshop felt like "Cheers" during the time in which I lived in the small university town. For those of us "regulars" who frequently came to book club meetings and who buy books fairly often, there exists a feeling of familiarity that is reassuring in a sometimes demanding university atmosphere and a sometimes-harsh world. In books, after all, we can retreat, and we can have deep conversations about imaginary worlds. What this place seemed to offer some frequent patrons and book club attendees is a Utopia for readers, a place where we

can delve into our imagination. In hindsight, I realize that the bookshop did not have this familiarity for all who shopped there, but those of us who went to the book clubs regularly perceived it as a place of comfort. On Donald Trump's inauguration day, for example, the new shop (as a second shop opened in a different area of town during the course of my study) served homemade chocolate chip cookies, as they knew many of their patrons, including me, were unhappy on this day.

MagiCon and Thick Description

MagiCon was also a research site for my study. The YA track, the Whedon track, and the Pop Culture/Comics track at MagiCon annually have panels about diversity and gender issues within speculative fiction film and literature; the YA track and the Pop Culture/Comics track also have panels that include teaching ideas for educators, particularly on Monday. The YA track also has a yearly book club meeting some years. At these events, we discuss and analyze books, comics, television shows, and films. I connect on an emotional and intellectual level to the people who attend through these conversations. In fall 2016, during my study, I was invited to speak as a panelist on two panels, "Gender in YA Literature" on Friday and "Superpowered YA" on Saturday, both of which included published young adult literature authors.

I have been going to MagiCon since 2005, so this was my eleventh year at the event. Every year, it appears to gets more crowded. The hotel lobbies smell like a combination of food and body sweat from too close together bodies. Especially late at night, I always see the colors of costumes from many different worlds: men dressed in Batman suits with a well-defined six pack, women dressed like Wonder Woman fully clad with the red and white boots, Storm troopers, robots, even dinosaurs.

One of my favorite moments this year was right after the social event for the Young Adult Literature panelists, where I met two of my interview participants. I walked outside, and unlike the earlier years, the lobby was already packed to the brim with people who wanted to dance, as the whole atmosphere was very carnival-esque (Bakhtin, 1984). Three tall brown Dinosaurs were dancing to retro music, and I, clad in my Wonder Woman costume, danced along with them and got a picture of me clad in the middle of them. It was the happiest I had been in a long time.

Every time I go to the start of this convention, I feel like I am in an alternative universe that parallels the speculative fiction of study, where we can dress like fantasy characters and be the best versions of ourselves, almost as if we are narrating our own life stories differently for another world. This CON, or popular culture convention, is a celebration of literature, multimedia, popular culture, and fandom. Based on my observations and interviews, I also think it is a celebration of people who are on varying levels of counter culture feeling free to be who we really are, void of normal societal expectations. It is the celebratory nature akin to Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque theory, in addition to the intellectual conversations, that brings participants here, more so than the chance to talk about literature and popular culture with other people who love the same media.

FantasyCon and Thick Description

A final in-person research site for my study was FantasyCon, which was very similar to MagiCon, only smaller and specifically focused on magical fandoms. At this CON, two fellow creative writers and I presented a panel called "Problematic Faves," in which we discussed problematic characters (particularly females) in the *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandoms.

FantasyCon's set up looked like an adult version of Hogwarts School of Wizardry from the *Harry Potter* series. It took place in a hotel, similar to the MagiCon hotels, only significantly smaller. All of the panel rooms were on the same hallway, so it feels like the hallway of a school, whereas MagiCon always feels much more like a maze. Each panel room was adorned with a banner with a name paralleling magical fandom, such as "Wizard's Way."

In the middle of the hallway stood a table with a plastic case of marbles for each Hogwarts House: Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Slytherin. Each FantasyCon attendee designates oneself to a Hogwarts house and wears attire to match it. As a Ravenclaw (a member of the intellectual house), I wore grey pants, a navy shirt, and a Ravenclaw scarf. When we won points for answering questions correctly, we placed the prized marbles in our respective house cup, with the ultimate goal of our house winning the "house cup" competition at the end of the CON. If MagiCon is a carnival (Bakhtin, 1984), then FantasyCon is more like a day at a magical school, with a Yule Ball dance or a medieval music concert in the evening to celebrate a long day of intellectual rigor and discussion.

Fanfiction

An important aspect of my autoethnographic data collection was in writing and analyzing my own fanfiction. I had not written fanfiction prior to completing this study, but through my recent watching of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (Whedon, 1997), I developed an idea for a storyline to explore. Being involved with the fandom community through writing in the fanfiction affinity space gave me even more of an insider's view into a literacy community, similar to being a participant-observer of panels at MagiCon and FantasyCon. As a result, I was better able to participate in the conversations at panels and had more to offer during interview

conversations with participants who shared these panel discussions and writing experiences with me.

Since fanfiction writers do not reveal their names online, I was able to develop a new writing identity and to practice my creative writing narrative skills while interacting as a participant-observer within online forums, which would contribute to my autoethnographic experiences. As shown in my Chapter Four narrative vignettes, several of my interview participants made reference to fanfiction as a non-threatening way to improve their narrative writing skills, and I had the same experience.

Recently, more MagiCon panels have explored the way that women have been treated within geek communities, some of which originated in the fanfiction and fanzine world. Writing fanfiction therefore gave me personal experiences and additional context to my scholarly readings as well as to my interviews. Since fanfiction has implications for improving writing and creative thinking skills (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015), it is an important element to include when considering how practices within fandom communities can carry over into classroom settings.

Participants

My study included three in-person events, and it involved twenty-one total participants, all of who served as key informants and eighteen of who were involved in formal semi-structured focus groups or individual interviews. Appendix B outlines in detail information about the participants, including who was involved in what event. The ages of my participants ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties, and I made a concerted effort to recruit participants who had a variety of life experiences.

As recommended by IRB, I sent all participants an email explaining details about the study, and I asked each participant to respond to the email briefly to indicate that they

understood their rights as participants and the details of my study (see Appendix A). Since my

study was deemed as a "low risk" study by IRB, an email sufficed rather than signed

documentation. The sections below will specifically outline my recruitment process, but I made a

concerted effort to recruit participants who varied in gender representation, sexuality, and race

(see Appendix B). I used a semi-structured interview guide for both my individual interviews

and my focus group interviews (see Appendix C), all of which were scheduled in advance.

Because of my feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework, my participant profiles

will not include explicit references to the race, gender, and sexual orientation of my participants,

as all of these categories are social constructions that exist on a spectrum. However, it may be

useful for some readers to know such information about the participants, so as to understand their

backgrounds and how they responded to certain situations. Therefore, this information is

included in Appendix B of the dissertation as a reference point, based on how the participants

identify in the aforementioned categories. The Appendix also makes note of the participants'

ages, to show that I was mindful of recruiting a variety of age groups for the study, and also the

event(s) of my study in which they participated.

A few of my participants are fairly "high profile" within the fandom and/or literary

community because of their work as writers and/or speakers. Therefore, when writing these

descriptions, my intention is to provide enough information to give the reader a sense of their

relationship to the study, but not so much as to compromise their identities. The order in which I

write these profiles matches the order in which they are listed in the appendix. Each of these

participants was a part of my narrative of experiences within the in-person affinity spaces of

CONS and Cloud Nine book clubs.

Landis: Landis is a writer with a day job in the business world and has been involved with fandom since the 1970s. She has participated in MagiCon and also many other smaller local CONS in the Southeastern United States, as well as other areas of the country. In particular, she is interested in CONS that pertain to horror literature, since that is the genre of most of her fiction work. She has presented at CONS across the country about female representation in literature and film, and she and I presented together at a smaller local CON in January 2016 about this topic.

Leah: Like Landis, Leah has been involved with the fandom movement since the 1970s, and she was heavily involved with the fanzine movement that came before online fanfiction. She has retired from her day job due to health issues, but she still takes on freelance acting and writing roles within the film industry of our local small southeastern university town. Like Landis, Leah has presented on CON panels in the southeast United States and across the country on female representation in literature and films. She and I first met in January 2016 as well, when we presented on female superheroes at a local CON. She has been attending MagiCon on and off since the 1990s.

Jessica: This participant is heavily involved in the Black Girl Nerds online movement, which includes podcasts, an online website, and Twitter posts regarding the representation of female characters of color in fandom. As referenced in her Chapter 4 vignette, Jessica was asked to speak at Princeton about her role as a writer, speaker, and podcaster. She has been involved with fandom for many years and is passionate about fandom becoming more diverse and inclusive. I got connected to the Black Girls Movement via Twitter, since my IRB allowed me to do Internet research. After initially connecting on Twitter and getting email updates from Black Girl Nerds, I

reached out to Jessica over email to ask if she would be at MagiCon and would be interested in interviewing for my study. She was interested in my topic and agreed to an on-site interview.

Ansley: Ansley is a recently published YA author of two fantasy series and one standalone novel about a girl who deals with her anxiety issues within a fantasy world. This was her first year at MagiCon, and she and I met at the Thursday evening social gathering for YA panelists. In addition to panels related to YA literature, Ansley also presented at a panel related to the online YA community, including such online social media spaces as Twitter and Goodreads.

Becky: Like Ansley, Becky is a relatively new YA author who publishes within the fantasy/speculative fiction realm. Her novels are inclusive of strong, diverse female protagonists of color and also of varying sexual orientations. For her day job, Becky works with students of color in a large city, as part of a nonprofit organization, to help them learn how to best tell their stories while getting involved with the outdoors. This was her first MagiCon, and she loved the experience. Through following Becky on Facebook and Twitter since MagiCon, I know that she has been presenting at CONS across the country this year and that the YA novel I bought and read after MagiCon has won awards. She and I have made plans to meet up at the RT Booklovers convention in Atlanta in May 2018.

Bob: Bob is a high school teacher in the metropolitan Atlanta area who has been attending MagiCon on and off for several years and who is especially interested in the Comics and Pop Culture panels. He and I both have attended many panels related to comics and education in recent years, since we both have an interest in bringing comics into classroom settings. Much to my surprise, though, Bob said in his interview that he attends the comics panels as an aspiring artist and writer more so than as an educator, in terms of how he hopes to benefit from them. He

and I both are involved with National Writing Project work and have a vested interest in writing of all forms.

Alaina: Alaina was my neighbor many years ago, when I had just finished my undergraduate degree and was teaching high school in Peachtree City, Georgia. After no longer being neighbors, she and I reconnected at MagiCon 2006 and then unfortunately lost touch. Recently, we reconnected on Facebook, and I learned that she and her husband, as a writing team, have now published several YA speculative fiction books. They have a particular interest in stories of diverse characters and strong female protagonists. Alaina has a high school age stepson and a college age stepson, so she is also interested in speculative fiction as applied to educational settings. Therefore, when I asked her to be a part of my study, she gladly agreed. She attended my panel entitled "Superpowered YA," and then she and I went together to the YA panel book club meeting about Susan Dennard's (2016) novel *Truthwitch.* Afterwards, I interviewed her at the study onsite, and she had insightful knowledge to share about her writing process, in addition to the topics at hand.

Kevin: Kevin and his wife Mandy have been attending MagiCon most years since 2008 and consistently since 2011. He is a current Engineer and a former academic researcher of atmospheric sciences. Therefore, while his primary interests at MagiCon are those surrounding the hard sciences, he is also very interested in panels about writing, as they benefit him professionally. He also takes an interest in literary panels, such as Michael Crichton panels and the panel I presented on, "Gender in Young Adult Literature". He has a passion for video games and board games, and in addition to panels, he spends much of his time at CONS in gaming rooms with his friends, as he enjoys the social and intellectual aspects of gaming. I have known Kevin for years, so I know that when he first started attending MagiCon, he was very skeptical

about the cosplay aspect of it. Now, though, he and his wife Mandy are both very avid cosplayers

and spend months preparing costumes of their favorite characters in advance for MagiCon.

Tina: Tina has been attending MagiCon consistently since 2004, although she and I did not

become acquainted until we met at MagiCon 2015. Her day job is in the business world, but she

is also working toward a master's degree in poetry and is a published poet who has aspirations to

be a writer and/or professor. She is very passionate about the *Star Trek, Labyrinth,* and *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer fandoms and, like me, is an admirer of Joss Whedon's work. Tina also loves to

attend puppetry panels because of the creative elements of the puppetry arts. She finds panels

related to literature and writing helpful and attended my panel "Gender in YA Literature."

Mandy: Mandy is a psychiatrist by day and a fiction writer by night. She has aspirations of

eventually getting her YA fiction published, although in her interview, she was very insistent that

if her writing ever got published, it would be under a pen name different from her professional

name that people know her by. She has been involved with fandom since the 1990s, when she

was a teenager, and she is an avid contributor and commenter on the fanfiction site called

"Archive of Her Own." She is deeply passionate about writing and YA speculative fiction and

attends many related panels, including my "Gender and YA" panel at MagiCon 2016. She and

her husband Kevin have become avid cosplayers, and while she is not an avid video gamer, she

and Kevin enjoy playing board games with their group of friends at MagiCon. Additionally,

Mandy attends panels related to the *Star Trek* fandom, as this is an interest she gained from

spending time with her avid reader and scientist father while growing up.

Melinda: Melinda has attended MagiCon since 2009 and has a passion for the *Star Trek* fandom

and panels related to puppetry arts. She attended both my "Gender in YA" and "Superpowered

YA" because she has an interest in speculative fiction and also because she wanted to be a

supportive friend to me. I did not conduct a former interview with Melinda. Although she has a

vested interest in my topic as an African-American woman who loves fandom, she feels that

MagiCon is one of her only vacations throughout the year, and she therefore did not want to have

to do an interview related to intersectionality topics that she already feels like she delves into

every day, a stance which I understood. However, as known to her, I included her reflections and

our conversations in my field notes, so although she was not a formal participant, I valued her

thoughts and opinions, as shown in the "Jessica" vignette of chapter four.

Michelle: During Fall 2017, Michelle was interested in presenting panels on female

representation in literature, film, and fandom at FantasyCon 2016. Tina, as a mutual

acquaintance, connected the two of us. Michelle then "friended" me on Facebook and created a

private group for those of us potentially interested in presenting at FantasyCon 2016. I therefore

served as a co-presenter at one of her two panels, "Problematic Faves," at which we discussed

problematic characters in the *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandoms. Like me, she

is very interested in feminism and female representation in popular culture, although she does

not have a formal post-secondary education in these topics due to her family's background as

Jehovah's Witnesses who did not believe in higher education. However, in her interview,

Michelle discussed learning about these topics on her own, largely through the Internet. Her

responses showed depth and maturity that I found impressive for her young age of 25.

Rick: Rick is the only straight middle aged White male who regularly attends the book clubs that

I studied at Cloud Nine Bookshop, the comics/graphic novel book club and the YA literature

book club. I did not bring up those attributes for other participants due to reasons already stated

involving my theoretical framework, but in his case, I believed it to be worth noting because

Rick served as an outlier in this regard. Interestingly enough, when I first started going to the

comics and graphic novel book club about a year before this study started, the group was very male dominated. However, since the bookshop is located in a small suburban university town, the community is very transient, as are the book clubs. During my study, both groups became more female-dominated, which made Rick's perspectives unique. Additionally, Rick enjoys attending literary panels at MagiCon, particularly as related to comics and diversity issues. Rick attended my "Superpowered YA" panel at MagiCon, as it combined his interests in comics and Young Adult Literature.

Elizabeth: Elizabeth came to my "Gender in YA Literature" panel dressed as Barb from the television show *Stranger Things* (2016)*,* which seemed fitting because Barb is definitely a unique and nuanced female protagonist in the story. Elizabeth has been a part of the YA book club at Cloud Nine bookshop for a couple of years now. During the course of my study, she was the participant who recommended the novel *Shadowshaper* (2015) to the group because of the fantasy/speculative fiction element and the diverse characters. As elaborated on in her vignette in Chapter Four, she writes a blog about YA novels with asexual, gray-area, and demisexual characters, and she revealed to me at the end of the "Gender and YA Literature" panel that she herself is asexual. As noted in her interview and vignette, she never discussed her asexuality with the whole group at the YA book club, but felt that it would be okay for her to do so, if the topic came up.

Kara: Kara was a participant who was fairly new to the YA book club at Cloud Nine Bookshop. As noted in her interview and vignette, she joined this book club in part for social reasons, as she wanted to meet new people in our college town area, and in part for professional reasons, as she is a librarian who wanted to learn more about diverse children's and YA literature. In both her interview and at one of our book club sessions that I attended and about which took notes

afterwards, Kara talked passionately about the need for more chronically ill characters in children's and YA literature. She was diagnosed with Celiac's disease in college and wishes that more books would describe the ongoing struggle of a chronic illness, in line with several YA books that do discuss terminal illnesses, such as John Green's (2012) *The Fault in Our Stars.*

Ellen: Ellen is a former secondary level ELA teacher who, more recently, has taken a job in the technology field and has pursued higher education. She was one of the older book club participants, so her perceptions of the book club environment at Cloud Nine were very astute, as she was the only participant who directly referred to the lack of representation of people of color in the YA book club at Cloud Nine. She also had passionate tales to tell about how her family, libraries, conferences, and school educational experiences contributed to her literacy development, and she was the only participant who directly referenced formal schooling as indicative of her interest in children's and YA literature.

Terra: Terra is a master's degree student who finished her degree not long after the study completed and spent the 2016-2017 school year student teaching in a local elementary school. Although she has not attended MagiCon up to this point, she has considered it, and she has been to smaller CONS in the Southeast US. She is a regular attendee of the comics/graphic novel book club at Cloud Nine and therefore offered valuable insight into bringing comics into the classroom, as well as female interactions within fandom communities. She talked about "coming out" as a feminist, which I found interesting.

Bruce: Bruce began attending the Cloud Nine bookshop YA book club in August 2013, at the same time as me, when I first moved back to our college town to pursue my PhD work. Until this study, though, I had never spoken to him at all outside of book club, so our focus group interview with Julia and Allen gave me an opportunity to get to know him better. As referenced

by the interview with Rick and Elizabeth, Bruce "came out" to the group as genderqueer in May 2016 at our YA book club meeting, and people thought he was brave to do so. He noted that because many of the books we read at Cloud Nine relate to characters of alternative sexualities and gender representations, it seemed an apt place to have the conversations. At the referenced book club meeting, he noted feeling happier since being able to express his fluid gender identity. In his interview, he discussed his interest in both comics and YA literature, although both he and Julia believe that comics have been more legitimized than YA literature.

Julia: Like many frequent shoppers and book club community members of the Cloud Nine bookshop, Julia recently received her undergraduate degree in English at our local university. She came to book club because she wanted a structured place at which she could discuss literature, since she works at the alumni office in public relations and is not currently taking graduate level classes, although she has aspirations to do so. Additionally, she found it harder to make friends who were adults in our university town than when she was a student, which was another motivation to attend book club, although she has also made new friends through her local running club. The book clubs she attends on a regular basis are the YA literature book club and the Classics book club, although she occasionally attends the comics/graphic novel book club and the paperback fiction book club when the books interest her and made occasional appearances at the *Star Wars* book club when it still existed. She and I have met informally a couple of times, not for the study, at coffee shops to discuss the comics we have been reading. Through book club interactions, we have discovered that our political beliefs are very similar and have attended two protests together, one anti-hate rally a few days after the election results were announced and one protest of Donald Trump's immigration ban.

Curt: Curt is the facilitator of the comics and graphic novel book club at Cloud Nine bookshop and a soon-to-be published author as well, working with the same editor as Allen. Although I did not conduct a formal interview with Curt due to constraints of his schedule, he and I had a fairly brief, but very helpful informal conversation after a book club meeting that gave me insight for my autoethnography reflections in Chapter Five. Curt has a vast knowledge of the technique of comics and graphic novels that he was able to share with book club attendees, and we often talked about the writing and artistic process in addition to the specific books of study.

Allen: Like three of my other participants, Allen is a published writer of Young Adult Literature, in addition to being a part-time employee at Cloud Nine bookshop. During the course of my study, he was the facilitator of the Young Adult literature book club, although he had to give that role up soon after my data collection period due to other responsibilities he was juggling. He is passionate about YA literature and exposing people to diverse literature, and his first published novel is about a high school aged student who slowly "comes out" to family members and friends as gay while living in a small town of the Deep South. He came to the focus group meeting with Julia and Bruce after one of our YA book club sessions, although he had to be late due to bookshop responsibilities. Much of his part of the conversation involved the timelessness of YA literature and the way it connects people because of our common "coming of age" experiences during that time of life, such as first love and separation from immediate family.

Data Collection

According to Mulcahy (2015), data collection for autoethnography and other forms of evocative inquiry, such as narrative inquiry, can include the following: individual interviews; reflexive, dyadic interviews, which includes the "interviewer's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, alongside the interviewee's words, stories, and interpretations" (p. 262); interactive

interviewing, in which "all those participating act as both researcher and participant" (p. 263) and that involve the prompting of the topic of conversation rather than a structured interview guide; focus group interviews, which are also used for case studies and that involve individuals who know each other and a semi- structured interview guide in which the researcher acts as a facilitator; and elicitation methods, in which the researcher asks the participants to bring an artifact and to share stories about memories it elicits.

Many data collection methods that Mulcahy (2015) describes were appropriate for my study, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, interactive interviews, reflexive interviews (including my thoughts and recordings taken immediately after the interviews), and the examination of my personal artifacts, such as photographs and blog posts. Because of my involvement with my sites of study and the autoethnography methods, most of my interview participants were people with whom I was already acquainted, although I also interviewed participants whom I met at the CON this past year and/or with whom I interacted online before the CON. In addition to interviews, I collected data through ethnographic field notes at the events I attended (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Mulcahy, 2011). Also, as previously noted, my fanfiction writing experiences gave me field notes based on the feedback I received from others, as well as conversation momentum with my interviewees.

MagiCon has been a literary home for me since 2005. Cloud Nine Bookshop has only been my literary home for the past three years since I moved back to our university town, but it has been an important community space for me and for many others. FantasyCon has only been a part of my life for the past year since being a part of this study, but it has many parallels to MagiCon for me. Plus, from the perspective of a researcher and literacy educator, FantasyCon served as a way for me to carve out my literary and scholarly identity in a new CON place. I

chose these sites for research because I believe in doing fieldwork in my literary "growing-up places" past and present (Pratt, 1984, p. 17; St. Pierre, 1997, p. 366). Fanfiction, although an online home, had elements of a growing-up place for me because I grew as a writer and could also write about characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), a show that reminded me of my own high school years.

For narrative inquiry accounts, data are collected through "listening to individuals tell their stories and living alongside participants as they live and tell their stories" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 45), both of which are activities I engaged in for the purposes of this study. This space for common experience between the researcher and the participant is known as the *field,* and it draws upon Richardson's (1997) idea of *fields of play.* Artifacts can be used as triggers, yet the field texts (the narrative inquiry term for data) are "composed, or co-composed, by researchers and participants" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 46), because participants are in the midst of researchers' lives and vice versa. The goal behind narrative inquiry is to learn how the participants' lived experiences contribute to a narrative that gives the researcher valuable information about a topic, which can include a situation in which the researcher is involved, as was the case with my study.

The stories of my participants, who experienced these events along with me, proved to be imperative in answering my research questions. When writing research through narrative inquiry, the concepts of temporality, sociality, and place become important (Clandinin, 2013), and all of these concepts were pertinent to my study. Therefore, the initial step in my analysis process was finding the sections of my interview transcriptions in which my participants grappled with power issues, deconstructed perspectives on the literary canon, considered gender roles, and/or explained the role of affinity spaces.

Another important part of my analysis process was constructing these interviews into storied experiences indicative of my theory and research questions, while also allowing their narrative vignettes to tell their stories as readers and as consumers of popular culture. Therefore, during the later parts of the analysis process, it was important for me to discover the narrative arcs within the transcripts, the moments in which the participants showed their growth through their interactions with these affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) and the follow-up discussions.

The sections below will provide details and explanation about who I chose to interview as related to each of the events, why I felt their insight was pertinent to my study, and how I went about the logistics of the interview. As aforementioned, Appendix B provides more details about each of the participants, in addition to the "Participants" section earlier in the chapter.

Data Collection Methods at MagiCon

At MagiCon, my data collection began very early upon arriving. On Thursday night, because I was one of the Young Adult Literature panelists, I was invited to a small, informal social event for people who were involved with the track. Several months before the CON, in Spring 2016, I was invited to speak at the YA literature panels and obtained permission to both take field notes and recruit research project participants at these events because I have know the track director for several years both professionally and personally. Also, since I have attended MagiCon since 2005, many of the track directors, panelists and frequent attendees know who I am. This insider knowledge made it easier for me to establish trust and to meet participants for my study.

Not long after arriving at the YA panelist social event, I got into an intense conversation with two panelists, both of whom were YA speculative fiction novelists, about being female writers and about representation issues. Our main conversation points were about the limited

representation of mental health issues in Young Adult Literature, since all three of us have had mental health issues at various points of our lives. Yet since one of the two authors is also Asian American and runs writing programs for students of color in her home state, the conversation eventually turned to representation on a broader level.

Both women have books out with diverse and empowered female protagonists, which they planned to discuss at MagiCon. I told them about my study, and they were very interested. We exchanged business cards and agreed to talk in more depth after the CON, as their schedules were very full and did not allow time for a more formal interview at the event itself. However, in my researcher's journal, I made notes about our informal conversation points. I was pleasantly surprised that these women were so willing to be open with me after I had first met them. I suspect that the shared interest of our feminist affinity space contributed us to connecting very quickly.

Throughout the panels I attended at MagiCon, as related to comics, YA literature, and fanfiction in particular, I took extensive field notes in my hand-written journal. Since several of the YA literature panels pertained directly to my research topic, I asked questions, along with other audience members, even though I am usually the kind of person who stays quiet in such gatherings. The YA track director knew about my research project, but at all panels I attended, I still did not want to seem too obvious as a researcher. Therefore, I wrote in a hand journal rather than typing notes at my computer, and I wore costumes and nerdy t-shirts to the events, in part to blend in, and in part because I wanted to be a true insider within my research environment and to interact as a participant-observer.

For two panels in particular at MagiCon, I had a participant-observer role because I was one of the speakers, specifically at the "Superpowered YA" panel and the "Gender in YA

Literature" panel. Speaking at panels gave me a unique opportunity to serve as a facilitator, in addition to a participant, and to have more of a leadership role. Since Melinda attended both of my panels, I conferred with her later in the evening at our hotel room to see if her perceptions of the event matched mine, and I wrote down both my personal observations and her reflections about the panels in my researcher's journal. She added key insights during our informal conversations.

I had a particularly impactful experience at the end of my "Gender in YA Literature" panel. One frequent Cloud Nine Bookshop book club participant attended, in part because she saw my Facebook post about the panel. Afterwards, she came and spoke to me, dressed as Barb from the well-known show *Stranger Things* (2016). I was dressed as Rey from the newest *Star Wars* movie, and this was the first year I had a costume professionally made for me prior to MagiCon. She revealed to me that she is an asexual person and that she was particularly moved by the part of the panel at which a transgendered/non gender conforming person revealed frustration at not feeling represented in YA literature.

Elizabeth told me that she keeps a blog about YA literature with representation of asexual and demisexual characters. I asked her to send it to me, and she said she would. Eventually, I interviewed Elizabeth and our friend Rick in a focus group setting after book club, as Rick attended my Superpowered YA panel. Both Elizabeth and Rick attend MagiCon as well as the YA literature book club at Cloud Nine bookshop, and I felt their focus group interview would provide valuable insight as to how the two events both compared and contrasted to each other.

Right after the "Gender in YA Literature" panel, I had dinner with a group of acquaintances that came to my panel and were interested. After a more informal conversation at dinner about the content of my panel, about which I took notes in my researcher's journal,

Kevin, Tina, and Mandy agreed to a focus group interview. Due to logistics and prior

commitments, we were not able to meet for the more structured interview at the CON, but the

four of us met a week later offsite in Atlanta as a focus group to further discuss the panel and the

representation issues in the literature. For each interviewee, once they agreed to speak with me, I

sent them the official consent email in advance, to which they responded with their consent.

Jessica from Black Girl Nerds was the first interview I completed on-site at MagiCon,

and we met up in one of the hotel lobbies. She had attended one of the same panels as I had

related to female representation in comics, so we had an insightful conversation about the

intersectionality issues discussed at the panel and where some of the gaps still remain in terms of

representation. My second on-site interview was with the YA author Alaina. She had come to my

Superpowered YA panel because her teenage sons are interested in this topic, and then the two of

us went to the YA book club session together based on Susan Dennard's (2016) book

Truthwitch. Afterwards, we had dinner together, during which I conducted my interview.

One my interviews related to MagiCon actually occurred a week prior to event. I have

two acquaintances in their sixties, Landis and Leah, who were involved with fandom and female

representation starting in the 1970s with fanzines, fanfiction, and the writing of female stories in

science fiction and fantasy. As mentioned in their profiles, we first met because we served on a

panel together regarding the representation of women in superhero stories at a smaller CON

close to our university town, and since then, we have met occasionally for coffee to catch up and

to talk about our writing and speaking endeavors related to feminism.

Landis and Leah have been to many CONS over the years, including MagiCon, and have

seen them evolve and change over the years. They had planned to attend MagiCon this year, but

they were not able to because of extended family needs. They were disappointed to miss my

panels, but I told them about the experience in November, when we met more informally over coffee at Barnes and Noble to talk about books. Over the summer, at another more informal meeting, they showed me some of the fanzines they worked on during the 1970s. When I contacted Landis toward the end of the study to ask a follow-up question about her interview, she suggested that I come to their house or meet them for coffee this summer to look at some of their collector's books related to women in fandom, which I thought was a kind offer.

Landis and Leah attended MagiCon in the nineties, when it had a different name, and are very knowledgeable about female representation in speculative fiction and comics. Therefore, I thought their perspectives would be valuable, and I conducted a semi-structured interview with them at a coffee shop in August 2017. They had insightful thoughts about representation, as writers who were involved with early fanzine movements. Another off-site interview related to MagiCon was with Bob, the high school teacher who attends the comics/graphic novels panels.

Data Collection at Cloud Nine Bookshop

At Cloud Nine Bookshop, I attended a total of four Young Adult Literature book club sessions and four comics/graphic novel book club sessions from the time period of September 2016-January 2017. Because I wanted to be fully present and involved in the book club conversations as a participant-observer, I did not take notes during the book club sessions. The book club participants and the facilitators, along with the bookshop owner, were aware that I was using the book clubs for research purposes, but I did not want to stand out by taking notes at the sessions themselves. I did, however, take field notes immediately after these events, and these notes included objective descriptions of what happened at the bookshop along with my personal reflections, conducive to autoethnographic methods.

Early on in the study, after speaking to Allen and Curt about it first, I told the participants of the book clubs about my study and asked who would be interested in participating in individual or focus group interviews. Several participants enthusiastically agreed, and I got their contact information at the end of book club, if I was not already connected to them via social media, to schedule interviews before and after book club meetings. I interviewed two participants of both MagiCon and Cloud Nine Bookshop book clubs (Elizabeth and Rick together), three participants individually (Ellen, Terra, and Kara), and one focus group of three book club participants, which included Julia, Allen, and Bruce.

The focus group settings worked out well because Elizabeth and Rick could discuss both their MagiCon and bookshop experiences, since they attended both events. Plus, Rick was the more outgoing of the two participants and helped draw responses out of Elizabeth. Julia, Allen, and Bruce all three are fairly reserved people one-on-one, but they responded well to the small group interview setting. Also, for both focus group settings, meeting immediately after the book club session was helpful because the previous meeting helped to generate conversations.

As previously mentioned, with the exception of one, all of the bookshop interviews took place either immediately before or immediately after book club, so I could write additional reflections of the interview afterwards, along with my field notes about the book clubs themselves. One interview had to take place mid-day on a non-book club day due to the scheduling constraints of the participant, but I was still able to take reflective field notes immediately afterwards. As was the case with the MagiCon interviews, when deciding between individual interviews and focus group interviews, I took into account scheduling issues and also how participants would interact with each other, in terms of interests and personalities.

Data Collection at FantasyCon

At FantasyCon, I was invited to be on a panel called "Problematic Faves," at which my fellow panelists and I discussed problematic characters from two of our favorite fandoms, *Harry Potter* and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* universe. Through the dialogue at this panel, Saturday morning at 10:00 a.m., I was able to be a participant-observer and to take field notes afterwards. I messaged one of the organizers ahead of time, after Michelle connected me to him, but initially did not receive a response and had to follow up at a later date. Therefore, I received permission from the convention organizers late, so I did not schedule any interviews ahead of time. However, I knew that because my study was deemed "low risk" by the UGA IRB organizers, I was able to take field notes and write about my experiences regardless of permission. Therefore, I took extensive field notes at the panels as well as added reflections afterwards. At a later date, I scheduled an interview with Michelle, one of my co-panelists.

At FantasyCon, I focused on the panels pertinent to literature, writing, and female representation. The panels that were most helpful to my study were the one at which I presented, the "Women in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fandom" panel, the "Creators versus Consumers" panel, and the "Writing Magic Right" panel. I went to a panel entitled "History of Magic in Comics" hoping to receive pertinent data, but was disappointed to hear that the panel focused in large part on male figures in comics over the years. I took field notes at this panel, but they were not as extensive as the ones I took at past panels. However, I went to the *Stranger Things* (2016) panel mainly out of my own interest and was pleasantly surprised to hear intriguing conversations about the representation of female characters.

I also attended two *Harry Potter* panels by a renowned scholar on this topic. Although these panels did not focus as much on diversity issues, they were helpful in giving me

realizations about why people are drawn to literature and fandom events, and why such events are appealing to people. At these panels, I gathered data pertinent to my dissertation as well as to future studies related to fandom. Michelle's interview after FantasyCon provided insight into female representation and how the Internet has led these affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) to change over time.

Fanfiction Writing

As previously noted, in addition to spending time at these in-person affinity spaces, I also collected data through a fanfiction site at which I participated known as *Twisting the Hellmouth.* One story I posted was a crossover story between the fandoms of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Lost,* both of which have diverse and nuanced female protagonists, who made their way into my stories. Specifically, my female protagonists were Willow, a bisexual Jewish Witch; Ana Lucia, a Latin@ woman who was also bisexual for the purpose of my story; and Claire, an Australian woman. In this story, Oz and Willow re-connect after years apart and after having relationships with Claire and Ana Lucia from *Lost,* respectively. Oz and Willow reviving their romance is not an idea that some *Buffy* fans agree with, comments I received on the story were still mostly positive.

I also posted my story chapters on the online sites Livejournal and Fanfiction and got a couple of high marks (10/10) on my story from Fanfiction, but I got very little specific feedback. However, the feedback from commenters with screen names on *Twisting the Hellmouth* was worthy of attention, perhaps because *Twisting the Hellmouth* is a site of fanfiction specifically related to the Buffy fandom, and the readers were therefore more invested in my story.

As part of the reflection process, I also wrote a story that took place in Sunnydale, California, only one mostly comprised of characters of my own creation: *Sunnydale High School*

Revisited: A New Slayer? I created new characters upon the suggestion of Landis and Leah, who read my first story and enjoyed it, yet felt I was ready in my maturity level as a writer to experiment with characters of my own. In the story, a few of the original characters from the *Buffy* television show have minor roles, but most of the characters are new, current characters. This seemed to initially cause confusion for some readers, so I clarified some time points upon revising the story. The feedback I got on these story chapters was less positive than my first story, but still helpful and constructive as I moved forward to complete it. For me, this story was a form of catharsis in working through personal issues, in addition to writing practice and a chance to interact with fans. "Slaying vampires" became an extended metaphor for overcoming the hardships of my adolescent years.

Data Analysis

Chang (2008) noted that with an autoethnographic study, data collection continues along with data analysis and interpretation processes, in order to fill in the gaps and enrich the data. Autoethnographic analysis and interpretation "involve shifting…attention back and forth between self and others, the personal and the social context" (Chang, 2008, p. 125). Chang (2008) also stated that an important step in analyzing autoethnographic data is looking for cultural themes, as ethnographers do. Another part of the data analysis, along with the interpretation, is the writing process itself, or writing as a mode of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; St. Pierre, 1997).

With these ideas in mind, my data analysis process was as follows, although not all of the process was entirely linear, as congruent with aforementioned poststructural theoretical ideas and autoethnographic and narrative inquiry methods. I transcribed my field notes and my reflections on both MagiCon and FantasyCon from my hand-written journals into Word files. During this

process, I moved out my own autoethnographic thoughts into separate Microsoft Word files from all three in-person events that I studied. After my interviews were transcribed, I listened to them again and, when appropriate, added to the reflections I wrote down immediately after the interviews took place.

The process of completing the transcriptions and checking them for accuracy gave me a sense of repeated ideas that emerged from my data as related to my theories and research questions. To have a more thorough understanding of my data, I read through the following documents to better understand the repeating ideas, as a first step of discovering my findings: my interview transcriptions, reflections of the interviews, my typed-up field notes and reflections from all three in-person events of study (which included four days' worth of panels at MagiCon, three days of panels and events at FantasyCon, four graphic novel book club meetings at Cloud Nine, and four YA book club meetings at Cloud Nine), my pictures and blogs from MagiCon and Cloud Nine literary events past and present, and the feedback I received on my Fanfiction stories (as previously described). I also added reflections on the past events that I described in my blogs to expand upon my autoethnographic thoughts, so I would better understand how I have grown as a result of these events.

As I read through these transcripts for the early data analysis, I paid attention to repeated ideas and language patterns, such as words and phrases that came up repeatedly. While keeping my research questions in mind, I made a list of repeated themes and participant input that emerged from my first readings of the data. This inductive process helped me in the later phases of data analysis, as specifically related to poststructural theory. In addition to my written blogs that I read for my analysis, I paid careful attention to the photos within these blogs, particularly of the costumes, to help jog my memory. During this process, I considered how the costumes, in

addition to the books and comics we discussed at these fandom events, served as texts and were indicative of the passion we expressed at these in-person affinity spaces. As a scholar who is interested in multimodality, I felt the images of the costumes, like the images of comics and films, were indicative of important ideas as related to the embodiment of the characters in the stories we studied in the CON spaces. I made notations in my notes about how the costumes related to the themes, participant responses, repeated ideas, and repeated words and phrases that emerged from the data.

As the next steps in my process, I read through all aforementioned documents again and looked for moments specifically related to Foucault's (1979) ideas on power, Butler's (1990) ideas of gender as a social construction, and Derrida's (1967) ideas on deconstruction, a process aforementioned in the literature review and that I will further outline in the next paragraph. When this process was complete, including thorough highlighting and notating based on the theoretical ideas aforementioned, I read through the documents again, focusing most heavily on the theoretical notations, ideas pertaining to the research questions, and storied experiences through which I could derive a narrative arc, as congruent with narrative inquiry processes. It is through this process that I was able to derive and write my narrative vignettes for Chapter Four based on my participants' experiences and for Chapter Five based on my own experiences.

In these proceeding paragraphs, I will highlight in more detail the process of analysis that took place during and after data collection as related to theory, since the processes are often interwoven with narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). As aforementioned, to collect data, I took field notes in my written notebooks, so as to better blend in with my surroundings. As I transcribed the field notes into word documents, I recorded my own reflections on the field notes, as well as my thoughts on what the participants were saying in the context to the settings.

The resulting interim research texts were "often partial texts that are open to allow participants and researchers opportunities to further composed storied interpretations" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 12.)

Therefore, like St. Pierre's (1997) asides, the data collection and data analysis processes were not always linear. The interim research texts "are ways to make sense of multiple and diverse field texts" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 49), yet the final outcome is a traditional academic publication. The overlap between the narrative inquiry and autoethnographic processes is that writing texts are part of the data collection and data analysis process, and eventually, they become more formal texts of interpretation paired with more informal accounts, or vignettes, which will be shown in my analysis chapters.

At a deeper level of analysis, after reviewing all musings I did at various levels of the writing process and the notes I took on repeated themes, texts, and ideas, I looked even more specifically at how my field notes and interviews related to my theoretical framework and research questions, as congruent with qualitative work. In particular, I looked for pivotal moments at which I and/or my participants deconstructed texts, written or otherwise, and when we discussed issues of power inherent in literature and its accompanying events.

Congruent with my primary theory of feminist poststructuralism and Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) work involving data analysis in poststructural ways, the primary theoretical concepts I utilized to better understand my transcriptions and notes were those of Foucault, Derrida, and Butler, all of which helped me to better understand the meaning behind my data. Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) method of focusing the analysis on theoretical concepts is meant to be a qualitative approach that is unique and catered to poststructural research.

For the theoretical part of the analysis, I followed the process of Jackson and Mazzei (2012), who noted the following about their data analysis methods as related to the Foucauldian theories described in Chapter Two: "We followed Foucault and, rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, we looked to the data and analyzed power relations as something that circulates within and among the practices of people" (p. 56).

When a researcher analyzes data from a poststructuralist perspective, one does not use codes or specific categories, as these methods of analysis are not congruent with the theory. Rather, one makes notations about the moments within the data that align with the theory, in order to better derive meaning from the data. Appendix D gives a specific example of a transcript and shows the raw data with my processes. For instance, as related to Foucault's (1978/1979) theories, I looked for parts of the transcripts in which my participants inquired about power relationships within texts: who has power, when do those moments shift, and did they ever have moments in which they had misconceptions about who had power in the situation. In my study, power played an important role in which characters and writers are represented and which ones still do not have a voice.

The participant in the transcript I referenced below, Michelle, made several references to fandom and its accompanying texts becoming more inclusive and diverse over time, particularly since the rise of the Internet, in part because fans feel more empowered to ask for characters who represent her. Therefore, as I read her transcript, I notated moments as related to this shift in power and to this noticing of increased diversity within fandom texts. These ideas that emerged, as related to power and diversifying the literary canon, helped me to construct the vignette of my interview with Michelle, which related to my research questions and also provided important

insight about the role of both in-person and online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) in deconstructing and changing the literary canon.

When analyzing their interviews with Derrida's theoretical ideas in mind, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) noted the following: "it is not just that deconstruction happens which is important in our attempts to make sense, it is what happens as a result of the deconstructive event. In other words, what is produced by the event that is deconstruction? Where are the places in the narratives in which sentences and their words lead elsewhere than the place we were expecting them" (p. 23). Specifically, they provided an example of an interview with their participant known as Cassandra and explained that "such questioning leads us to re-read the data, not in order to pin down what is relevant to creating the trajectory of Cassandra's career, but to seek a reading that endeavors to understand the moments of deconstruction and what these moments produce" (p. 23). In other words, after a participant deconstructs a text and/or an aspect of their experience, it is important to note how this instance has changed the person, or provided an important shift in thinking.

As aforementioned in the literature review, for Derrida, "there is nothing outside the text. We can think of a text literally in the form of transcripts and books, but to limit the 'text' to these spoken or written words is to limit our understanding of what *counts* as data" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, at a deeper level of analysis, I re-read the transcripts to also consider what the participants noticed about texts according to Derrida's definition noted in Chapter Two and about how the literary canon and literary events are being deconstructed.

My participants, like those of Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) study, also troubled and discussed identity categories. When considering Judith Butler's ideologies, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) noted the following: "Butler explains that, as sites of trouble, identity categories are

normative (and troubling) because they attempt to regulate people...or calling an individual that

initiates her into subjected status and therefore into 'a certain order of social existence'" (p. 74;

Butler, 1993). There were moments in my transcriptions in which my participants acknowledged

that some people find labels helpful for seeing parallel experiences, yet they also acknowledged

that identity labels could be confining and problematic. Therefore, such moments had an impact

on the parts of the narratives of my participants I chose for my vignettes because such

conversations are pertinent to discussions of diversity.

Although Jackson and Mazzei (2012) did not specifically discuss in their book the

analysis of data with the concept of Gee's (2004) affinity spaces, I also highlighted and notated

parts of the transcript that pertained to this concept, as it relates to my conceptual framework, my

research questions, and my findings. Additionally, as discussed in my literature review, the ideas

of Bakhtin's (1984) carnival theory and Rebekah Williams's (2015) self-identity through

narrative in post-object fandom tie into some of the poststructural thoughts I explored, so I

reference those in my analyses of the vignettes as well, using the same techniques that Jackson

and Mazzei (2012) employed of relating analysis directly to theory, in order to derive meaning

and to make discoveries related to research questions.

After reading through the transcripts and making notations and highlights on theoretical

pivotal moments, I read through them again to consider how these key moments within the

interviews created a narrative arc for the experiences of my participants. Appendix D shows one

specific example with my notations related to this process. My next step was to create vignettes

based on our storied experiences with more theoretical, academic analysis embedded within the

vignettes. As Chapter Four will further explain, I stayed as true to my participants' words as

possible and did not alter any of their statements and details. I did, however, have to take

grammatical structures and sentence flow into account when constructing the vignettes, which include the most important moments of their interviews as related to the theories and questions of my study. Their vignettes, therefore, are what best represent their answers to my interview questions, which were written in relationship to my research questions and to my theoretical framework.

As the data analysis process of narrative methods is not always linear, creating my and my participants' storied experiences was a part of the analysis process, as I focused on the parts of the interviews and notes that were pertinent to my theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The language of the vignettes is intentionally more informal, as reflective of our storied experiences. Yet the academic analysis in Chapters 4 and 5 is intended to be more formal and to help the reader understand how the stories relate to my theoretical understandings and research questions. As I constructed the vignettes and wrote my academic analysis of them, the data analysis process thus continued, as it is more non-linear with poststructural research practices.

Analysis of Fanfiction

Another crucial aspect of my analysis was the writing of my own fanfiction stories. I undertook this role, as previously stated, to better understand this aspect of fandom and writing with which I had been unfamiliar with previously. The fanfiction writing fulfilled both of these purposes, yet it also made me aware of an additional element of fanfiction, the opportunity to explore your own stories behind a separate writing identity. Several of my interview participants made reference to this aspect of fanfiction writing, and I experienced it myself through my own storied experiences.

Through the writing of my fanfiction stories One *Year Away from 30: Willow and Oz Reunited in San Francisco, CA* and *Sunnydale High School Revisited: A New Slayer?* I was able

to explore issues from past romantic relationships and insecurities from childhood and early

adulthood that I thought I had buried. Had I not been posting this writing under the guise of a

fanfiction user name, which only select people knew about, I would have felt vulnerable my own

truth. Particularly with the story about Willow and Oz, I was utilizing characters created by Joss

Whedon, not by myself. However, though these fictional characters, I created a narrative that

helped me come to terms with my own past.

In the *Sunnydale High School Revisited* story, the current vampire slayer Rachel was a

semi-autobiographical character of me. Through Rachel, I was able to slay vampires, literally in

the story yet metaphorically within my psyche. Also, I was better able to come to terms with the

impact that my high school jaw surgery had on my life. Had Joss Whedon not created the

original series in the late '90s, my own high school years, with nuanced and strong female

protagonists, I would not have had the opportunity years later to re-visit my own buried teenage

and young adult drama vicariously through these characters. My story bears witness to an idea

that came up in some of my participants' interviews: fanfiction gives women and other

marginalized writers a voice.

In addition to going through the fanfiction writing process, I also did a Foucauldian and

Derridean analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) of the feedback I got on my fanfiction stories. By

writing fanfiction, I deconstructed former notions of how the stories of my fandom should be

told, and I also gave my female characters more power. Because we are behind the pseudonyms

of fanfiction, many of the power dynamics of in-person exchanges are at least less apparent

because we are unaware of each other's race, socioeconomic class, gender performance, and

other traditional markings of identity.

There are power dynamics that can result from some writers being more experienced than others and some writers having more status within fandom writing communities than others, due to their more extensive knowledge of the fandom and experiences interacting on the forum. However, elements of identity that can lead to oppression do not exist in fandom writing communities, which is part of why female writers and other writers who are sometimes marginalized tend to gravitate toward this writing forum and why it is an online affinity space (Gee, 2004). The suggestions I received were helpful in improving my narrative writing skills and in making me feel like more of an insider within the community.

As a specific example, the following is an exchange that I found especially helpful and pertinent:

Review of story "One Year Away from 30: Willow and Oz Reunite", chapter "Chapter Seven: Oz" from Cordyfan

Review:

A nice little story. Unlike a lot of fans, I'm not averse to the idea of Willow and Oz getting back together at some point. Both have clearly moved on with their lives here, yet still care about each other. You've also shown how while their lives may have changed, what happened in their High School years will always have a huge effect on them.

Thanks for writing this.

Comments from author:

Thank you for your feedback! And yes, those were definitely my goals when writing the story, so I'm glad the characters came across the way I wanted them to. I'm a Cordy fan too, especially in the Angel series (I'm almost done with Season 3 and hope to finish it before MagiCon this year).

I look forward to reading some of your work as well, and thank you for taking the time to read this story. I enjoyed writing it. :)

Review By Cordyfan • Date [1 Jul 16] • Rating [8 out of 10] •

The exchange between CordyFan and me showed that I accurately captured the characters of Willow and Oz, yet also created a new plot line in which the two of them could grow and change as twenty-nine year old adults, although they were teenagers and young college students on the show. Additionally, the phrase "unlike a lot of fans," established CordyFan and I as equals and me as a member of the affinity space. Because the online screen names do not reveal the gender or race of the people writing and giving feedback on the site, the typical power dynamics of gender and race, based on binaries, do not exist in this space, as is part of the intent of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004). Therefore, in terms of Gee's framework, the portal was having a *Twisting the Hellmouth* online account, and the shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Lost* served as generators, since they provided the content of the story.

Fanfiction as a space to write and to give feedback can be both liberating and constraining, from my perspective as both a creative writer and as a literacy researcher. The experience of writing stories under a screen name that is separate from my academic identity gave me an opportunity to explore topics that I might not have normally wanted to write about. A few of my participants made reference to this freedom of not having to worry about professional scrutiny under a fanfiction name, as their vignettes in chapter four will reference. Also, I did not know much about the people who were giving me feedback, other than their screen names and their fandoms, so I was more open to reading their constructive criticism than I might have been if I had met them in other settings. People can belong to online fanfiction communities regardless of socioeconomic status, education level, race, gender, etc. Therefore, so long as they show

knowledge about the fandom and at least a rudimentary knowledge of writing, I and most other writers are open to reviewing feedback, from what I read and experienced on the site.

Yet, despite the alias of a screen name, the surveillance aspect of posting online affected my interactions within it. Inevitably, Foucault's (1979) Panopticon concept has an influence even on seemingly private online interactions because as a writer and as a commenter, you are aware that you are being watched. The only truly free place for a writer to share ideas is in a journal. Still, I found fanfiction sites to be a less intimidating place to post my creative work than many online sites, since the other writers were of my same fandom, and I was using a screen name without a profile picture. Also, I found most of the commenters to be helpful and supportive, and I could post as often or as few times as I wished, both with stories and comments. Therefore, fanfiction sites are ones I would wish to further explore in classroom settings with students as one affinity space (Gee, 2004) from which to get creative writing feedback.

Materials Consulted: Comics and Novels

Since I was a participant observer in the Cloud Nine Bookshop book clubs and at several MagiCon and FantasyCon events surrounding books and comics, part of my data collection and data analysis process involved reading the book club novels, so I could be more fully vested in the book club communities and accepted into the affinity spaces. As previously stated, I had been a part of these book clubs, although somewhat intermittently, beginning in August 2013, when I first moved back to our town. However, to take part in the study, I consistently read the books for both the Young Adult book club and the comics/graphic novels book club from August 2016-January 2017, with the exception of one December YA book club meeting that occurred when I was not in town, though, as it happened, that discussion involved a realistic fiction book that I had previously read.

The books I highlight below were ones that we read for book club and ones that specifically related to my focus on diverse, nuanced, and empowered female protagonists. Below, I describe the books and how the analysis through reading them and discussing the books with others affected the findings of my study. I placed the description and analysis of these books immediately preceding Chapter Four because there are several sections in which the participants and I refer to these texts. Therefore, having the descriptions here will allow the reader to reference them more easily when needed.

Vivian Apple at the End of the World **(2016):** The Young Adult book club read this novel for the September meeting that was a part of my data collection. The central protagonist is a cisgendered straight White female, yet the aspect of her that is nuanced is that she is an atheist. Some of the minor characters are racial minorities, such as the protagonist's best friend Harp and her brother Raj, who is tragically murdered by the right-wing religious group in the book (followers of "The Book of Frick") because he is openly gay. The group as a whole thought Vivian was an empowered female protagonist, along with Harp, because they took agency over their own choices and were not over- obsessed with romance. In fact, Harp left her male romantic interest at the orphanage in favor of the mission she had with Vivian, which we admired. The genre of this novel is a blend of realistic fiction and dystopian literature. We also thought the book had plot elements that reminded us of the current political climate and the fall 2016 presidential election period.

Bitch Planet Volume I **(2015)***:* This book was of interest to us in the comics/graphica book club because writer Kelly Sue Deconnick is a White European woman, yet the cast of characters in the book is very diverse. The premise of the book is that in a dystopian universe women who are considered "noncompliant" are sent to a faraway place known as "Bitch Planet"

and are imprisoned. One element of the book that we appreciated is that it was diverse in the body shapes of the female characters in addition to the racial representation. More of the female characters were roughly American average (approximately 166 pounds) if not above that, and one woman in particular was much larger. Throughout the book, there are ads of the dystopian universe that very blatantly have feminist messages within them. Terra pointed out that at the end of the paperback volumes (rather than the hardback editions), there are essays from feminist perspectives about such topics as intersectionality. A conversation about fandom culture also came up at this book club meeting because Terra talked about how she had been to CON events and had seen women with the "NC" (Non Compliant) tattoo that the women of Bitch Planet are given upon their entry into that prison system. Common tattoos can definitely be a bonding experience at fandom events, I have found from personal experiences.

The conversation that I had with the book club leader afterwards is a good example of the tangent conversations that affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) have to offer. Upcoming books of our discussion would be *Faith* (2016) and the new *Superman* (2016) series by Gene Luen Yang. Faith is about a woman of size, which caught our interest after reading *Bitch Planet* (2015). The book club leader and I somehow got into a conversation about costuming, gender roles, and how easy it is not to feel welcome in a given space when one is not part of the dominant group, as described in more detail in Chapter Five.

Shadowshaper **(2015):** This book had a female protagonist who was Black and Latin@, a representation that we could appreciate. Although we thought there were some structural issues with the plot, such as the pacing of the book, we appreciated the characters of the novel. It is a fantasy story that takes place in Harlem, New York, about a teenage girl who must learn about a group known as the shadow shapers, who can make graffiti come to life, in order to better

understand her family and her cultural heritage. Although as a group, we realized that we probably were not the intended audience of this novel, we appreciated the intent of the book, even though there were some aspects of the execution that we questioned. This novel brought up an important conversation about finding and encouraging diverse novels from diverse authors, a conversation that was congruent with one that we had at the diversity panel of MagiCon.

Plutona **(2016):** This novel was about a suburban town but still had a diverse representation of neighborhood friends, including an Asian child and a blond female character of size. In this universe, superhero characters are mortal and can actually die, therefore changing up some of the typical rules of the genre. Plutona, the female superhero, is both a working single mother and a superhero by night. The fact that she is a single mother makes her representation unique, as there are scenes of her waiting tables and looking very tired, in addition to having her superhero role. The opening scene of the book involves the suburban kids finding Plutona apparently dead after a battle and trying to figure out how to handle the aftermath. To me, this book was interesting because of the representation of trauma. Additionally, it examines Plutona's intersectional roles as mother, workingwoman, and superhero, along with the intersectional identities of the characters.

Faith Volume I **(2016):** We went into reading this book excited, but also a little bit concerned because we were worried that Faith was going to be a stereotypical "fangirl." However, after reading the book, we found that we were pleasantly surprised about her representation. We found that she represented not only women of size, but also Millennials well. As someone who is on the outer edge of this generation and just barely young enough to be considered part of it, I feel that our age group started the trend of the twenty-something working woman who made her career a priority and who cared about romantic relationships, but was not

afraid to choose her career over marriage, especially immediately after college. Also, her duality between being a workingwoman and being a superhero was interesting to consider. We appreciated how the drawings made her curves look attractive and flattering.

Throughout the course of my interviews and in-person planned book club meetings at Cloud Nine Bookshop, several participants referenced the fact that the Cloud Nine Bookshop staff and book club facilitators intentionally choose books that encourage discussion about world issues and that are diverse in terms of the representation of characters. I believe that the books I described above are indicative of these intentions, which is one reason why I chose Cloud Nine as one of my research sites. On reviewing the book list, although there is some representation of non-White characters, I think there could be more, and I wonder if that trend will change over time. The study of these books, and in particular the chance to discuss them with others, improved my own understanding of intersectionality issues and of gender representation.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS FOCUSED ON PARTICIPANTS

As a feminist narrative researcher, I am drawn to St. Pierre's (1997) idea of being a "feminist ethnographer" (p. 368) and allowing my feminist poststructuralist theoretical understanding and worldview to influence my interviewing techniques and analysis of data. When writing her dissertation, Bettie St. Pierre (1997/2005) frequently made use of "asides," a concept initially derived from theater in which the actor spoke to the audience, but not to the characters in the play. Her "asides" were more informal pieces of writing that were inclusive of theoretical citations, yet also allowed for autoethnographic notice and allowed the researcher to ruminate on her data collection process and findings, including the cultural themes of the data. After each aside, St. Pierre (1997/2005) included an analysis section of her thought process. I am describing Dr. St. Pierre's (1997/2005) process as an introduction to this chapter because it serves as a model for how I chose to represent my findings, as related to the theories, research questions, and methods of this study.

Chapters Four and Five include narrative inquiry autoethnographic accounts, with St. Pierre's asides as a mentor text, in order to represent my data. St. Pierre's (1997/ 2005) asides bear similarities to the ethnographic vignettes Kathleen Stewart (2007) used in her book *Ordinary Affects,* which also served as a mentor text to me as I developed vignettes based on book clubs and literary events. An additional mentor text was Wolf's (1992) multi-genre account of her research in Taiwan, which was indicative of feminist and Poststructuralist viewpoints.

For St. Pierre (2005), a great component of her "nomadic inquiry" was achieved through writing because for her, "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and entangled *method* of discovery" (p. 967). In narrative inquiry and autoethnographic writing, data analysis and representation involve finding essential features and descriptions of their interrelations, and data interpretation involves finding cultural meaning beyond the data; the two are not the same, but for autoethnographers, they are not independent from each other either (Chang, 2008). As outlined in Chapter Three, I therefore considered these ideas, as I read and annotated all aspects of my data. For evocative inquiry researchers, the writing/artistic representation is part of the analysis process (St. Pierre, 1997), which is why I used it for data representation and analysis. Chapter Four focuses on the experiences of my participants, and chapter Five focuses on my own experiences.

All of my participants are included in the vignettes below and/or the reflective section at the end of the chapter. Most are quoted directly, and all are at least referenced. Since some interviews had more verbose content than others, some narrative vignettes are longer, as they related directly to the theories and research questions outlined in Chapter One and best represented the findings.

As I was choosing parts of the interviews to weave into narrative accounts, I considered which parts best related to my research questions and which aspects most related to my theoretical perspectives of social semiotic spaces as specific to affinity spaces and feminist poststructuralism, particularly Foucault's (1979) ideas on power, Butler's (1990) ideas on performativity, and Derrida's (1967) ideas on texts and deconstruction. As noted in Chapter Three, I tried to keep the voice as true to the interviews as possible, but I did have to take grammatical correctness and organization into account when devising narratives of my

participants from the transcribed interviews. Also, I changed small details and names in order to protect their identities.

Although the life experiences and backgrounds of my participants were very different, their vignettes have a common ground in that the participants are seeking power: through improving their understanding of literacies, through desiring to see themselves in the multimodal texts with which they absorb, and through reading the word and the world around them while deconstructing traditional notions of power. I see all of these desires and goals within myself, as further outlined in Chapter Five.

The specific findings of my study will be listed at the close of this chapter and reiterated at the end of Chapter Five. However, the following main ideas surfaced repeatedly within the vignettes, as indicative of the data: parental figures and libraries as influential on reading practices, the Internet as influential on current multimodal literacy practices, the Internet as an affinity space for the discussion of diversity issues and changing content, the desire for more diverse representation in literature and popular culture, CONS as encouraging creative practice and awareness of literary craft, and comics/speculative fiction worlds as conducive to telling stories of marginalized persons.

MagiCon Vignettes and Analysis

Jessica:

I am a blogger, managing editor, and founder of Black Girl Nerds. I'm also a podcaster. As far as how I came to create it, four years ago I went on Google and looked up Black Girl Nerds because I was very curious to see about content that spoke to women like me. I was noticing TV shows like <u>Big Bang Theory</u> (2007) *and other mainstream nerd, geek websites becoming very popular and talking about all types of fandoms that I was interested in, but I didn't see any women of color, black women in particular.*

So that's what piqued my interest. I decided to Google the term, and nothing came up. So that night--I had some blogger experience before--and that night I went ahead and created a blog page with the same name. Literally within 24 to 48 hours, I had a published author reach out to me saying hey, I'd like to write content with you. And it just kind of snowballed from there.

Other contributors were very interested, and then in 2013, there was a podcast that was started that was brought on by fan demand. And as far as the social media content, that really got sparked by way of my interest in my tweeting TV shows. I had already set up a Twitter account and a Facebook account once I had created the blog in 2012, and then from there, I loved live tweeting shows like Scandal.

I realized that the live tweeting brought together a community of people that were interested in the same kinds of shows and were fans of various different things, whether it's media or whether it's movies, TV, comics, whatever. I just thought that was really cool, so I started live tweeting more TV shows. So the social media content or the social media part of Black Girl Nerds really got developed out of live tweeting. Also, I love Twitter; I am on there 24/7. I love to engage with the people that follow, so every day, I'm having conversations with folks about various things, whether it's hot topics that are happening in the media or whether it's stuff related to the website. So that's how it all got developed from there.

I think having an online presence helps, and the digital age is a really great conduit for so many marginalized voices, especially us that don't have a big platform or a corporate conglomerate to help amplify our voices. So we can use the Internet, we can use Twitter, we can use Facebook, we can use Snapchat, whatever to get the word out about what we're doing and really expose a lot of content out there that has been underserved. Like there's just an underserved component of comic book creators or women that are into tech industries, coders,

so many things that are happening and you just don't hear about that. And I think using social media has a great way to be able to connect.

Jessica's discussion of online social media spaces, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, conveys the idea that social media can serve both as a platform to invest participants in ideas related to literature, representation, and power, and also as an affinity space (Gee, 2004) for people with like-minded ideas using specialized written language to discuss creative concepts that matter to them. As other participants pointed out, the Internet can provide opportunities for voices that would otherwise be marginalized to let their ideas be heard and their stories be told.

Since feminist poststructuralism calls for broader representation in the literary canon (Weedon, 1997), the Internet is serving as an avenue for making literary and popular culture texts more diverse in terms of characters and authors represented. Therefore, the power dynamic that used to exist between creators of literary content and consumers is becoming fluid rather than fixed (Foucault, 1978).

As for experiences and panels at MagiCon, I was at a panel yesterday called Representation of Super Women. I took a few issues with the panel itself because it framed itself as a panel that dealt with the representation of super heroines in comic books. But the panelists themselves, even though they were all women, they were all White women, so there wasn't a lot of intersectionality happening there. But I did respect the fact that there was a scholar that had a lot of background in Muslim studies. And she was talking about the victory of Muslim women and Muslim superheroes in comics, which I didn't have much knowledge of. I didn't know that there had been several superheroines before Kamala Khan, so that was good to know.

I think whenever you frame something as representation of women, you have to remember all women because historically the Feminist Movement has always been focused on

and catered towards White women. And many of us have been kind of marginalized and

dismissed. And we don't want to continue that. We don't want to perpetuate what history has

shown where Black women and women of color in general have just been removed from the

conversation. We want to be a part of the conversation because, in fact, feminism represents all

women. And it should be all women. So yeah, I'm glad that point was brought up, and hopefully,

in future panels to come will feature more women of different backgrounds.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Weedon, 1997) is a topic that has come up frequently

in recent comics and YA panels I have attended at CONS and bookshops as well. I attended the

same panel that Jessica referenced above and had similar impressions. The panelists were

knowledgeable about the subject matter, but some groups of women were not represented.

Therefore, the title of the panel, "Representation of Super Women" was somewhat of a

misnomer, and several attendees asked questions that reflected their discontent.

One of the panelists said she should have acknowledged upfront that she was only

discussing some women in comic films, specifically White gender-conforming female

characters. I discussed the panel with my CON roommate and longtime friend Melinda, also an

African American female, after completing both my field notes and my observations about this

panel. Her reflections and viewpoints had congruencies with Jessica's. She posited that people

were unhappy with the panel because feminism sometimes seems geared more toward White

middle class women.

Betty Friedan's (1997) foundational book about the feminist movement, *The Feminine*

Mystique, has drawn criticism for being focused on the experiences of White middle-class

women, which has lead to more recent publications of more inclusive third-wave feminism.

Although White women had more social and cultural capital during the earlier days of the

feminist movement and could therefore spearhead it, we now need to be more mindful of practices including women of other races and sexual orientations.

During this panel discussion, one of the panelists noted that MagiCon and the Popular Culture/Comics panels are making an effort to include more diverse panelists and more topics related to diversity. Over the past ten years, I have seen more diversity in panelists and in the literature discussed at MagiCon. Yet I understand the concerns, as the content had limited its representation of women by including only White European women and Muslim women. Characters of other races and gender representations were not discussed. I feel that part of my responsibility as a literacy educator is not only to expose students to diverse literature, but also to present about it at conferences, which I hope to continue to do at both popular culture CONS and at academic conferences.

I am aware that some poststructural researchers find discussing such labels as race is problematic (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), since race is a social construction rather than biologically based. However, when discussing issues of representation, the issue of race and representation inevitably came up in my interview data, particularly in the field notes and interviews that referenced book clubs and/or panels that discussed books with characters of color. Therefore, I refer to racial categories, but not lightly, and in hopes that representation in literature, comics, and other forms of media will continue to become more diverse, along with the panels at which these issues are discussed. These desires are indicative of third wave feminism and also with philosophies of feminist poststructuralism.

Even though the panel itself was not as diverse as some attendees would have desired, I noticed the audience was diverse. Attendees at both MagiCon and FantasyCon noted during panel discussions that these CONS are getting more diverse every year in terms of attendees.

One person who did not participate in interviews, but who attended a "Diversity in Science Fiction" panel at FantasyCon, specifically noted during the panel discussion that she was excited to see an African American female character represented on the MagiCon badge this year.

Today I attended the Marvel Now panel that featured Sanford Greene and Afua Richardson. Sanford Greene, he's an artist on Power Man and Iron Fist comic, and also he's doing Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur. And Afua Richardson is very prolific. She was actually a guest at our blurb Tweetup on Friday. She's actually an artist on the World of Wakanda book that's going to be coming out, which is very historic because it's the first book by Marvel, which is kind of crazy to say this in 2016. But it's the first book by Marvel featuring a black female writer. And now we also have a black female artist on the same book. So she was on there. They were just talking about the landscape of Marvel and how that's evolving and changing and they're really trying to reflect more diversity in their comics. So it was great to see both of them on the panel and to get that kind of coverage out for BGN (Black Girl Nerds).

Jessica's musings, along with feedback from other interviews from MagiCon participants and past research I have completed on comics and YA literature (Robbins, 2015a; Robbins, 2015b), references the increased diversity in comics and graphic novels, particularly for female characters of color. Since comics have traditionally been a marginalized medium, they are conducive to telling the stories of people who have been marginalized by patriarchal society (Carter, 2008; Robbins, 2015b; Schwartz, 2010). Additionally, the other-world element of superhero comics makes them conducive to telling stories of social justice and of giving power to marginalized voices, such as women and people of color (Robbins & Whitley, 2016). Jessica uses her platform of Black Girl Nerds, an affinity space (Gee, 2004) that takes place both online and in person at CONS, to publicize emerging African American artists and writers.

I did a fanfiction panel a few years ago over at Princeton University. Yeah, so I've had conversations about that. And I actually used to write fanfic a long time ago prior to doing the blog, but I think that that is a great way to connect because fanfiction does allow so many people to have this nice reimagined world that they just don't get to see on their either favorite TV shows or read in their favorite fictional novels. So it does allow for great alternate universes that reflect the real world that we live in.

Fanfiction has had that impact, and I do respect it. I've had conversations with people within the fanfic community. And I'm learning to be a little bit more sensitive because I think there was sort of this--how can I say it--there was this notion that somehow fanfiction is just, it's not legitimate writing. But there is a community of fanfiction authors that are like this is a real thing for us, this is a big, and this is very important, this is a very valuable space for us to share our work.

It's not something that should be looked at less than a fictional novel that's published, that you could get at your local Barnes & Noble store. So that is something that I've learned over the years recently and kind of changed my opinion on because I used to think that way. I didn't take my own fanfiction seriously. And the fact that there are actual academic classes being taught at Princeton about this is awesome.

Twitter and social media in general is just a great way to connect with so many people that you just never know who it is from whom you can get you to either do opportunities for talks or someone that you can just have a great conversation with and connect with about things that you're likeminded about. I'm really grateful that social media, because not only… I know we've been talking a lot about Twitter, but Tumblr is also a really great platform to allow fans of color

to really project their feedback, rant and rave about things that they find problematic on shows, and also things that they really like.

One show in particular is <u>Sleepy Hollow</u> (2013). There are two panels here at MagiCon about that. And I think <u>Sleepy Hollow </u>(2013) was the first time, for many of us as black women, to finally see, like, a character in a genre TV show, sci-fi, fantasy where she's like the lead protagonist, and she's not a trove, she's not a stereotype. And that was taken away from us. It gives us an opportunity to voice our frustrations and also to be able to let folks know that this is the kind of content that we want and this is the kind of content we should continue to have.

Unfortunately, it looks like <u>Sleepy Hollow </u>(2013) wasn't listening much. But hopefully other shows in the future will pay attention to what fans are saying. Because as fans, we're the ones who are supporting the creators' content. The demand that we are actually asking for is something that you should provide. And hopefully that's something that will continue to happen in years to come.

Much of what such online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) have done in recent years, particularly within fandom communities, is to trouble the notion of who really has the power in terms of literature and media production. Until more recent years, much canonized literature was written and published by White European men. Feminist have challenged this trend and pushed for an expansion of the literary canon (Weedon, 1997). I would also argue that re-writing a text and retelling the story in the form of fanfiction serves as a form of deconstruction (Derrida, 1967), in addition to a form of remixing (Jenkins, 2013a).

Because of the dynamic of the writer and reader relationship where readers did not have as many public forums on which to post reviews of their work, White European men have still tend to maintain much power in terms of literature and media production. Some academic

journals and magazines have published film and book reviews, but even such professions as journalism and academia that publish this work have tended to be more male-dominated (Friedan, 1997). However, the Internet has allowed people of all backgrounds to give feedback on content, so that the Internet has made the power relationship between creators and fans fluid rather than fixed (Foucault, 1978).

As more than one participant noted in the interviews, since the consumers are supporting the content, creators have acquiesced to the demands of customers and consumers even more so since the creation of the Internet, which allows creators the chance to dialogue with fans online. Therefore, congruent with Foucault's (1978/1979) concept of power, power has become fluid rather than fixed in terms of media production, which is one reason for the increase in diverse representation. In the case of fanfiction, the power to create has no longer been confined to people who have the resources to become published authors.

What I really love about MagiCon is that this is a CON created for fans by fans. And an example, even though this doesn't really speak to issues of diversity, but also probably speaking of women, is Penny Dreadful and how a lot of us were kind of venting over the fact that she, as the female protagonist, was killed off of her show. But it was a venting session, and even the panelists, who are all fans, as well as the attendees, we just had a moment to just be able to discuss and also give theories as to why this is happening, what was wrong with this, and just collectively be able to air our frustrations, if you will, about what was happening. So I think MagiCon provides that, as opposed to other conventions where it's really just focused on the content itself and not just like the fandom community.

As in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) that are feminist in nature, CONS allow a space for fans to discuss their concerns, such as the discontinuation of key diverse and nuanced female

protagonists. Jessica aptly noted that MagiCon in particular focuses on the concerns of the fan community in addition to the content. For example, when I attended MagiCon in 2015, one of my favorite panels was one conducted by a high profile YA writer who discussed advocating for female fans.

Unfortunately, female fans are sometimes still mistreated in cosplay settings, so she offered suggestions for how women can handle such situations. Specifically, I have both been flirted with inappropriately when wearing superhero costumes and also told by one person (implicitly) that I was not tall or thin enough to wear a Wonder Woman costume. This experience exemplified how women who do not fit society's standards of attractiveness are told they should not wear certain costumes, and women who do are treated as sexualized. I have heard and read accounts from female accounts over many years complaining of this treatment and have experienced it first hand.

Since Livejournal is no longer as active as it used to be around ten years ago, the previously mentioned author discussed other forums for publishing fanfiction stories and fan art, such as Tumblr. Another YA author at a different panel two years ago discussed the discomfort she has faced in the past at comic shops and possible approaches for combating those encounters. Very much like the online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), these in-person affinity spaces at CONS give female fans an opportunity to voice concerns about content as well as the still male-dominated fandom culture, in hopes of improving conditions for women who occupy these physical spaces in the future.

Mandy:

My dad loves sci-fi. I don't even know, bizarrely diverse collection of paperback books. So he had bins; he had a lot of them and I was about nine. And he went underneath the house

and he brought them out and he was like you should read these. And I think we kind of actually

picked through them, and he kind of took out the ones that were really grotesquely inappropriate

for a nine year old. But left a lot of them in. The books were missing covers, which might have

meant they were stolen.

So I took the whole bin home to my mom's house; it was this huge Tupperware bin like

the kind that you keep wrapping paper in. I basically read that whole summer just all sci-fi,

fantasy, Star Trek like Larry Niven, Jerry Pornell, all of these very famous sci-fi and fantasy

writers from the '70's and '60's. And it changed everything because I was like well, if these

worlds could exist then anything could exist. And I could do whatever I want. I also remember

checking some of these books out at the local library.

Like many of my participants, Mandy described the importance the local library had in

her literacy development. In addition to the influence of libraries, Mandy, like many other

participants, had at least one parental figure that played a crucial role in fostering her love for

reading, writing, and/or the speculative fiction genre. Mandy's father did not have a lot of money

when she was growing up, so they had to rely on the local library and garage sale books, some of

which were missing covers, to encourage her as a reader. Literacy and access to books brings

power, in terms of educational resources. Mandy developed into a voracious reader and prolific

writer, in spite of not being from a well-off family, because her dad found creative ways to give

her access to books and to other forms of media.

Now, as an adult, I think the passion of the entire MagiCon experience really affects me.

I mean you, even just walking around in the main floor, you see these people who have invested

hours and hours, I mean hundreds of hours of work into like whatever costumes they have

decided to represent themselves as. And you can see the pride on their face and their joy and like

celebrating this thing about whatever they loved. They've been able to create something that

represents that. I think that is just it's intoxicating; it's fascinating like you're surrounded from

all sides with people who similarity care about speculative everything. And it's, of course it's

like a holiday. It's like a five-day magic Halloween.

Mandy in particular pointed to the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) nature of fandom

conventions, as also referenced in interviews by Tina and Landis. People are in a state of

celebration and therefore operate under a set of normative rules and practices that do not

necessarily pertain to everyday society: the dress in costume, stay up late, go to the events of

their choice rather than those assigned to them, and are a no-holds-barred atmosphere in which

"anything goes" as long as others are not harmed in the process.

In a true carnival environment in tune with carnivals of the middle ages, all are invited.

MagiCon feels like such an environment to those who attend it, according to the responses from

some participants. In reality, though, one is only invited to all events of the Con if he/she/they

has a badge, which serves as the portal to the event. In my opinion, therefore, CONS are affinity

spaces (Gee, 2004) more so than carnivals, although it is interesting to note that some attendees

described MagiCon in a very carnivalesque way.

The way Mandy describes costumes to me, as a researcher, resonates with Derrida's

(1967) description of texts, which can go beyond what is written (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and

include overall settings and surroundings. In order to show their affinity for their respective

fandoms, many participants wear costumes from their various fandoms. The costumes contribute

to the atmosphere of carnival and also present an alternative version of texts to represent an

allegiance to a written or a digital text.

Costumes, based on Mandy's description, can also be considered a form of fan art, and the amount of time and effort some participants extend on their costumes show the potential fandom spaces have for creativity and artistic production, for visual texts as well as written texts and media. Also, the panel events, from this interpretation, can be read as texts that help readers and viewers better understand the content discussed, especially if they are written into field notes and/or referred to in interviews.

I've been coming to MagiCon for six years straight now. I generally go to the Star Trek *stuff because when I grew up, I watched* The Next Generation *(1987) TV Shows with my dad, and I'm interested in the diversity of the show. It was the show that featured the first interracial kiss, and I think that's really cool. But I also really like some of the stuff on the writing track that I've attended. I like to listen to the authors they have that come in and will read a small excerpt from something they've written and then you can speak to them afterwards. I remember watching Tamora Pierce read part of one of her newest novels, which I think can't remember which one it was at the time. May have been* Terrier *(2007). It was a Beka Cooper book. And I loved it when she read that aloud. She's awesome. I remember her original series* Alanna the First Adventure *and the other* Song of the Lioness *quartet.*

I remember reading those Tamora Pierce when I was like eight or nine and just being like, wait, a woman could be like a knight? Amazing, I love this! It was very female empowering because-- I remember now-- so first she's a twin in the very beginning, and she has boy brother is her twin and their dad like doesn't care about them and is going to send her to a convent to become a nun and him to become a knight. But he doesn't want to be a knight and she does. And so they basically switch places.

Like many of my participants, Mandy referenced the *Star Trek* fandom. It was on the minds of many participants because 2016 was the fiftieth anniversary, and the show has become well known for including diverse and empowered characters, including females. In the focus group that Mandy was a part of, one participant mentioned that the first interracial kiss on television took place on that show. This practice seems to be a frequent in speculative fiction, as Joss Whedon's (1997) popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featured the first on-screen kiss between two lesbian/bisexual characters.

Mandy loves the Tamora Pierce novels, along with other YA speculative fiction stories, because of the empowered female characters and because of the troubling of gender binaries. The two characters that switch roles between a nun and a knight are indicative of Butler's (1990) ideas of gender as a social construction. Both characters did not want the role typically ascribed to their respective genders, so they switched, giving readers the idea that they do not have to follow socially constructed gender roles.

I read a lot of YA fantasy and speculative fiction, and I have also read a lot of fan fiction, I have written a lot of fan fiction. Fanfiction is not a thing I associate with my real life. But it is a really nice outlet because if you have an idea for a story in your head, and you just want to write the story, it gives you a space to do that. Then I can just bring in the characters from this other world where I don't have to worry about things like, what should she be like? Or, what should he be like? Or, what should the relationship be like? So I can just do the thing that I want to do for my creative outlet in that moment. And then that's it.

For practicing writing, I think it's really good. But in that sense, I'm just trying to explore how I write, and it's very, very helpful. It's like a way of experiencing or expressing my thoughts without it being associated with my real self. And I think depending on your profession,

that's very important; even if I were to ever write real fiction or poetry or anything like that and publish it, I would have to use a pseudonym regardless. It's just impossible for someone in my job to publish that kind of stuff; it can't be associated with my real name. It's a nice way of exploring thoughts, seeing how they develop, and then maybe from that point, publishing the work under a pseudonym.

For Mandy, writing fanfiction has been an important way for her to get writing practice and to improve her skills as a fiction writer. In addition, it has contributed to her constructing a self-narrative (Williams, 2015) and to creating a writer identity that is separate from her identity as a medical professional. In my opinion, Mandy's reflections show fanfiction is a way to scaffold writing for those learning how to write fiction. The characters and the world are already developed, so the writer can therefore focus on the plot construction.

Because fanfiction writers are under the guise of a screen name, they have an additional portal (Gee, 2004) to explore plot territories they might be afraid to if their true everyday identities were known. For me, as a literary educator, my identity as a creative writer is very closely tied to my day job known to society. For some fanfiction participants, Mandy as an example, having a separate writing identity is crucial to their development as writers. Perhaps for students, it is helpful to not only introduce them to fanfiction as a concept, but also to sites where they can develop their skills under a writer identity that is independent of schools and their daily lives.

I'm being reminded of--since you bring up fan fiction--Cassandra Claire is one of the most successful young adult writers right now. Five years before she was remotely published, she had a very strongly loved line of fan fiction. And very rabid fans loved it amazingly. Obviously she took it all down, once she got published. Now it's really difficult to find. This may sound

crazy but, but that's how she got her start. She learned how to build a character and a plot based on other people's characters and then translated that into her own work. And there's very little similarity between what she wrote as a fan fiction writer and what she wrote as a fiction writer. You can tell how she was developing how to write a character. There are subtle changes in the version of the person that the original writer had written. And I think it surprised all of us, but also like gave us so much joy to see how successful she has become since then.

But it was a way for her to get started, because she already knew who the character was, because somebody else developed the character for her, and she was writing fan fiction it was a lot more story driven. She had to spend so much time telling us who the person was. Because for instance, we already knew whom Harry Potter was. So she didn't have to spend a lot of time doing that. She had a lot more time to develop the story itself. Right? Because you know who it is; everyone who is reading that fan fiction story has already read the primary work. I wouldn't read fan fic for something I've never seen or watched. So I think that maybe freed her up to explore other things. But honestly in the end, I really like her published fiction. Her fiction is awesome.

Archive of our Own is like the biggest network of fanfiction. And I think there is some variety on there; some is terrible, but there's some really, really good. People who read your stories can comment on them. It's a way to build another community of people who have no idea who I am in real life.

As referenced in Mandy's interview, Cassandra Claire as an author is an interesting case study because she is now well established in terms of having a high volume of YA literature sales, but began as a fanfiction writer, very much like the writers at the fanfiction panel I attended at MagiCon for data collection purposes. According to Mandy's interview, Ms. Claire

was able to develop her skills on the online affinity space (Gee, 2004) of fanfiction, where she had a community of writers and fans who gave her supportive feedback. As a result, once she got published, she already had a platform based on her fanfiction followers.

As a female writer of speculative fiction, fanfiction gave her an avenue at which she could establish herself, as female writers are still underrepresented, particularly within speculative fiction. Now, her novels are recognized for being well written and for having nuanced female protagonists.

Mandy acknowledged that fanfiction writing tends to be mixed in quality, as it is not vetted in the same way as books or even magazine articles tend to be vetted. However, for Mandy and other female writers, fanfiction has been an important online affinity space (Gee, 2004) to develop their skills and to form a supportive community of writers who may or may not know their real world identities.

Tina:

MagiCon feels like a holiday, like it's like a weekend and it's a big celebration for those involved. And you get to be like whoever you want to be. And at panels like when I saw Jim Henson's panels, he's talking about how he did his puppetry in <u>Labyrinth</u> *(1986), and it's like my favorite thing ever. And I was fan girling out and thinking like wow he did that at like 21. And I could do that; people are still doing that. Like I could do whatever I want to do. And it just it makes you hopeful. So, sometimes as part of a fandom, just seeing other people excited about the same thing you're excited about makes it feel like not a waste of time, it's kind of a driving force. And it can help in my writing; it can help in my everyday life of choosing to go back to school for creative writing, and I can continue to make that happen for myself. That's what I learned.*

Tina's vignette, like Mandy's, expressed her desire to be a writer and how MagiCon, as an in-person affinity space (Gee, 2004), encouraged her desire to do so. Many creative types can feel discouraged in the pursuit of their goals, but hearing from other writers and artists who have been successful gives them encouragement to pursue their goals. Like Mandy, Tina expressed the ability for fandom communities to encourage creative production, such as puppetry and visual arts.

In her focus group interview, Tina also discussed the important role her mother played in encouraging her love of reading and of creative writing, as she is currently getting a master's degree in poetry. Like Mandy, she had a parental figure that fostered her love of reading and writing, along with speculative fiction, as they watched *Star Trek* together when Tina was growing up. In addition to describing the carnivalesque feeling of MagiCon (Bakhtin, 1984), Tina expressed her belief that MagiCon was an environment that supported creators, and it therefore gave her motivation to continue with her own creative writing.

I just want to be empathetic (toward the transgendered person who spoke up at the Gender in YA panel about the lack of representation) and just not make you feel uncomfortable but at the same time not feel like I don't know? There's a lot I see online that's like the new feminist movement. I don't know if it's called the new feminist movement, but there's like a, I almost want to label the anti-white woman movement. It's like a feminism that's like well you white women don't get it.

And if a white woman has a question about it in the forums it's like we have to say, I know my privilege; I have to apologize for my privilege to ask you a question. And it's this very weird like…Yeah like "Every Day Feminism" is the website that I've seen this on and it, it's, to me comes across as like there's going to be a fringe group always that says you don't know me.

Because now I've got this new label or now I've got this. And you can never understand me. And I'm going to keep adding new things.

And I'm not saying that's what's happening in every situation. I'm just saying for a person who wants to understand and who goes to look to find out these things, it's very like alienating of like I actually like care about people. And I want to do this right but it puts this assumption on me as a white woman, that like I can't understand and I need to apologize for being born this way and it's like it seems so backwards.

Tina expressed the desire to learn more about feminism, particularly "new feminism" or third wave feminism. She noted, per her vignette, that she had tried to do so on online forums, but had felt shut down because of her identity as a White middle class female. Yet in my opinion as a feminist researcher, participants on online forums should be open-minded and courteous, but White European people who are involved in conversations surrounding race and representation should be aware of our privilege. I realize that I have not always been aware of this privilege as I should have been myself, and I am glad such conversations are now taking place, both online and in person at panels.

After the interview, per her request, I sent her an article describing the waves of feminism in more depth. Based on my experience talking with Tina and my other participants, particularly those who attended the CONS, I felt as though they were open to learning about diversity issues. This open mindedness has surfaced perhaps in part because of being brought up in homes that fostered conversations about literacy and an openness to multimodal texts with diverse characters. *Star Trek* serves as one example that Tina gravitated toward because of watching the series with her mother growing up. Although the participants were in different places in their

understandings of feminism and their exposure, the panels and accompanying interviews gave them opportunities to discuss challenging topics.

It is interesting to see that within online spaces, power dynamics involving race and gender sometimes shift (Foucault, 1978). People sometimes challenge one another in ways that they might not do in person based on Tina's vignette and other experiences I have had on online forums in which people discuss controversial issues. However, these online forums do give participants an opportunity to learn about perspectives that they might not otherwise be exposed to.

Becky:

One panel I was on was [a] fanfiction panel, at which we talked about our past work on fanfiction sites, from our various fandom communities, and how that prepared us differently for our publishing. And I was on the LGBTQ literature in YA panel. So that was a lot of fun. That was mostly about the genre of YA. The panel went all over the place, but it was a really great panel on representation, and we talked about our favorite books, and there were some book reps in the audiences. There were quite a few well-known authors, too. And so we talked a little bit about our characters and what it meant to have our LGBTQ characters on the page.

And then the other panel that I was on was called Bi-Sci-Fi, which was actually in Whedonverse track. Bi-Sci-Fi is a Twitter hashtag that started a few months ago, with a few authors who write speculative fiction. They have science fiction novels together, and they both have bi-sexual characters and they're also bi-sexual. And so I joined the Bi-Sci-Fi hashtag when my most recent [book] came out. We all write sci-fi books, and we're all bi. That was a really great panel in part because there was a lot of discussion about genre, too.

We discussed what is cool about speculative fiction that lends itself to be diverse and well, if we're imagining a great future, what is the point of imagining a future where we have limits of this one? That's why we tend to see more diversity in science fiction. I talked a lot about <u>Star Trek</u> *and like how that was a great game changer. And back in the '60s when they started* <u>Star Trek</u> *they created all these diverse characters. They were like, we're going to have a Russian, we're going to have a Japanese guy, we're going to have a black woman on deck, and then do all these amazing things and address all these social issues with this really science space operation. And then we went from sci-fi to other speculative genres. We also discussed* <u>Buffy</u> *and* <u>Firefly</u> *and a few other fandoms.*

Like other participants, Becky talked about fandom speculative fiction shows that have served as game changers in terms of diverse representation, particularly diverse and nuanced female protagonists, including such fandoms as *Star Trek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)*,* and *Firefly* (2002)*.* In these speculative universes, there is a possibility for change and forward moving perceptions, such as how sexuality is portrayed. She aptly pointed out that during the *Star Trek* era, characters were diverse in terms of their nationalities, race, and gender. During the late 1990s, we also saw characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Firefly* (2002) who were empowered females and who varied in race as well as in sexual orientation.

Bi-Sci-Fi was a fun blend of talking about bi characters and the importance of labeling them. Labels don't work [for] everyone, and I know that like not everyone finds them helpful or want to use them, but I think that it's good to have them for the people that don't know or are questioning. Because then if you don't know you're bi or you don't know it's an option, you just think that, there's gay and straight, and then you think that you're wrong or you think that you're... you're a mistake or a problem. And so if you don't know that there's such thing as

being bi then seeing someone else have that label, using that label and having a word for it, I think is really powerful.

Before I knew asexuality was a thing—that's a huge deal, too. And just learning about different identities and knowing that there's a word for it, it's really powerful. And even if that word doesn't necessarily apply to you because gender and identity is a spectrum and not everybody's going to fit into the categories, but if we have those categories, we can start to define ourselves more. So those are the panels. Those were the other two panels that I was on.

Butler (1990), along with some other Poststructural scholars, caution against using labels when referring to gender and sexuality as well as race. They have reason to do so, as gender is a social construction as well as race. However, Becky made the relevant point in her interview that some people perceive labels as empowering because they can name their own experiences and also find others who have similar non-normative experience.

From a researcher's perspective, I believe there are pros and cons to such labels, but I understand the point about wanting to bring a word to one's life experiences. I wonder, though, if our society will eventually come to a place where such labels as "bi sci-fi" are not needed because bisexuality and sexual fluidity are normative, just as some of my interview participants expressed the hope that one day, diversity panels might not exist because diversity conversations will take place throughout these con sessions, rather than having to be labeled as such. Do we need labels for now in order to discuss these issues, or should we be trying to steer away from them? It is a question I will continue to ponder, both as a scholar and as a fan.

I started reading fanfiction when I was in high school. It was the age of the <u>Harry Potter</u> series, when those books were still coming out. I really loved the series. And I think part of the community was built up around the fact that we were all super invested in the story and this

magical world. And then there was a three-year wait between books three and four, and then four and five, and then five and six. So I really wanted to engage in more of the story, but I didn't have the novels, and so I read a lot fanfic. And I started off reading the "what if" stories. There's like anything and everything when you get into fandom. There are people doing all sorts of things. As a kid, I was reading all these things, and it really broadened my mind to a lot of like gender identity stuff, too, and queerships and "ships" that I hadn't thought of, but like really enjoyed.

Some of the <u>Harry Potter</u> pairings were really powerful reading that because I was like wow, I didn't know that, not that I didn't know that there were gay people. I knew there were gay people, but I hadn't thought about it too much for myself either. Like, I always thought…well, because I'm bi, so at first, I was really aiming to assume that I was straight with… with some weird… other things. And so just reading a lot of Harry Potter and then I guess writing in it, too, but… but not really. I didn't really write a lot. I just read a lot about bisexual characters and who wrote about their own experiences.

Like Becky, I was in high school when the *Harry Potter* books were becoming popular and in college by the time the movies began to come out. These books truly have moved the field of Young Adult Literature forward, particularly the genre of YA speculative fiction. They began a surge that I recall taking place in a larger volume of middle grades and YA literature being published. At a Cloud Nine Bookshop event I attended during the course of this study, a high profile author who is about five to seven years my senior discussed having very few options for what to read as a teenager, which is part of why he now loves to read YA literature to make up for lost time. Becky and I were on the cusp of a generation that had more options for books to read as teenagers.

However, at a panel I would later serve on at FantasyCon, we would discuss the limited diversity of characters in the *Harry Potter* series. Although we love this fandom, we acknowledged this limitation. Hermione is a very strong, nuanced female character, but the only characters of color in this series are minor characters that are not well developed. Also, there are not any characters in the series that are non-normative in terms of gender presentation and sexuality. Although there are many important aspects of *Harry Potter* for the YA and fandom communities, the diversity element is fairly lacking.

Yet Becky's vignette presents fanfiction as an alternative forum that offered *Harry Potter* alternative narratives, or re-mixes, that presented characters who were more diverse in terms of their sexual orientations. Therefore, fanfiction is in many ways a feminist space because it affords writers a chance to write about characters that are not on the dominant side of patriarchal binaries. Writers who identify as gay, bisexual, or queer, in addition to women writers, have used fanfiction as a chance to publish their re-mix stories based on fandom, as their fans and followers were open to narratives not solely about characters who are normative in terms of their sexuality.

As for mental illness, I just think there's so much of a stigma in talking about it, and I don't know why. Shame is a part of how we treat people with mental illnesses. Like our families are ashamed of us. We are ashamed to talk about it. We're ashamed of ourselves. If you're surrounded by messages that tell you that like you're worthless because you have this thing, then it's really hard to heal at that point. And it's part of coming from being able to own it and being able to talk about it because there are people who won't talk about it. And it's a huge reason why I think it's as prevalent of an issue.

And it is because there's a huge taboo on talking about your emotions, and not just emotions, but if you're going through something, it's hard, and it's weird. I hope that like by my

talking about it or writing about it, or having it being normalized, I think it is another form of

diversity awareness that you can see characters that are struggling for the same things you did,

and they're still people and they're still going through things and… and they get through it. And

that can be really powerful for people to see themselves to get through that.

Mental health and mental illness is an area of diversity that as a scholar, I believe remains underexplored in Young Adult literature, even speculative Young Adult literature. Overall, my data show, from the perspectives of my participants, a remaining underrepresentation of characters who are chronically ill and who have mental health issues. I believe the limited representation of people with illnesses, mental or chronic, is in part because of the stigma society has toward these conditions and also because of the feeling of surveillance noted in Foucault's (1979) ideas of Panopticon.

As a person who has been diagnosed, and re-diagnosed, with a learning disability, ADHD, and an anxiety disorder, I understand the feeling of surveillance that comes with having these conditions, as people are constantly trying to label you and to put you in a box, which is ironic, given that we are often out-of-the-box thinkers. Perhaps authors fear that having such characters would intensify this feeling of surveillance. In actuality, though, based on the stories of my participants and my own experiences, increasing character representation in literature would help us feel more connected. Becky uses her platform to discuss mental illness on social media forums in order to help normalize it and to promote productive conversations.

When I first met Becky at Dragoncon, we were at a social gathering for people who were invited to be panelists for the MagiCon YA literature panel. She, another author, and I got into an intense conversation about the limited representation of characters with mental health disorders, even in YA speculative fiction. I revealed my own spatially based learning disability, ADHD,

and anxiety issues. Becky said she is passionate about this issue because she struggles with depression, and Ansley, the other author, wrote the book she discussed at MagiCon in part as catharsis from the anxiety issues that sparked from a break-up with a long-term significant other. Through this conversation, they agreed to be part of my study.

After meeting these two writers at MagiCon and before conducting their individual interviews for my study, I followed both of them on Twitter and followed Becky on Facebook. I noticed that Becky in particular was passionate about using social media to foster a conversation about mental illness and to remove the stigma. Ansley was less open about her anxiety issues on Twitter. However, I read a recent novel by each of these authors, and Ansley was very open in her description of the book, both in the introduction and on her website, about how the book helped her to overcome some of her anxiety issues.

Both authors have writer names that are a slight diversion from their given names, which might in part give them some anonymity. When asked, neither one of them noted using initials rather than full names for gender reasons, but they did both acknowledge that fewer female authors tend to get published within the speculative fiction realm.

While doing this study, I noted that some authors used Twitter and Facebook, along with their websites or blogs, as online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) where they could dialogue and post about issues that were important to them, such as mental health. Another author who I did not interview for this study, but who was at the fanfiction panel presenting with Becky, is very open on Facebook about being transgendered and uses it as a platform to discuss this important issue. Many of these conversations about diversity issues begin at Cons, yet continue on online forums.

For my day job, I work at a nonprofit in south central Los Angeles, serving communities of color. The main focus of the program is to get kids hiking and backpacking, but I incorporate

a lot of journaling and creative writing into our programs. Hopefully this year the kids will be able to polish some of their pieces (poetry, short stories, etc.) and we'll publish them in an anthology. But encouraging them to write, find their own voices, is really important to me, as an Asian American. Another thing I'm starting up is working with local libraries, especially in the East Los Angeles area, where communities are predominately Asian American and Mexican American immigrants. So starting up a youth writing program where kids can write their stories, get feedback from each other, and develop as writers. It's in the works!

Becky's story is truly one that shows the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and the need for more voices in the literary canon. Through her work with students of color in East Los Angeles, she hopes to give them the power to tell their own stories, just as she eventually has felt empowered through speculative fiction and fanfiction to tell her stories involving bisexuality and mental illness.

The character in her newest novel, which I have read excerpts of, is an Asian-American character becoming more aware of her sexuality and her preferences for both females and males. She is also from a superhero family of the future, so as reflected by Becky's interview and vignette that derived from it, a futuristic universe allows her the opportunity to envision a better world in which bisexuality is normalized. Becky's passion for the writing program shows her desire to bring more voices into the literary canon and to give writers a color an opportunity to tell their stories.

Landis:

In the seventies, when I first started writing, women weren't being taken seriously in science fiction. And then all of a sudden they're all doing these fanzines. And I think that was just

women finally stepping forward and, and saying we're going to do this no matter what. Even

then also, all the pulp magazines they were starting to die.

I remember when because you used to have lots of Pulp magazines out there. What you

called pulp because it's made from pulp paper. But like now you go here we're in Barnes and

Noble you go over there and look and what do you see? Ellery Queen's Mystery, you see Alfred

Hitchcock, you see the science fiction and fantasy, and you see like maybe three or four. There

used to be in the scores of those things.

All of these magazines were devoted to the weird. To the science fiction, to fantasy, to

horror and they're, basically they're gone. When everybody gets excited about a new magazine,

a new horror magazine, it's not a new horror magazine for the most part. There were articles

about how to do that mask for Halloween or how to do this, or an interview with the director or

any interview with the start.

From the interview with Landis, I learned that before fanfiction was published online, it

was written in print form in magazines known as fanzines. These stories were alternative

versions of speculative fiction stories, which actually were published as early as the 1930s with

such publications as fanfiction that was homage to Sherlock Holmes stories (Jamison &

Grossman, 2013).

Eventually, with the Internet, these stories began to be published more so online on

fanfiction, Archive of Our Own, and other related sites. Yet fanzines were the beginning of the

movement. As Landis will note in the vignette section below, they gave women writers of

speculative fiction more empowerment as writers and also might have contributed to the

legitimization of the speculative fiction genre, and the progression toward speculative fiction and

media becoming more mainstream.

As computers burgeoned I think so did the science fiction. We were still in the media/literary, but the computers had started coming out. There was this wonderful convention in Atlanta and it was very different. It was called a Phenoma Con. And it was in the early '90's and we went to a couple of them… And we watched, there was this incredibly savvy, very trench coated [woman]; she looked like she had just stepped out of an anime movie. And I mean she was going around and she was a computer whiz. And she knew what she was doing. And she was just leveling everybody on the panel these guys that supposedly were the experts. These guys did not know what to do. And you saw them running after, all of a sudden the power in that room shifted.

The head honchos shifted and were running after her because she knew computers. She was good looking, but not a "babe". So they weren't just like standing, she was sort of like one of the guys but a girl. But she could run rings around them. It was just really strange to watch them. We saw it happen and I do not know at what point but it was like she had wiped their slates. But she was asking heavy duty, not just computer questions but she was asking philosophical questions. And she was holding them accountable, and suddenly they realized they were in the presence of somebody who had been doing this. She said, I've been building computers since I was six years old.

Landis, like several of my participants, made note of how the Internet has been a game changer for literacy and for speculative fiction writing. In addition to increasing literacy options, technology also opened up opportunities for people, particularly women, who had career aspirations related to the sciences. Initially, during the CONS of the early 1990s when the Internet came out, some people were not receptive to women who knew about technology.

Yet in truth, these women had been knowledgeable about the field, and the Internet and resulting panels simply brought this knowledge to light. Therefore, through these in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2000), power shifted (Foucault, 1978), and women became more empowered both in technology fields and in writing. They had opportunities that were not available to them in the past due to constraining power relationships and binaries.

But one of the things that were interesting was that there were a lot of people that were like big name fans and like they had the little woman along with them. Who did like the stuff but everybody knew that mainly it was his deal. I can't think of a single black author. I did meet Ann McCaffrey; she was at one of them. There were a couple of other women, as you know, when MagiCon started really growing. But, to see Margaret Weise, I think is her name? She was at one and would get people's attention. But mainly the women that were there were, and you still see it, the women that were there as guests were, had done a show. Or had been in a movie. Or you know they were eye candy.

Julie Newmar, well she is eye candy, but she was there because she was an icon from My Living Doll and from Batman, all that. But I saw very few people of color; I saw maybe a few in the 1980s, but it was only the last few years that we saw really any real contenders. And that landscape started changing. And like I said, and I still say it, the arts reflect what's going on in the world. And the world reflects what's going in the arts. And I think that is what has happened. The world there is no "other" anymore. We are "The Other". And we have to deal with that, within ourselves. You know, that paradox. So, and I'm glad to see it going that way.

But this past year, just last week, at the Hugo Awards, in came, I apologize if I mispronounce her name. Jenison or Jessalyn? It's <u>The Fifth Season</u> (2015), and she won the Hugo Award and it's the second in the trilogy and it's this expansive, wonderful thing going on.

And people you know some got upset about it because…well, but it's a big deal, kind of like the

Olympics, since a woman of color won.

But the fact of the matter is, that contingency of no women, no blacks, no different

religions, some people are thinking, let's keep it the way it was. When in reality, it's like guys,

adapt or die. If you want to win the, if you want to win the Hugo, write something worth voting

for. And they, the puppies, the sad puppies or the rabid puppies, whichever one did it, they as a

joke voted for a gay erotica, a whole series of gay erotica, basically science fiction porn.

The guy won. Because it was like, it was fun. And you know why, why ever he won, but

it's like we will beat you at your own game. Neil Gaiman himself who was nominated for a Hugo

said I would pull you know, the Sandman, you know, it was nominated. But that would give them

even more bad publicity and all that so, but you know everybody, it's really shaken up a lot of

people. And people, we're always complaining about stuff but basically that's what it is. Adapt

or die. The world is changing. You've got to change.

Over time, Landis has watched female writers and writers of color become more visible

at Cons and within the speculative fiction genre. More recently, at the Hugo Awards, an African-

American woman won an award. Landis pointed out throughout her interviews and resulting

vignettes that not everyone has been receptive to changes in diverse female representation both

in literature and in technology fields, yet the world is changing, and as the world is changing,

representation will have to become broader. The broadening of the literary canon, therefore, is

indicative of larger societal changes that are occurring.

Landis's narrative is intriguing as data because, in her sixties, she was one of my older

participants. She began writing and publishing speculative fiction in the 1970s and was involved

in the fanzine movements that eventually evolved into online fiction. Therefore, she has seen

how power issues (Foucault, 1978), particularly as related to gender and race (Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997), have changed over time and how Internet affinity spaces, including fanfiction, have contributed to such changes. Deconstructing the literary canon (Derrida, 1967; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997) and making it more inclusive is very important to her. She and her partner Leah met as a result of Con events, as Leah is an actress who has been very involved in the fandom and fanzine movements as well. The two travel around the country together to discuss female representation in speculative fiction media, and as aforementioned we first became acquainted with each other when we served on a Female Superhero panel together at a smaller local Con. They have seen how MagiCon and the fandom events as a whole have become mainstreamed over time.

Leah:

I was one of the only women writing this work in the 70s, when I first started going to CONS and writing for fanzines. Fandom is fun; it's like Halloween. But it wasn't cool to be a geek like it is now, back in the late'70's. There was another, there were a couple of other women up in upper South Carolina. But the Star Trek fandom is really what hit it. I found them simply because I was reading Star Trek Lives. I thought all fandom was based in New York. Because that's where, they were having these huge Star Trek conventions, along with Philadelphia and Los Angeles. There's a great book about it. You should look for a copy sometime, if you want to know about really the early stuff and also the fan scenes.

So there was a small one-day event at a mall in Greenville, South Carolina, I think it was '76. I went to that and it literally changed my life. I met a group of people including a female editor of a fanzine. She helped me get started. She would look at my stories, and say oh this is crap. Or this is good, but why don't you tighten it up? I mean she really helped a lot and couple

of others. We all went our separate ways. I moved to Atlanta eventually but also I was, they were very old time, very laser beams and the space ship and you know talking about this. They were more hard-core science fiction. I wanted to write, and I wanted my stories to be character driven. But yeah those spaceships are great but you know what? Anybody can fly those spaceships. But not everybody can come and get two people who have been warring for 500 years, to stop warring.

Several other participants described *Star Trek* as being influential to them personally and also influential to the fandom scene because it had a more diverse cast of characters and, subsequently, brought more women into fandom. As previously stated, the *Twilight* series fandom is one that is controversial because of the portrayal of women and romantic relationships, but also one that brought more women into the fandom. Yet my findings and literature review show that the first surge of female writers and participants who took place in fandom occurred as a result of the *Star Trek* fandom, along with its accompanying conventions and fanzine stories. Leah, like some other female writers, was able to establish a support network through fanzines and CONS, which show the ability CONS and fanzine/fanfiction forums have to give writers who would otherwise be marginalized, or even silenced, a voice in the literary world.

Leah and Landis both have been able to publish successfully as speculative fiction writers throughout their long careers in part because of the support they received at *Star Trek* conventions and other speculative fiction and popular culture conferences they continue to go to, some of which have literary agents. Leah has also managed to continue an acting career, which has been spearheaded in part because of her CON connections as well.

FantasyCon Vignette and Analysis

Michelle:

I used cosplay lot more as a younger fan than I do as an older fan, mostly because of time. It takes a lot of time and money to make a costume and even if you're buying one you still have to pay to purchase the costume and so I do less often now. I actually tend to do more background and generic costumes these days. I think it's because I'm more comfortable in…well, I don't want to insinuate that people who cosplay aren't comfortable with themselves, but I do think people who are uncomfortable with themselves often do get into cosplay because it allows them to interact with the fandom without having to feel like the character, their own personality is being judged. My friends call it the 'dead pool effect'': you'll have a guy who is really awkward and maybe doesn't have a lot of friends and he goes to conventions and dresses as 'dead pool' and he's being crazy and fun and like people like the character and so they interact with him positively.

I think I used to do that more as an awkward teenager just because I didn't feel like I had anything to contribute. As I've gotten older and started being on panels and started talking to people at great length about these things, I feel more comfortable just presenting as myself within the fandom.

Michelle's description of fandom and identity fits with Williams's (2015) ideas on fans creating a self-narrative. Through cosplay activities, CON participants not only show their affinity and passion for a fandom through the visual art and visual texts of costumes, but they also can create an alternative identity for themselves, very similar to the alternative writer identities that fanfiction writers can create for themselves. Through

costuming, they can remix (Jenkins, 2013a) themselves into a newer and improved

version of their personas, just as fanfiction writers can take a storyline and characters

they love and construct, through writing, a plot line that they see as superior to that of the

original fandom story. Through art and writing, fans can construct texts that are re-mixed

and improved storylines, both of the fandoms and of themselves.

This year at FantasyCon, I was on two panels related to female empowerment. Yes. The

first one I was on was Feminism in Witchcraft and it was about witchcraft and represented

media and I talked about basically various different shows and movies that feature witch

characters across modern television history. The other one was problematic phase where we

discussed mostly…I think there were a couple of male characters discussed but majority female

characters and we talked about facets of those characters that were either problems within the

characters themselves or were problems with the way the characters were handled by the

creators or by people who rehashed it later.

I was on one of the two panels with Michelle, the one about problematic characters

known as "Problematic Faves." A mutual friend connected us via Facebook prior to FantasyCon

because she thought we had common interests and would enjoy being on a panel together on this

topic. Through Facebook, we connected and then met once to discuss the panel prior to

FantasyCon. After we were on the panel together, Michelle agreed to be a participant on my

study because of her interests in fandom and female representation.

I watched the panel about Feminism and Witchcraft immediately after watching a panel

by a *Harry Potter* scholar about the plot devices and themes of the book. The two panels were

intriguing to see back to back because they presented two very different philosophical

standpoints. The Harry Potter scholar discussed the plot devices of J.K. Rowling that made the

book an engaging read. He also discussed the commonalities between the feelings that people have when reading literature they connect to and the feelings people have when involved with religion. He believes that there is a goal of feeling connected to a creative force greater than oneself that one can often achieve through religion, but if not, one will look to other avenues for this fulfillment: football, sex, and also literature in some cases.

At the feminism and witchcraft panel, the participants discussed how the representation of female witches, very much like the representation of female superheroes (Robbins 2015a), has changed and shifted in congruence with political movements and philosophies of the United States. In the 1950s, television shows and accompanying comics such as *Bewitched* showed portrayed female witches as using their powers to perform household tasks and to please their husbands. As a contrast, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)*,* which came out in the late 1990s, was indicative of the "girl power" generation, and the witches and vampire slayers in the narrative had more empowering roles that did not involve men.

In the "Problematic Faves" panel at FantasyCon, we were critiquing two of our favorite fandoms, *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* based on their characterization. In the process, we were therefore deconstructing these texts, since even in more recent fandom stories, the lack of representation of diverse characters and/or problematic representation can reinforce dominant narratives and hegemony. Some of the minority race characters in *Harry Potter,* particularly the female characters, are not very well developed. The attempt to have them in the story is honorable, but better developed characters would have been more of an asset to the story.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is known for its representation of empowered lesbian witches. However, in the panel, Michelle made the argument that Willow's representation was problematic because she was labeled as a lesbian, but performed more as a bisexual woman.

These concerns are legitimate and also bring up the question that Butler (1990) posed as to whether or not labels are even necessary when describing people's sexual identities and preferences, and the hope that sexual fluidity will be considered more normative in the future.

I think a big problem, if you want to focus on female characters specifically, there were a lot of problems either when they attempted to empower characters they made them very one dimensional and they weren't relatable in any way or alternatively. They would throw other elements of the character under the bus in order to elevate the strong female aspect. They weren't very nuanced. I'd say it's been less of a problem in recent years although it still happens. But there was a good period of time in the '70's, 80's and the early '90's where a strong female character was a very one-dimensional kind of character.

Although female representation was improving in the early 90s, Michelle aptly notes here that some representations of women were still fairly one-dimensional and not very nuanced. However, the Internet became more prevalent in the mid-90s, and according to my findings from my interviews and field notes, consumers began to demand more from creators in terms of character representation. Therefore, since then, representation of female characters has began to improve, although it remains inconsistent in terms of the quality of character representation and the diversity of authors represented. My data show that the emergence of the Internet in the mid-1990s had a drastic affect on the portrayal of female characters in popular culture as well as literature.

It's interesting because when I was younger and a little bit less secure in myself because now, at twenty-five, my interaction with fandom is, I think, if anything, more intense but less obvious. I think when I was younger I was a little bit more in a shell level into my fandoms. I was very interested in reading and watching and repeating the

experience of them but I wasn't getting too in depth in the plots for the most part but I wore a lot of merchandize and like I could've been a billboard for a lot of merchandise that I liked at the time as a teenager.

But now, as an adult, I'd say most of my fandoms I have a much deeper appreciation for on an artistic and intellectual level, but you might not see me dressed head to toe in Buffy the Vampire Slayer merchandise, but I might have like stake earrings on at the office. I'm not embarrassed by it, but it doesn't encompass my whole identity anymore.

When I was younger, fandom served a purpose of creating an identity for me, I would say and now that I've gotten older it's something that I enjoy but I can separate myself from an enjoyment in that I can talk about the way it inspired me and the way that I interact with the content and how it makes my life better but I still am my own person and I don't feel like it defines me.

I think if <u>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</u> were ever somehow unwatchable, if I lost all of my DVD's I would be sad but I wouldn't feel like my identity was ruined. Interestingly, I have some friends that are my age and a little bit older that are struggling to have appropriate levels of interest in fandoms. I have some friends who the only thing that they seem to want to discuss are fandom related issues and that can be a lot of fun if you want to talk supernatural, say, but it sometimes seems like they can't engage with anything but the content and so my friendships with them have kind of become a little less and less because they don't relate the fandom to what's happening in their lives or the world, they're a little bit more stuck within the world itself because they kind of use it as an extreme escapism.

When Michelle was younger, her relationship with fandom better matched Williams's (2015) ideas behind fandom as a way to construct a self-narrative. However, over time, her relationship with fandom has become less personal and more so academic and creative. Like me, she is interested in analyzing texts from a feminist perspective and deconstructing the character representations to think about how they might be reflecting ideologies of the patriarchy, whether or not the creators were aware of these attributes. Through having these conversations from critical media literacy (Hall, 2012; Morrell, 2002) deconstruction of texts (Derrida, 1967; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997), power relationships (Foucault, 1978), and expansion of the literary canon (Weedon, 1997), fandom will continue to become more inclusive over time, along with multimodal texts.

I went through a period of time from about eighteen to twenty-one where I was very isolated geographically and I learned most of the things that I learned online and so I was just starting to learn about political and social issues at the same time that I was also being on Tumblr and being involved in fandoms and I started to get drawn more and more to people who would write a really intelligent essay about something that I had been told up to that point was frivolous and not worth exploring deeply.

I think that I've always been a little bit more drawn to co-defining the absurd, I guess, and so I started reading these essays and then I would order some of the books online, some the college essays that people had written about Firefly and such and just became more interested in talking about it on a deep level because I just started to become more aware of the actual purpose of media and started to see it less as just passive entertainment and more as a way to introduce an idea to a large group of people.

Michelle has a strong interest in writing and in sharing both her writing and her

passion for fandom on the online affinity space (Gee, 2004) of Tumblr. Several panels I attended and other participant interviews referred to Tumblr as a very primary site for sharing fanfiction and fan art, although Tina pointed out that writers on Tumblr can be very harsh when giving feedback on writing. It is intriguing that Michelle developed this interest in Tumblr in part because of being in a geographically isolated area in which she did not have a lot of access to book stores and other places to consume media. Also, since she was not able to achieve a college education due to her socioeconomic status, she is very much self-taught in terms of feminism, literature, writer, and popular culture. Some of her more informal education on these topics is from Internet affinity spaces (Gee, 2004).

Due to her location and her lack of financial resources, Michelle relied heavily on the Internet to give her access to the content of her interest. Through these Internet connections on the online affinity space (Gee, 2004) of Tumblr, Michelle was able to form a community with other people interested in such fandoms as *Firefly, Harry Potter,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* A crucial aspect of these Internet spaces is that people can participate in the forums regardless of their race, social class, and gender.

These online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are occasionally vetted for inappropriate content, yet leadership and participation are porous. Therefore, I argue that these online affinity spaces deconstruct traditional classroom settings in which there are structured leaders and which one's race, social class, gender, and other aspects of identity can affect access to information and potential for leadership.

I think you can use media to talk about something in a way that can somehow manage to be simultaneous depersonalized and also intimate because people can be

deeply familiar with <u>Harry Potter</u> and talk about terrible things that happen in <u>Harry Potter</u> without getting the same level of disconnect and upset that they do if you try to talk about the same issues in real life. My friend sent me a meme yesterday to my phone and it was a picture of Donald Trump signing an executive order on abortions funds worldwide and underneath it he put the picture of Delores Umbridge creating her proclamations on the wall behind her…and it's funny because…and I think that's another thing that fandom can do for you as far as engaging in real life subjects that are difficult…if you can't laugh, you'll cry.

I think that pointing out absurdity in this way, I think sometimes can help you process information that would otherwise turn out to be overwhelming. I know that I've had trouble just keeping up with all of the different executive orders, trying to read them all and understand what they do. I mean, there have been quite a few and so it's been a little overwhelming in and of itself. So, it's worth considering the amusing parallel of absurdity and comparing that to the reality. I think it actually helps it be less intense because you can see it and you can laugh at it and be like, "Okay, I have the energy to deal with this because I can see some humor in it".

As an example, Dr. Seuss wrote comics during the World War that people read that made absurdities of situations. He actually made one that referenced his children's book, "The Sneeches," and he made one that was a line of people getting ready to be turned into 'sneeches' so that they could avoid detection. And so I think people have always done this. I think they've always kind of related media that already exists to talk about a difficult real world subject on a more neutral playing field. It's more academically discussed now but I think the tendency has always been there. I mean, even

the stories of the ancient gods were ways to discuss difficult political issues happening at the time.

Within both in-person and online fandom communities, Michelle has found an avenue with which to discuss political issues in context to stories. As someone who has read the entire *Harry Potter* and who has followed the fandom for several years as well, I have talked with other fans about the parallels between No Child Left Behind and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* Book 5 (2004), along with the parallels between the current political scene, fascist governments past and present, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Book 7 (2009). These conversations parallel Michelle's reference to the political implications behind Dr. Seuss's literature and also the conversations at other literary events I have attended. Much of this part of the conversation involved the power dynamics of politics and how quickly power can shift (Foucault, 1978) and how these changing dynamics can affect the literature we study. Also, literature can be empowering to people who might feel disenfranchised by political figures who are in power.

The conversation regarding the *Harry Potter* fandom is an example of how speculative fiction provides an avenue for discussing difficult and controversial topics in a world outside of our own, therefore allowing people to be more honest about their thoughts and feelings and perhaps even be able to see the humorous and more lighthearted side of hard situations. Speculative fiction worlds provide possibilities not only for more empowered female characters, but also spaces in which people can discuss real-world problems in fictional worlds and settings.

At CONS and fandom communities, I think I benefit from having the outlet to talk about difficult issues in a way that is less confrontational with people who don't

necessarily agree with me. I think I benefit from inspiration and from seeing…I mean, fortunately, now there are some more real life examples for women and girls of different genders, nationalities, sexual orientations than there were ever before but growing up, I was pretty limited in role models, and so it was very beneficial to have fictional role models at the time and it is still nice to have them today for the elements that aren't quite represented by a real life person that I can easily point out.

I think they also give you a framework of what's possible. I think that if you can compare yourself to the adversity…no one is going to be the chosen one in real life but I think that it can give you a bit of a perspective of realizing that you can surmount things. I think Buffy really taught me about community. It was the first superhero-esque show that I ever saw where the main crux of her success was her team.

This part of Michelle's vignette is indicative of why diverse characters are important to have. Since Michelle did not have a lot of role models growing up in her own family, she relied on role models in her speculative fiction universes of fandom. She identified with Buffy from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandom.

In the panel we were on together, Michelle discussed identifying with Willow as a nuanced female protagonist, in spite of the problematic aspects of her characterization, because Willow, like Michelle, is bisexual/of a non-normative sexuality. She noted being happy to see more of a variety of female role models in fandom stories. The issue of Willow's representation, as previously stated, relates to the problem that some feminist poststructural thinkers have with labeling people and putting them in binaries based on their gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990).

As someone who has been into popular culture cons and fandom for a long time, I'd definitely say CONS and the literature and media have become more inclusive. I think that it was a combination of people simply demanding more options and also more diverse creators just getting a shot of having their stuff out there. I think that fandoms are easier to get than they used to be. Back in the day, access was a little bit of a problem especially for me in a rural area. I didn't have Internet until I think I was like fourteen. So, it was a little bit tougher to find out about events or to know when the new books would be released, things like that. You had to really be on the ball.

So, I think now it's really easy to…if you decide one day that you really want to be interested in Captain America, you can spend a weekend knowing everything that you ever wanted to know. And so I'd say that the access to those groups is a lot easier than it was when I was growing up. Internet changes everything.

I think it also made it more acceptable because I know that I was made fun of in middle and high school for being as into <u>Harry Potter</u> stuff as I was but as an adult no one cares and none of the teens that I know now are saying they're being made fun of at all for being interested in them. I think that exposure, even for people who aren't necessarily interested in fandom, people who aren't interested in it, being exposed to it has made them care a lot less about it and so there is a lot less push back towards kids who might be really into something.

Michelle, like some other children who are readers, was made fun of for her strong interest in literature, particularly the *Harry Potter* series. However, through her online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), she was able to form a supportive community of people who shared her literary interests. Without the Internet, this community formation would not have been possible because she lived in a rural area without a lot of access. In addition for the in-person CONS and

literary events of my study being important affinity spaces for these discussions, the adjoining online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are also necessary avenues for people who cannot come to the events, due to location and/or financial constraints.

For those who do not have the portal of access of a CON pass, their portal into these fandom worlds of literary discussion is access to the Internet, which is usually easy this day and age. If people do not have Internet access at home, they often do at the local library or at schools. Therefore, as several of my participants pointed out, the Internet affords opportunities for these literary and diversity discussions to people who might not otherwise have them. So many of my participants, regardless of their age, discussed how the Internet has had a drastic effect on their lives.

I think that creators have to listen to fans more than they used to because people are more willing through social media mostly, I think, to speak out when they feel that things are harmful. I think that people are more aware now that words do mean something. I think there is a lot of anti-bullying campaigns when we were in high school and they've kind of spread and people are a little bit more aware of the things that they say having an impact and I think creators want to have to have more clout right now. I think that fans and series are looked at more as love projects than moneymakers. People are putting out fewer things just to make money off a character and they're having higher content.

Comics is a really great area and the quality of graphic novels and comics, the story line-wise have really gone up in recent years simply because people have insisted upon it. And it's only helped the gene, along with video games. Overall, the respect for fandom, I think, has increased the quality and so I think it's a two way street. I think creators are intentionally putting out better stuff because the networks are allowing it and I think the networks are

allowing it because the consumers demanded it and then followed through with actually

consuming it when they did take a chance on it. There are times when fan feedback can go

wrong. In book 7 of <u>Harry Potter</u>, J.K Rowling got too wrapped up in what other people would

want for the characters and not in what was realistic. But usually, fan feedback from online

social media forums and otherwise makes the content better.

Like Jessica, Michelle discussed the quality control that multimodal texts now have in

large part due to fan feedback. Social media spaces, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, give

fans of all backgrounds a chance in which to express their viewpoints on content. Because

creators know that the fans are the ones who are supporting their content, they will adjust when

conversations of concern take place on social media. Therefore, these social media sites serve as

affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) that deconstruct the power lines between creators and consumers.

In the past, creators were in complete control of what they produced, which is why

content was limited. But now, with the Internet, consumers have the power to express our

discontent when we do not like the content, and creators must listen if they want to be successful.

With power, there is resistance (Foucault, 1978/1979; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Creators might

initially have the power over what content is produced, but if the fans complain enough, the

power begins to shift and to be fluid rather than fixed. Fans and consumers, therefore, have more

power over content than we used to, which has contributed to the increase of diverse

representation.

Michelle is one of my younger participants and was interesting to talk to because unlike

most people whom I interviewed, she has not had the opportunity to pursue a college education.

She has not had the finances to achieve a college education at this point in her life, in her mid-

twenties, and she also grew up in a religious group that discouraged people from obtaining higher education.

Michelle is an autodidact with fandom and pop culture issues, along with feminism, because she is passionate about representation of bisexual and queer women such as herself. As a result, she presents at conventions, such as FantasyCon, which is how I was able to become acquainted with her and to interview her. Her vignette speaks to the importance of costumes as a cultural aspect of fandom and as texts, power relationships between fans and creators, the representation of females in fandom spaces, and fandom as a form of identity.

Book Club Vignettes and Analysis

Kara:

I was literally raised in a library, in the Athens Regional Library System. There are two libraries in Franklin County, there's the Lavonia Library and the Royston Library, which is the one I worked at in college. The manager of the Royston Library is my great aunt's daughter. So I've known her my whole life. She's known me since I was born. I grew up with her on a frequent basis and then the manager at the Lavonia Library was my Sunday school teacher and went to the same church that my grandparents went to, that I went to growing up with them.

My parents got divorced when I was really little. And my biological father had every other weekend visits, but his parents got me, and so I would spend the whole weekend with them and they would take me to see Rosie at the library. And they're in their eighties now. So they were a little bit older and I think the library was a really amazing place for them to take me where they thought I could interact with people and have fun and be entertained without overwhelming them. And so I grew up going… some of my earliest memories are that library and being read to and… and just being.

Books consistently surrounded me as a child. My mom has been reader. My great grandmother on her side is a reader. My great grandmother passed away, she left me her entire collection of Grace Livingston Hill books because she wanted me to have something appropriate to read. It was really, really sweet. And so that was something that was fostered in me really, really early. And I naturally loved it. So I don't how much of that was it being shown to me and given to me as a child, or how much of it really was like presented and then I latched onto because it was something, you know what I mean? As a kid, it's really hard to remember that young. I don't remember learning to read. I just sort of always think that I have no memory of not reading.

Like most other participants in this study, Kara cited the public library and her family as being very crucial influences on her development as a reader. Noting that she was raised in a library, this aspect of Kara's life came back full circle, as she is now a full time professional librarian who specializes in children's and YA literature. Therefore, the book clubs at Cloud Nine are a career interest for her, in addition to a personal interest, because they give her an opportunity to learn more about YA literature.

Kara's narrative differs from some of my participants in that in spite of her age (mid twenties) she does not cite the Internet as having a major impact on her literacy practices; instead, she talks more about public libraries and her family as being influential on her interest in children's and YA literature. Additionally, the academic and the social interests for Kara, like me, are equally important in her decision to attend these literary events. These in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are a way for her to develop her academic interest in children's and YA literature in a setting that is less formal than educational institutions.

As a kid, my main presenting symptom with Celiac was joint pain and started experiencing it in the summer between eighth grade and ninth grade. So I was always… I always loved books. It was always really natural for me to stay inside and read a book rather than go outside and play with friends. Also, I moved around a lot. So that might have had something to do with. But it was never unusual for me to lose myself in a book.

But by the time I got to like those pivotal years, I lost myself in books because my daily life was really painful and a lot of that, well, there's sort of two sides to that coin because I was constantly looking for myself in those books and a lot of times, I didn't find it because it was a very large gap in young adult literature for kids who are sick, who don't either have cancer and die at the end or who don't get better. That's not a lot of, this is my life and this is how I live with it. And that's okay sort of thing.

But there was so much… I mean like I grew up with the <u>Harry Potter</u> series, and even though that's fantasy and not really anything related to my life, I found myself in Hermione even though she's not sick or anything like that. Like she loved books as much as I did. So I was able to lose myself in a lot of that and find a lot of hope in that even if it's not strictly presented and in the <u>Harry Potter</u> series, a lot of the times it was really presented fantasy situations, but it's still incredibly important I think. And you really get to see that in young adult literature and middle grades where it's developed out. But you see that a lot in picture books too.

I lost myself and I found myself in books as a teenager. And there were a lot of things that I didn't experience. I was home-schooled in high school. Not strictly because I was sick, but it ended up being much more beneficial that way. So there was a lot of stuff I didn't necessarily experience for both of those reasons. And then there was a lot of stuff like I didn't ever feel the

need to cope with my problems by doing crazy things. So I think I sort of saved myself a lot of trouble because I usually just turned to books.

Also, and that was kind of two-fold thing too because I wasn't out doing things that were not inherently bad, but could have caused me more trouble in the long-term. But I also learned how to, I saw a lot of people in those books learning how to help, how to cope in a healthy way with things. So it sort of was like an instruction manual for me to a certain extent. I think I was sort of in that generation where children's and Young Adult Literature was sort of exploding and there definitely is more now.

Kara, both in her narrative here and in some of our book club sessions, pointed to the limited representation of people with chronic illnesses in children's and YA literature. This issue of underrepresentation is gaining more momentum in both feminist and (dis)ability studies, yet based on my experiences of studying this literature, it is an area of representation that is understudied and not acknowledged as much as it should be. As Kara pointed out, there are novels such as John Green's well-known *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) that include kids who are terminally ill, but there are not many YA novels about kids who are chronically ill, not even within the realm of speculative fiction.

We had this interview in November, and Kara's passion for this issue came through in our January discussion of book club, perhaps because our conversation caused her to be more cognizant of this lacking representation and for her to advocate more for chronically ill children's stories to be apparent in literature. I understood her concern because although there are more books out about children and teenagers with autism and physical disabilities than there used to be, I never once read a book about a teenager with a more hidden disability like mine, which is a visual-spatial processing disorder.

The first book I ever read about someone with a learning disability similar to mine was *I Was Told There'd be Cake: Essays* by Sloane Crosley (2008), a collection of nonfiction essays, and I did not read this book until I was in my twenties; it is not a book meant for adolescents because of the content. I feel that if I had read more books from the perspective of learning disabled teenagers, I would have been less ashamed of my learning disability and still would be now, and I would be open to talking about it with people.

Reading has always been so consistently a part of my life. I never had to be convinced to go to the library or to read a book. My parents sort of always fostered that. I always sort of fell in with people who loved books too. And so I went to college I started as a psych major and I realized that's not what I wanted. So I picked something that I knew I would enjoy, History. I almost double majored, but I was really sick in college. I have Celiac and I didn't get diagnosed until a year before I graduated. And so I knew that officially double majoring would be too much on my plate. So I almost majored in English, but I really wanted books to stay as something that I loved and not something I ever had to do. Eventually, I ended up back in the library system I was raised in, focusing on Children's and Young Adult Literature.

When one is chronically ill, just like when one is learning disabled, it can affect every area of life. Having the illness without the diagnosis was difficult for Kara, yet books served as a form of solace and refuge. The book club participants in particular described books as having a cathartic, healing, and even spiritual effect on them. Perhaps if more people were able to see books in this way, more people would be readers. Her narrative emphasizes the importance of readers, especially kids, being able to see themselves in the literature they read.

I just finished college and so I got a history degree, but I think that's just because I loved it. I started working part time at the library because I needed a job. So that sort of propelled me

into my library career, and now I work as a full-time children's specialist. I do birth to 18 months, primarily children's like weekly story time stuff, but I do a lot of young adult and teen stuff too. I've always really loved young adult literature. That's why I ended up in the Cloud Nine Young Adult Literature Book Club. Since college, I have been looking for places to meet new people and make new friends. Cloud Nine's YA book club is a natural extension of my interests.

I live in Franklin County, so I live in a very rural part of our area with my grandfather, who is in his 60s. He was a Vietnam Vet, and he's about to retire. He's a huge gun enthusiast and all of my family (including my parents and my siblings) has political views that are vastly different than mine. That's something where we just… with my grandfather, we came to a mutual understanding and never talk about it. It does more harm than good for us to talk about it. We've never, he's a very nice man. We've never like butted heads against it, but we just respectively don't talk about it. That's not the case with my mother, and so I've found other than just my small group of friends who are all my age, well, under 30. I talk to them about politics, but not the rest of my family.

In terms of my friend group, my boyfriend is the oldest and he's 30, I'm 24. So there's six year time span of people close to my age, we all have exactly the same, or close enough to exactly the same view, but I have just sort of been surrounded other than them by this opposite rhetoric of what I had hoped for the end of the election. And I've kind of gotten to the point where there's nothing to be done about it. I have to surround my people or surround myself with people who, even if they're opinions are different than mine who are respectful and are welcoming and opening, and I think as a librarian, libraries play a really, really big role in that.

I spent the day after Election Day at an all-day staff training with every branch of my library system, we were in the library for like eight hours all day and so, that was a huge relief for me because I didn't have to think about any of it. I got to interact with people who are like me in terms of being open to different views and different kinds of people. I think in a sense that Cloud Nine, what's Cloud Nine is doing and independent bookshops do play a big role in that too. Like we are, our doors are open for people regardless of any beliefs, as long as they're respectful to other patrons. People who read books and go to bookstores and people who love books in general are very much like that,

I knew coming to Cloud Nine tonight, I'm assuming we're probably not going to talk politically. And even if we do, it's not going to be the focus. There will be something so refreshing and like just a warming about being around people who understand where you are coming from. I'm assuming that most people in the book club align with my views, but at least somewhat, but even if they don't, I feel like it's a safe space for me to exist and sort of get re-energized to go back and face next week.

Since Kara's family has very different political beliefs than she does, book club has been an important social outlet for her since the presidential election. The term "safe space" is a loaded one and problematic for some, but Kara described book clubs in that regard, since she saw them as a place at which she felt more empowered to express her perspective. Her grandfather is clearly a dominating figure in her household, based on her narrative, and he holds the power in terms of the dynamic of conversations that take place. Therefore, Kara seems very hesitant to contradict him in conversations, therefore causing her to simply not bring up politics in conversations. I can understand this, as I sometimes avoided topics growing up that would have led to conflict with some of my extended family members.

Unsurprisingly, it was the desire for connection, in addition to the desire to learn more about Young Adult literature, which brought Kara to book club meetings. Initially, she came because she was new to the area and wanted to make friends, yet she also gained an affinity space (Gee, 2004) in which she felt more empowered to express her views than she did with her more traditional family.

I've been there for three book clubs. So I've been there for <u>Vivian Apple</u> *(2015) and* <u>Shadowshaper</u> *(2015) and now* <u>Black Widow</u> *(2016). And I think* <u>Shadowshaper</u> *definitely stood out as the most diverse for sure, but they all had very strong female characters, had more than one strong female character, which I really appreciate. And I think that's amazing for everyone to read, not just women because I think it's important for everyone reading books to see different roles reflected.*

So I think <u>Shadowshaper</u> *(2015) was a hugely diverse and important book; even if you didn't entirely love the story, it did a really wonderful job of sharing this culture that she grew up and her family. And it wasn't even just her culture. The guy in the book, his family was, or his culture was different too, but it was different from hers. So it was a celebration of lots of different cultures and those tie in and how important those things are in everyone's life.*

But with <u>Vivian Apple</u> *(2015), I don't really remember if we got any sort of characterization based on race. She's an easy one to sort of assume, she's probably White, but she was a very… it was a really interesting dynamic between her and her friend who was a girl. And there were some smaller characters that were more diverse. I think her best friend was some sort of different ethnicity.*

Then with <u>Black Widow</u> *(2016), obviously, they're white, but they're Russian and so that was new, and I think most people probably assumed they're going to get entertained from a*

Black Widow novel, but there was a lot more than I was really expecting. I didn't know the story going in, so it was interesting to see it go from not just like a SHIELD based, Avengers idea, but to Russia and more exploration of their backgrounds.

It is interesting that Kara pointed out that *Black Widow* (2016) has diversity because of the characters being of another nationality. Also, she saw the value in *Shadowshaper* (2015), even though the group as a whole had mixed reactions to the novel. *Vivian Apple at the End of the World* (2016) had diverse characters, even though the primary character was of White European decent. Her best friend is Indian-American, and her best friend's brother is gay, so not all of the characters in the book are straight, White, and heteronormative characters. As a whole, the group had a positive reaction to *Vivian Apple* (2016), in part because they felt the apocalyptic undertones were indicative of current world events. Overall, Kara's narrative shows the power these affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) have in allowing participants to discuss important social issues related to character development.

Kara's story truly is one of a reader, heavily influenced by a family of readers, who eventually became a librarian. Her narrative points to a largely underrepresented group, that of the chronically ill person. In both her interview and in one of the book club sessions I attended, Kara expressed her desire to see more chronically ill people represented in YA literature. She desires increased intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) representation in the area of (dis)ability studies, which has overlaps with feminism. I interviewed her right before a book club session that was very charged with political discussion, since it occurred the Sunday after the results of the presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Hillary Rodham Clinton were announced. Therefore, it is interesting that she discussed her desire to connect to people who are similar to her in terms of political mindset at our book club.

Terra:

I feel like we talk about gender and maybe sexual orientation a lot in the comics/graphic novels book club. And I feel like maybe that's part of like the group of people, too, that it is because lots of times, it's funny because when I first started going I feel like there were a lot more men, but now it's like kind of gone to where it's like a lot of women and Curt. And so it's like a lot of people who are kind of interested in that sort of aspect of literature. I feel like there's a lot of talk sometimes about the idea of gender and the way people look at it.

I know I struggled at first, when I first came out as a feminist, I realized, this is something that's really important to me. I struggled with the idea of like oh, but I really like this TV show and it doesn't really look a certain way. For instance, I just binged watched all of Entourage. What do I do now? So I feel like it's good to have those conversations of, just because this TV show or movie wasn't perfect, it doesn't mean like you have to hate this thing. Or, you know, have a happy medium. Like you can't be mad at yourself.

And I feel like… I think because of the group dynamic, I feel like you're the same way as me. And if someone's like oh, this is a strong female protagonist, I'm like yes, I'll read that no matter what the rest of the plot line is. I'm like oh, absolutely. And so I think, for the most part, I think the things that we read do end up catering to that aspect. I think it makes me think more about what I'm reading. I do think I like the act of like reading something and really having to process it because I know that I'm going somewhere where I'm going to have to talk about it with others, at a book club or at a panel.

This interview was the first time I had heard someone refer to "coming out" as a feminist. Partly because of my understanding of feminist and poststructural theories, I find the term "coming out" to be problematic because it insinuates that people should hide all aspects of

themselves that are non-normative, and the act of "coming out" is an act of revealing something

that is secret. Yet Terra has been able to be more open about her feminist beliefs because of her

involvement with both books and fandom culture. For this study, I interviewed Terra specifically

about her involvement with the Cloud Nine Bookshop comics/graphic novel book club. She has

been involved with fandoms and Cons, just not the same ones I have attended. Her conversations

about book club definitely reveal the importance that the social connection aspect has for her.

I think people go to these events because they want to be around people who like the

same things as them. Part of the reason why I started going to graphic novel book club was

because like comics are fun if you have like a friend to talk about them with. And I didn't at the

time. I did not have another person that I knew that read comics, and so I was like oh, this is my

in to find other people who read comics. I don't know that geek culture is as taboo or like

underground as it maybe once was, but just the whole idea of going somewhere where people

like the same stuff you do is appealing. I think this is also why people like to go to CONS and

other fandom events.

Like Landis, Terra has noticed that geek culture has become more normalized and

mainstream over time. It is interesting that both participants pointed out this trend, as Terra is

about forty years younger than Landis and has not been steeped in geek culture nearly as long.

Yet although geek culture is more mainstream than it used to be, Terra noted the benefits of

attending these in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) to discuss these interest related to literature

and visual media that not everyone has.

And I would absolutely bring comics and different graphic novels and things into my

classroom for so many different reasons. Last semester I was in a fifth grade classroom, and they

had a bunch of Adventure Time comics. And they all watch Adventure Time, and seeing

Adventure Time comics made them want to read for one thing. And now, on the other end of the elementary spectrum, I'm in a first grade classroom, and some of the like struggling readers in that classroom find comics more engaging. They feel like they've accomplished more than if they just read a picture book. But it's still not like so difficult for them as reading a chapter book.

 It felt good to talk about all of this.

Terra's eagerness to use comics in the classroom deconstructs (Derrida, 1967) traditional views of the literary canon (Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997). She, more so than the high school teacher that I interviewed, expressed receiving support for this pedagogical choice. I wonder if her having more support for teaching comics than the other teacher is because Terra is teaching elementary school in a liberal university town, whereas the male teacher Bob teaches at a high school in the outskirts of a more suburban area north of Atlanta.

Bob was concerned that he would not have the support or the financial resources from his school to obtain class copies to teach such comics of interest as *Ms. Marvel* in the classroom. He has been able to take his students to the library, as I did, to obtain copies of comics and graphic novels to read individually, but thus far, he had not been able to teach them more formally. His interest in the comics/graphic novels panels at MagiCon is more so in the craft, as he would like to one day write and draw comics himself. Terra, as a contrast, is interested in comics both personally and academically, since she does have the flexibility and support to teach comics in her current classroom setting.

 Much of the academic literature about comics relates to this form as a scaffolding tool for other forms of media, whereas my scholarship is more so with the goal of encouraging educators to teach their students how to study the images from critical literacy perspectives

(Robbins, 2015a; Robbins, 2015b). Still, since many still perceive comics as a scaffolding tool more so than as high art that should be studied critically, Terra teaching younger students gives her more leverage to teach comics in a more formal school setting.

In a part of the interview not referenced in this vignette, Terra told me that a male romantic partner first introduced her to the *Bitch Planet* comics, and even now that she's separated from this boyfriend, she continues this interest in comics on her own. This is something with which I identified with, as a male romantic partner first introduced me to MagiCon in 2005, and he was my primary connection point with this event and this culture through 2007. Yet even after he and I separated, I continued to go to MagiCon on my own and to develop an interest in speculative Young Adult literature on my own, which eventually evolved into an interest in comics. Therefore, Terra and I both are interested in challenging the idea that fandom is a male space.

I found it pertinent that Terra noted that it felt good to talk about these topics in the interview. Even though she claims that comics and fandom have become more so mainstreamed over time, her statement shows that in some spaces, she might not feel comfortable discussing such topics. When asked questions specifically related to racial issues in the books we studied, Terra was not very forthcoming. However, she was very open in discussing gender issues as related to fandom and literature.

Ellen:

Part of the reason I enjoy YA books right now is because they are very plot-driven. And so when you don't have a lot of mental energy, having sort of a quick paced book is nice. And also because when I was teaching, I was teaching middle grades, and so YA books were often right up their alley. And so I read YA to keep current in what they were reading, which is also

why I go to ALAN. It's because it keeps you current and involved so you can recommend good books and know what's going to come out and what the trends are.

But the reason I go to the book club is because it's always nice to have somebody to talk about the books that you're reading. And the group of people that I think go to that share similar interests, and it seems to be, for the most part, a core group, which means that you can grow to trust each other and say your opinions without fear of them really judging you because they sort of have gotten to know you.

Oftentimes, membership in both in-person and online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) is fluid rather than stable and without a designated leader. In a transient college town, fluidity in membership is inevitable, and since the book club meets on weekends and is not required, it does not have the exact same group of people each time. However, Ellen pointed out that there is a "core group" of people who tend to come to most of the book club gatherings, and over time, those of us who come frequently to both the YA and the comics book club have gotten to know each other.

Cloud Nine offers several book clubs. Some people go to two or three book clubs, and some people only go to one, depending on their time constraints and interests. Since these are affinity spaces rather than formal school setting book clubs, people are allowed to go to the ones that interest them and when they choose. In formal school settings, the when-to-go rule cannot always be invoked, but the choice and interest rule can. Literature circles in secondary classrooms was the closest I came as a secondary teacher to this book club setting, but I wonder what other opportunities may exist.

The common link between ALAN and Cloud Nine book clubs is that rejuvenation. You know, you go to ALAN to go to… like you go to any conference. It sort of kicks you back into

gear and reminds you why you're doing what you're doing and what is new and innovative

because you get tired, but also, you know, there's this rock star component of seeing the authors

and getting to interact with them. And, you know, I'd rather do that than meet musicians, you

know, that kind of thing.

Well, and the same goes with Cloud Nine in that they bring in the authors, but also a lot

of... even if they don't bring in the authors, the sellers at Cloud Nine interact with the authors, at

least on Twitter, and so they bring that personal component in. So I think it's that feeling

connected to the art of the book, I guess, or the artist of the book that really draws me to ALAN,

but again, I mean, you know, it's that really positive feeling that you get when you're at either

place. I mean reading is art, for some people. I'm a reader, and so getting to around people and

the thing that you love makes you feel good.

Both Cloud Nine and such academic book conferences as the ALAN workshop at NCTE

offer places to increase one's academic knowledge. However, the Cloud Nine book clubs have

the additional component of encouraging personal connections, since they happen monthly rather

than only once a year, like academic conferences and Cons do. However, Ellen pointed out that

Twitter is a way to stay connected to authors and other people with common interests after

academic conferences. These online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) therefore allow participants of

both academic conferences and Cons to continue the conversations that begin in the in-person

spaces and could otherwise not continue with the same people because we are spread out.

Therefore, the Internet truly has changed communication in regards to literacy practices.

As an active Cloud Nine book club member and regular customer, like Ellen, I know that

Cloud Nine has become known in our college town community for bringing in high-profile

writers, particularly high profile YA authors. This has happened in large part because two of the

booksellers and book club facilitators are new authors, and nearly everyone who works at Cloud Nine is very active on Twitter.

I am more active on Facebook and Instagram than I am on Twitter, but I know that much of the content these Cloud Nine employees post is related to the literary industry. Had they not connected to some of these authors via Twitter, and Facebook as a secondary social media forum, we would not have had the opportunity to connect with these authors in person. Therefore, the Internet has offered opportunities for these affinity spaces that would not have existed prior to the mid-1990s.

So, in terms of the books we've read recently, Vivian Apple (2016) I adore because I'm reading the second one now. And I… while I didn't like that it's not a trilogy… a set… I don't think if there's a third one… I really enjoy actually the parallel in the politics between then and now, even though it wasn't written. And so in that way that it, you know, it's mimicking reality. I wasn't the biggest fan of Shadowshaper (2015), but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy the process of reading it and having a chance to talk about it. I tend to, well, we often lean towards more supernatural books I think at Cloud Nine, and that's not generally my forte. I'm more of the realistic fiction, and so I enjoy sort of opening up my world a little bit whenever we try the new books.

Both Ellen and Kara discussed enjoying Vivian Apple from the novel *Vivian Apple at the End of the World* (2016) as a strong, nuanced female protagonist. On a surface level, Vivian does not appear to be a diverse female protagonist because she is clearly of White European decent, based on how she is described in the book. However, she is an atheist, which gives her a different form of diversity.

Although Ellen acknowledges preferring realistic fiction, even though the group as a whole tends to gravitate more toward supernatural/speculative fiction, she feels that the book club opens her up to reading books she would not otherwise choose for herself. Choice is an important component of affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) in terms of chosen interests, but the chance to read a book that the group as a whole has chosen has also opened me up to books I would not have picked myself, and has given me insight into new characters who have different backgrounds from me.

Oh, I guess that there's probably two primary reasons why we tend toward the supernatural and fantasy books. And one would be that they seem to be popular right now so they're… they seem to be in a trend. And also because that's what the community enjoys. And so since it's a voting process, we are picking, and that's what we're picking. I guess it would be a combination of trending so they're being offered and then and then also the democracy of it.

But I think that they're trending… I mean I just wonder if they're trending in YA because I don't know that the adult books are mimicking that trend. But then I remember when the adult books were all vampires. And this is, of course, more before YA. So I'm wondering if the YA has sort of taken over the… the sort of supernatural trend… I'm not sure… or if it's just that kids like to go past reality. Because it's all-good and well to read characters you reflect yourselves, but sometimes you want something that's so totally different from your world that you want to go outside of it.

Supernatural books have been trending on and off since I started reading Young Adult Literature more heavily fifteen years ago, when I knew I wanted to be a teacher of adolescents and therefore read in order to better connect to my students' interests. In this particular affinity space (Gee, 2004), there is a democratic voting process, and most of the group prefers this genre.

An idea I have for further research, though, is to explore when and why speculative fiction tends to trend in the YA genre and otherwise. Does it have to do with the political tone of the country and of the world?

When we're picking our books, we're very aware of the diversity that we should be reading, and so we purposefully pick books that have some sort of non-cisgendered white male character. And so sometimes that means we're going with more women characters and sometimes that means we're going with books with people of color and sometimes that means we're going with kids who are transitioning or wondering about their sexuality or finding that they're having to face obstacles.

I think that a lot of the obstacles people face today or the awareness of the obstacles people face today are because of this divergence from traditional… you know, the… the white cisgendered male. And so I think that that's sort of a natural… you know, those are the books that are also coming out. We tend to be looking for cutting-edge books. Therefore, we're trying to also be careful that we're reading books that reflect the world as it is and the world as it can be.

I think that the group is really interested in that. I mean if I'd take a look at the group, you know, we have one male who wears skirts, we have a gay male, we have a traditional sort of open-minded white male, and then we have a bunch of women. And we don't have anybody of color in our group, which is sort of strange. And I don't know… I don't recall anybody coming of color, but that if they did they didn't return.

Typically, at the Cloud Nine YA book club, the facilitators suggest books for us to vote on and also open it up to the group to suggest books. Yet all of the books that we choose to vote on fit the description that Ellen has noted here, and nearly all of them have themes surrounding

social justice. Also, as a group, we are mindful of representation and of expanding the literary canon to be more inclusive (Weedon, 1997), perhaps in part because we live in a liberal college town with many educated people. The choice aspect of the book club gives it traits of an affinity space (Gee, 2004), and the role of the facilitator shows that power within these spaces is fluid (Foucault, 1978).

As Ellen pointed out, the group is majority women, and there is only one middle- aged straight White male who comes on a regular basis. There are people of non-dominant sexual orientations and gender representations in the group, which is important to note because it may be one reason why we gravitate toward books that offer alternative perspectives. Several participants of the study who consider themselves members of the LGBTQIA community reported that they feel welcome at Cloud Nine and appreciate the opportunity to discuss diversity issues in literature at book club while connecting with people with whom they can feel comfortable and open.

As Ellen pointed out, at least during the period of data collection, there was not a person of color who came to the group and who stayed. Yet we still tried to choose books with diverse racial representation, *Shadowshaper* (2015) being the most prominent example. The lack of racial diversity within the group is a limitation of the study and shows the institutional racism of the setting (Collins, 2000). The group is fairly diverse in terms of age, as participants ranged from early 20s to early 50s. However, my personal observations correlated with Ellen's: the group has diversity in terms of gender, age, and sexual orientation, but not in terms of race. Even while shopping at the bookshop, I rarely saw a person of color enter the store.

I think we're looking at what people face and how it mirrors reality and whether or not we think it's an honest portrayal from our perspectives, be they limited. And that we're also

looking at, as far as identity, the expanding ways that people can feel like they belong, but also

feel like they don't belong. So even the book <u>Anna and the French Kiss</u> by Stephanie Perkins

(2011) you know, that was very white rich kids, but they each had their battles.

And so whether or not you felt that they were normal battles or not, you know, whether

they were honest portrayals of those battles is sort of, I think, what we look for. And is the author

able to portray the character in a way that sort of resonates or did we sort of feel like it's being

forced, because I think we don't put as much stock into those that we don't feel like the author

has a handle on him or herself.

That didn't seem to be the case as much in <u>Shadowshaper</u> (2015) book. Like the female

protagonist, I think she was Puerto Rican, but I could be wrong, but I know she was

Hispanic. The book didn't feel, I hate to say the word authentic, but it didn't feel like it was

immersed in the book the way that it should have been for us to really relate to that character.

And the other characters also, even though there were… I think the gay characters… the two

women were more honestly portrayed, but I thought the other sort of felt pushed.

<u>Gabi, a Girl in Pieces</u> (2015), I felt it was more authentic, but I think other people felt

like the author should have done more, again, to make us feel like she… to make us understand

what it was like to be Latino. I think we look for these… at these books sometimes to understand

what it's like to be someone other than ourselves, and when they don't show us that we get sort

of annoyed.

In addition to choosing books with a diverse representation of characters, the group as a

whole tends to gravitate toward books when we can relate to the experiences of the characters.

Therefore, the characters need to seem realistic and believable, or the participants will not be as

receptive to the book; as an educator, I have found this trend to be true in classroom settings as

well. As Ellen noted, the group had mixed reactions to the book *Shadowshaper* (2015) because

the plot seemed forced and the characters, while diverse and nuanced, did not seem authentic.

Yet Ellen and other members of the group found *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero

(2014), a book they read several months back, to be a more authentic representation of a Latin@

woman of color. As noted in the MagiCon Diversity in YA panel, readers desire diverse books

that are also high quality, and readers are more likely to be engaged if they can relate to the

primary characters. The group was quick to resist a book in which the character representation

did not seem authentic, and the fact that participants felt that they could be outspoken and honest

about their views shows that we were in an affinity space with a fluid power structure (Foucault,

1978; Gee, 2004).

You know, I don't know that book club has shaped me as a reader because I'm coming in

it pretty old. And so I feel like I'm pretty shaped as a reader already, but it shows me the value

of having conversations about what I read and wanting to talk about that and fulfilling that need.

So I wouldn't say that that's shaping me, but it's definitely influencing me and helping me

choose what I read.

As a writer I think that it quashed, squashed like when I… before I was in Cloud Nine

and I did the Writing Project, I actually thought I could write fiction. And now reading so many

books and talking to authors, I realize that I'm not sure I have that skill. And it's not that I

wouldn't want to try later. It's just that I watch how Allen talks about books or how the authors

who come to visit talk about books or somebody's talking about meeting these authors or

tweeting with these authors. I'm like I don't know if I have that mentality or I think that way. So

it's sort of made me recognize that as much as I would like to write young adult books, I don't

know if I've got that skill. I very much want to as well. For me, I don't have time right now. I'd like to try it one day, but I could definitely see that that might not be something I'm able to do.

Like some MagiCon participants, Ellen has a greater appreciation for the craft of fiction writing as a result of attending these affinity spaces (Gee, 2004). Because of the professional and online connections Cloud Nine employees have with YA authors, a few have been able to visit Cloud Nine not only for more formal literary events and book signings, but also to take part in our book club when we have read our books. Because of a love of literature that extended to Twitter, authors felt encouraged to visit the bookshop and on a more personal level.

Through these conversations, we as a book club have learned about their writing processes, in addition to the books themselves. Forming relationships with each other, the bookshop, and with the authors has broadened our literary understandings, and these deeper connections with the authors have become possible in part because of Twitter. Many people aspire to be authors, but after hearing about the process, most realize that only so many people can do it.

I think that our book club is quick to point out when they don't feel like a female character is authentic. And I think that there were 80 percent female so that we catch that. I think it's… I just don't know. We read such a diverse set of books that the female identity is portrayed in so many different ways that what we're really often looking for is, is there something that sort of resounds with us or someone we've met. I think it's important not just for a female, but also for everybody. But just as you would say why would you think it's right to have an African American month or a Hispanic month, that having a chance to talk about female characters gives us a chance to sort of balance that playing field. But again, we don't balance it because we're not doing a lot of male characters.

Because the YA book club group is mostly female, we tend to choose books that portray female identity in many different ways. Also, we discuss the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of the characters and how the different components of their identities affect who they are. Arguably, because we are a group of mostly women, and we perceive the men in the group to be open minded, the book club gives us an affinity space (Gee, 2004) in which we feel comfortable discussing aspects of female identity of the book characters that might not come up in other settings. Also, the composition of the group affects the books we choose, which is one reason why we tend to choose books with diverse, empowered, and nuanced female protagonists, possibly more so than because of the genres we are studying. Having an all-female group does affect the power dynamic in terms of the books we choose to read and to discuss (Foucault, 1978), and it is part of the reason why we want to deconstruct the current literary canon (Derrida, 1967; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997).

In terms of childhood/early literacy, my parents always had books in the house. My mother read to us constantly, and she embodied the books. So she would recite lines from the books just randomly like during the day. She was like a real oral person, and so she would hear like a pattern and it would sort of sound… she would think of some book with the same kind of cadence and this voice would just come out of her mouth. And so books have always been really important in our family. I mean I still have books from my childhood and my family's kept books from my childhood.

I can remember being in my fourth grade class and reading <u>My Side of the Mountain</u> (2004) *because we got to read it in lunch. We got to come into the teacher's room in lunch. I remember when I moved in the third grade the class got together and got me a book and signed it. And I still have the book. It was like called Miss Susie and it was about a squirrel that kept the*

house clean. In reading for that class it was in New York in the '70s, and so it was an open

classroom, and you got to do whatever you wanted. And I only read. Like I never did math, and

so I always stayed in the reading corner and read. And when I traveled across country five days,

I read Anne of Green Gables *(1908/2014). So like my whole childhood is sort of framed around*

books and reading. I can't imagine… I've worked in a bookstore a couple times, and I can't

imagine sort of doing anything else or being around anything else. You could take a lot of things

away from me, but reading would not be one of them.

Of all of my participants, Ellen was the first person to discuss influential literacy

experiences in more formal school settings. Several of my participants discussed libraries,

families, and the Internet as having a major impact on their literacy practices, and one participant

discussed a professor, albeit a professor who she met on Twitter rather than a formal school

setting. One participant discussed her college experiences as being important to her decision to

becoming a librarian. But Ellen is the only one who had memories in school, which she

recounted as being influential to her literacy practices, and she cited her parents and her family

before school. These findings have implications for the importance of both in-person and online

affinity spaces (Gee, 2004).

Book club, for me, is food for the soul. And I'm not a religious person, so soul is, you

know, this ambiguous word. But it makes me happy, and so I really need to be happy. So the

reading makes me happy, the coming together with groups of people who are likeminded makes

me happy. It is something to look forward to.

Again, you can take away a lot from me, but the books are not one of them. I try to

spread that to others, and so it's really important to me for the kids that I meet. I get to take the

books from book club and maybe recommend them to somebody or recommend an author to

somebody, and so helping kids establish libraries of their own is… is important. And so, again,

you sort of have to immerse yourself. And so, again, like the ALAN workshop, one of those

parallels is that you get all these books and that you come back. And once you've read them you

get to give them to people or keep them for yourselves because they're super awesome. And I…

just the value of that, but mostly the book clubs are to feed me.

Ellen describes reading books and discussing them with others as having the same kind of

affect and emotion that some people associate with fandom (Grossberg, 1994). Though

controversial, as previously stated, one panel I attended at FantasyCon described the experience

of reading books as akin to religious experiences. Although that finding was not a primary goal

of this study, it came up in two interviews and in two panels I attended, so it is a topic I wish to

continue to explore.

So these literary events, they're furthering the industry, and so I think that that's really

important to… to grow the industry. We're giving new authors a voice. And I think that… that by

supporting them and listening to them and spreading their word we're better constructing a

more diverse network of books that people can read. And I'm very much one of those people who

thinks that we change the world a person at a time. I'm not one of those people who shout from

the mountaintops and say you all should do this. It's sort of those daily interactions we have

shape the world.

So by going to those and participating in those you're being part of that network. So

simply by voicing things and having conversations we're changing what reality is and we're

making that reality more diverse, be it woman, gay, people of color. Any group that has

traditionally been marginalized, we're strengthening their network simply by having that

conversation. So financially, globally, personally, it's so valuable to feel like you have a

community to belong to and that gives you somebody who you know you can count on, but I think community is not just having, a network of friends; it's creating that, discourse of readers and having this concept of what a reader is and being around people who sort of act the same way you do so you fit in. And everybody needs to fit in, and reading is such a positive way to fit in that I think that that is also, really valuable.

So again, the diversity aspect of it just strengthens who we are as a community outside the reading community. So be that local, state, national, global, it's hard to think in terms because in size because that's just whatever we're thinking about at the time.

As Ellen aptly noted, a key role that these affinity spaces play for literacy education is exposure to diverse literature from both new and emerging authors. Particularly within the comics and YA literature forms, there are many stories of diversity, overcoming adversity, and identity that are worthy of study, and some might not come to the forefront and be accessible to readers, teachers, and librarians were it not for these events. While many of us are initially drawn to these literary events with the goal of forming social connections, we stay in part because of the academic knowledge we gain about diverse literature with nuanced female protagonists that we can share and discuss with others.

Ellen's narrative represents an account of how our book clubs contribute to important conversations surrounding representation, female protagonists, and diversity issues. Additionally, her story speaks to the common links between those of us who tend to frequent these events and how we became readers. Like me and like some of the other participants, her family played a crucial role in developing her interest in reading, and like me, her teaching and research experiences have shaped her interest in diversity issues within literature.

Book Club and MagiCon Crossover Vignettes and Analysis:

Elizabeth:

I have a blog where I write reviews about various books with asexual characters, because there used to be a list of about five that people were aware of, and people wondered if there were any more. And it would be these same five and no one had ever read any of them it seemed like. Like there was, you couldn't find anything on them. There's one that I still think no one has read. Because it looks so boring, but it's not, and it's kind of debatable as to whether it has any representation at all. But it still is always on the list. So I was just like oh, what the hell, I will read these and start writing reviews so they'll be out there and other people can find them. So I have been doing that for a couple years now. But I don't keep up with it as much as I'd like to.

Like some other participants, Elizabeth identified sexual identity as an area underrepresented in YA literature. Since she is asexual, she actively looks for YA novels in which asexual characters are represented. She also wrote a blog post about demisexual characters, meaning they are people who can form a sexual attraction, but only if a deep emotional connection is present. Very much like sexual attraction, how sexual or asexual someone is can exist on a spectrum. However, some people prefer to name themselves as asexual or demisexual, or gray area, a space that exists between the two, in order to find others who share their similar experiences.

Elizabeth willingly shared her blog with me after hearing me speak on the Gender in YA literature panel at MagiCon, as previously mentioned. This was the first time she had told me about this aspect of who she is and about her blog. As I looked at her blog, I realized how effective Tumblr is for forming online communities and having dialogues about these issues

through online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004). There are tags and support groups for people who are interested in sexuality identity issues (such as identifying as asexual), fandom, young adult literature, and many other niche interests. I have a Tumblr account, but have not been very active on it, so Elizabeth's blog opened up for me areas for future research exploration.

I think the community aspect of book club could be more maybe actively encouraged if we, if we wanted. But as it is I feel it's overall an environment where I could bring something personal up something up if I wanted. So I don't think I've ever really said anything about being asexual and asexuality in any of the book clubs. Like that's not something that's come up. But that's fine. I feel like I probably could if I wanted. I know Bruce is genderqueer and talked to us about that and felt comfortable doing so. I do like the structure of book club at Cloud Nine, because some book clubs I've had more informally with groups of my friends have just kind of petered out over time.

From Elizabeth's perspective, the Cloud Nine YA book club is a place where participants feel that they can open up about issues that are important to them and express their true identities. Since Bruce is genderqueer, he performs a gender identity different from the one of his biological birth. At one book club, he opened up about his gender performance, but noted that he had not "come out" to his work peers yet. Therefore, the book club group knew about this aspect of his identity before people who saw him daily. My viewpoint, based on the responses of the other participants, is that he felt comfortable because of the conversations we have had about such issues and the books we have read that foster conversations about diversity. Therefore, some members of the LGBTQIA community did feel a sense of empowerment within the book club space.

I didn't have any real fan experiences before the Internet, but I remember being blown

away by Amazon and the fact that you can look up an author and see all of their books in order.

Like because I was library only, and if the library didn't have it, I didn't know it existed. So like

I was so amazed to be able to be like this is the order of this series. This is the book I'm missing.

There are other reviews about it. Like oh my God Amazon was, I was so amazed, 14 year

old me. And now creators I think have to pay more attention to the fans in some ways I mean I

think there's sort of something about, fans are entitled these days. But it's easier to be like this is

who watches it. This is who cares about it. And this is what they care about in ways that before

they might not have.

For Elizabeth, in addition to some other participants, the Internet increased her access to

books and the options that were available to her as a consumer. As other fans have noted,

creators now have to pay more attention to readers and to fans when it comes to production. It

may give us a sense of entitlement, but it also opens creators to issues that are important to their

fans and increases the diversity of content.

I was actually a little bit disappointed by some of the MagiCon panels I attended this

year because I have been spoiled by podcasts, especially the ones that debate stuff. I liked the

gender and YA literature panel; that one had good book recommendations and a pretty good

representation of different opinions. But I was disappointed in some of the others; only because

the quality of podcasts I've been listening to is so good. I almost went to podcasting panels this

year. And I didn't, because I've gotten so into podcasts for my new job.

Elizabeth is among the many participants who described the Internet as having a huge

impact on her literacy evolution. She has read fanfiction, but does not write it, and she is an avid

follower of podcasts. Her narrative confirms the finding that consumers and fans are demanding

higher quality in terms of content and performance. Now that podcasts are out that discuss issues related to fandom and literature, people are still excited to attend the in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) of CONS and book clubs, they are expecting a higher caliber of information because of what they hear on the Internet.

I have attended the YA book club with Elizabeth for two and a half years now, but this is the first time I crossed paths with both her and Rick at MagiCon, even though I was aware that both of them went to MagiCon every year. The two events and their literary panels tend to draw some of the same participants, as they have similar structures and generators of discussion. This year, I posted information about my MagiCon panels on my Facebook page, in hopes of drawing a crowd.

Even though Elizabeth and Rick neither one know me very well personally, they were interested in the subject matter of my panels, and each one attended one of the two. Therefore, Facebook actually served as a portal of entry to my panels, as I gave people the information they needed to attend. Social media sites can serve both as portals of access to help people learn about literary events and generators of discussion before, during, and after.

Rick:

I like the book club just because it's a chance to connect to others. As we all get older, it's not as easy to find a steady group of friends. I have a lot of friends, but a lot of them live far away. It's not as easy to find groups to go and meet with regularly or at least that you might have something in common with. Over time, we just know each other. We hang out all the time. It's fun to have a reason to go and discuss these things. I've made friends with people in book club that I also see outside of book club.

I just enjoy going to places with people with similar mindset, at least about the topic of

books and fandom. Maybe you don't agree about everything, but you can at least agree that you

like YA books or you like Star Trek or Dr. Who, or comic books. So I think it's just, fun to go and

hang out with and be around people that think the same way you do sometimes. Or don't, or you

can disagree about that topic. Also, it's nice to have a facilitator who has read the book and who

has thought about it, along with an agreed upon time to meet once a month.

I interviewed Rick and Elizabeth together in a small focus group because I was interested

to hear how they thought the experiences of CONS and book clubs paralleled, since both

participants are involved in both affinity spaces. Both of them pointed to the advantage of having

a book club in a more structured setting, with a designated facilitator.

In the longer interview, they pointed out that the facilitators of the YA book club at

Cloud Nine have changed, but there has always been a point person, which gives the other

members a sense of accountability and the fluid power structure more typical of an affinity space

(Foucault, 1978; Gee, 2004). The leadership is porous, but there is a designated point person,

unlike some online affinity spaces. In the book clubs I have attended, the facilitator usually starts

the conversation, yet lets us as participants guide most of the dialogue and intervenes only if

some people do not have sufficient time to speak their turn. Both Elizabeth and Rick noted that

the book club meetings tend to go more smoothly when the facilitator has prepared in advance by

reading the whole book and preparing starter questions.

Rick enjoys book clubs as an opportunity to discuss content he is interested in. Mostly, he

sees book clubs as a chance to connect with people on a personal level, as it is harder to make

friends who one sees consistently once one gets farther into adulthood. Oftentimes, from his

perspective, book club participants start off as acquaintances and over time become closer friends, or at least a steady group of friends to see on a regular basis.

As for MagiCon, the <u>March</u> panel was probably the one that delved the most into media and diversity issues, the book that's about John Lewis's involvement with the Civil Rights movement in the '60's. They mainly talked about <u>March: Book Three</u> (Lewis, Aydin, & Powell, 2016) this year. I have not read the other two books in the series, but now we own all three. And so I need to read them now, I think, as a white male. It's always interesting to me to hear what other people have gone through, because my life has been pretty easy. But I thought it was a good panel. Amy took her 11 year old. She was like very excited that her son was getting a chance to experience hearing one of the icons of that movement. But only so many of the panels we went that delved into serious topics.

The <u>March</u> panel was a lot about the process of getting all the words on the script written. They said that some panels were easy, but some were really hard to draw. The process of having to interview people that were there and looking at the source material was time consuming, because they really wanted this to be like a document that people could like look back on. They wanted to feel they really knew what was happening. So they bothered to look into subtle details, like who was wearing what hat? Who was carrying what bag? And they drew all the details, as exactly as they could. And then of course people just had questions for John Lewis, about just his life in general.

But generally, I like hearing people get excited about what they like. And that's also why I like going to MagiCon, and panels. It's fun when people get excited about something.

Rick discussed learning more about the writing and drawing of comics as a craft from attending some of the MagiCon panels, which is a consistent finding among the participants.

Additionally, the *March* panels helped him to consider issues surrounding diversity and history that he does not always encounter on a daily basis. To me, it was very intriguing that he was aware of his privilege as a White middle class male, as some White middle class males I have interacted with outside of his study have been very resistant to discussing issues surrounding privilege. He shows a willingness to deconstruct the traditional literary canon and to grapple with the power and privilege issues involved with being a straight White middle class male.

Of my participants, Rick was one of only two White men and the only one about whom I created a vignette to represent the most prevalent findings of my study. Both of the spaces I studied were female-dominated, in large part I believe because of the interests represented. While I am happy to see these spaces at which women and gender nonconforming people can feel comfortable discussing diversity issues, I do feel that the lack of White male attendees is a limitation of the study, and also an attribute of these spaces that I hope will change over time. Perhaps, as we have more conversations surrounding White privilege, more people will feel comfortable discussing them candidly.

Additional Key Observations from Participants

The organizers of Cloud Nine bookshop, according to the participants, have made a conscientious effort to bring in literature and writers that encourage a more diverse literary canon and representation of writers and characters. In her focus group interview, a mid-twenties participant of the YA book club, Julie, noted, "I think they deliberately try and host events that feature authors and material that is more inclusive." As a literacy educator, I believe part of my responsibility is to introduce my students to literature that is diverse in tends of authors and characters, so I appreciate this goal.

Based on the limited time period of my data collection, although Julia made the point about the effort toward inclusiveness, I believe more of an effort could be made to include books with characters of color. Of the four book clubs I attended and took notes on for the purposes of this study, only one had primary characters of color, although another had several minor characters of color and yet another had a main protagonist of the LGBTQIA community.

I believe it is possible that the book club would recruit more long-term participants of color if the books were more diverse in selection. The selection process might be limited in part by how the participants vote, although the facilitators could certainly make more of an effort to include books by a variety of authors. Additionally, from a researcher's standpoint, I wonder if having a more diverse staff at the bookshop would increase the diversity of the book club selections, although it has gotten more diverse over time during the three and a half years I have attended the book clubs.

Cloud Nine employees are also cognizant of this responsibility in choosing novels for book clubs, as are the organizers of MagiCon and FantasyCon in terms of the panels they accept, based on my experiences and the interviews of my participants. Based on my one-year experience there this far, the comics panel at FantasyCon could have been more inclusive of female voices and non-White voices, but the panel on female characters in science fiction and fantasy was inclusive of diverse and nuanced female protagonists, including women of color, LGBT women, and disabled women.

Congruently, Bruce, whom Elizabeth had noted in her interview came out to the group as genderqueer, noted the following about Cloud Nine Bookshop:

It's a pretty inclusive-feeling place. They definitely the conscious effort to pick

voices that are not already prominently displayed and/or we haven't been

covering recently or at all. Inasmuch that we're not Social Justice Book Club, we

do have specifically in our discussions about what books to do next, multiple

times said, let's look for a voice that we're not familiar with. Like, for instance, a

couple of months ago, we did a book about transgender issues and like a trans boy

growing up, and having to deal with like being mis-gendered, and trying to figure out

how to navigate that instance. And that was a specifically conscious choice of like, hey,

let's do this book as opposed to other things. But then there are definitely several books

that we've read that obliquely mention or kind deals with minority cultural issues that are

not always super out in the open.

Bruce also noted that they associate more inclusive environments with liberal political views

more so than conservative views, in part based on their own experiences growing up in a very

conservative family.

The ability to discuss controversial issues in book club sessions I attended is in part due

to the conscious choices that the facilitators make in the novels. However, it is also in part due to

the rapport we have formed with each other based on meeting once a month fairly consistently to

discus a novel, since there is a core group. Allen, the facilitator of the YA book club noted that

the YA genre is conducive to forming these relationships: "I think that Young Adult literature

also tends to bring out a kind of connection, I think we all connect really well in part because

reading about these characters who are younger than us, we've had experiences like those of the

characters, and maybe sometimes reflect our experiences as younger people, like there's like a

bond that we get to like create. This subject matter that we talk about is more personal, like my

falling in love the first time, experiences like that."

One of the visiting authors at an Cloud Nine bookshop event I attended made a very similar point, that YA literature has a universal component that some forms of literature do not because we all experience coming of age and having to become an adult. Perhaps because of these common coming of age experiences, YA literature lends itself to readers being open to different voices because even if the characters have some life experiences and attributes that differ from our own, we can still connect to the coming of age components of the stories.

Although these spaces are working more toward inclusion in terms of increasing diversity in multimodal texts, these goals do not come without their challenges. Two panels that I either helped facilitate or participated in at MagiCon discussed the marketability issue. Some publishing companies are more hesitant to take on novels with diverse characters because they worry whether or not these books will sell, and therefore whether or not they will make the profit they need to keep the company afloat.

One of my participants Alaina, who attended the Superpowered YA panel and was involved with one of these conversations, noted that this issue carries over into television shows:

> When the TV show *Supergirl* (2015) makes the main character Jimmy Olson f
> rom the Superman comic black, there's an interracial love interest between him
> and Supergirl. I think it's fantastic. I think they work on screen so well. It's
> ridiculous. But unfortunately, there are the few people who will be like, you
> know, oh I can't believe that you're having this inner-racial relationship. But the
> TV producers know that you have to do it, in a way that succeeds economically or
> the show would be taken off the air.

Alaina also noted later in her interview that people who attend Cons, from her experience, are more open minded and creative and therefore open to texts with more diversity, and this is a

component she considers when marketing and writing her own YA and fantasy literature with her writing partner and husband. Yet she acknowledges that within the more general and broad population who might engage with popular culture, some consumers might not be as open to interracial relationships and diverse representation of characters.

Therefore, creators and writers alike need to be cognizant of how they approach these issues when they market and create their content. Much of the conversation in Alaina's interview, as well as the panels, was about striking a balance between moving society forward with this content and being aware of marketability issues.

Another participant, Kevin, noted that comics may have more flexibility in terms of representation than some forms of media because of their readership, which is largely comprised of off mainstream people known as "nerds" and or people who have felt marginalized due to their interests and/or identities. He noted, "They're shoving minorities to the forefront in a lot of different ways. I think because it's already a minority readership. As long as you're going to write them that way, everybody's going to read them that way. So that's probably why." His statement is congruent with past research I have done about comics as a marginalized media form that tends to tell the stories of marginalized and oppressed people (Carter, 2008; Robbins, 2015b; Schwartz, 2010), therefore drawing in an audience who takes interest in such issues. In my opinion, this trend is one reason why comics should be studied in more depth, both inside and outside of formal educational settings.

There is still not as much diversity in representation in more mainstream forms of media as some would like to see, but some participants have noticed an improvement in recent years. Rue, one of the main protagonists in the *Hunger Games* films is a woman of color, along with one of the central female characters in the new *Ghostbusters* (2016) movie. Although both of

these characterizations led to backlash on such social media forums as Twitter, some of my participants noted these changes as positive. Mandy also pointed out other recent changes in this direction: "Earlier today, I was looking at the Internet and it showed that they had cast the new *Wrinkle in Time* movie, and it's almost entirely people of color. it reminds me of Hermione being recast as an adult Hermione in *The Cursed Child* play, because they recast her as a black woman as well."

The topic of Hermione as an African-American woman in the new play version in England did not come up in the MagiCon or FantasyCon panels I went to that were specifically devoted to *Harry Potter,* which surprised me. Yet in several of my interviews, my participants mentioned the increase of female protagonists and creators of color, including the Hugo Award winning novel *The Fifth Season (The Broken Earth)* by N.K. Jemison (2015).

As a researcher, I am aware that these topics emerged because of the nature of my research questions. However, the fact that my participants were aware of these changes, in part because of the Internet, and saw them as positive bodes well for the future of the speculative fiction and comics/graphica forms of literature. Hopefully, if book club facilitators and Con coordinators continue to take their responsibilities to expose attendees to diverse content seriously, people's awareness of diverse literature with empowered female protagonists will continue to increase.

Findings

This section will explain the findings that I derived from interviews and interactions with my participants, along with my field notes from in-person events and analysis of my fanfiction story feedback. Although the findings of this study are too complex to be confined to a list, there

were commonalities between responses of my participants that are worth noting, along with certain areas in which there were outliers.

Based on the responses of my participants, people who are drawn to literary events that discuss multimodal texts with diverse and empowered female protagonists tend to have had the following past literacy experiences as crucial components to their development of literary interests: parents who fostered their love of reading, frequent use of libraries growing up, and exposure to the Internet. Formal educational settings were secondary in influence to the aforementioned avenues for literacy development. Regardless of their ages, which ranged from mid twenties to mid sixties, nearly all of my participants described the Internet as having a significant impact on their literacy development, their connections to fandom, and/or their understanding of literature and newer forms of literacy.

Ellen was the only participant who made direct reference to novels she had studied in formal classroom settings. Kara mentioned formal classroom settings, but did not elaborate on specific novels she had studied in classes that impacted her. Kevin discussed Accelerated Reader as a tool used in classroom settings that motivated him to read, but did not describe formal classroom instruction. Kara was the participant who talked the most about the influence of libraries on her literacy practices, although Kevin, Tina, and Mandy all referenced libraries as making a major impact on their literacy practices as well.

Many of my participants believe that representation of diverse and empowered female protagonists has recently improved in multimodal texts, in spite of some pushback from mainstream society. However, the following groups reported that they still feel underrepresented: Women of color, people of the LGBTQIA community, people with chronic illnesses, and people

with mental health disorders. Jessica, Becky, and Ansley have used their social media platforms and presence to be outspoken about these representation issues and to encourage change.

Within these spaces, there is sometimes a discrepancy between the literature and diversity issues discussed and who comes to these spaces. According to discussions I heard in panels and my own personal observations at MagiCon after going for ten years, both MagiCon and FantasyCon have become increasingly more diverse over the years. The majority of participants and panelists are still straight White middle class people, particularly at FantasyCon but both the panelists and participants are becoming increasingly more diverse. Also, as evident from the panel on female representation in comics that Jessica and I both attended and the panel on women in science fiction that Michelle and I attended, the organizers of these two CONS are aware of the lacking representation and are very open to discussing it in panels. For the MagiCon Comics and Popular Arts conference, there is now a note on the website that encourages people not traditionally represented in academia to submit paper proposals, namely women, people of color, members of the LGBTQIA community, and people with (dis)abilities.

As aforementioned, the majority of participants discussed how the Internet has had a significant impact in the increased diversity of multimodal texts because through social media and other online affinity spaces, so consumers now feel more empowered to give creators feedback on their content and, therefore, demand more diverse representation. Rick and Elizabeth, as attendees of both MagiCon and Cloud Nine Book Clubs, had especially interesting perspectives to add on this topic. Most of the podcasts they engage with pertain to fandom communities, but both are active Goodreads users, and Elizabeth has a very active blog on Tumblr about YA literature with asexual characters. They each attended one of my MagiCon panels in part because I listed them on Facebook ahead of time. Jessica and Michelle both talked

at length about how they see Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media forums as opportunities to express their desire for quality content that presents characters who are not all straight White middle class people. Landis and Leah, as longtime female fans and my two oldest participants, have seen how the Internet has contributed to the change of representation in related literature, film, and other forms of media.

This study emphasized the ideas that comics, as a medium that has been marginalized, and speculative fiction, with its alternative universes, are conducive to telling the stories of people who feel marginalized by patriarchy. Young Adult Literature unites people of different experiences because of the coming of age element and, therefore, is also conducive to stories surrounding social justice and their accompanying conversations. As a researcher, I was very intrigued that Julia and Bruce, as readers, both thought that comics are more legitimized in literary circles than Young Adult Literature, since my perception as a scholar and Teacher Educator was that the opposite was true.

However, the two teachers I interviewed, Terra and Bob, had conflicting views on how legitimized comics are in terms of how well received they are as literature for classroom discussion. Both have an interest in bringing comics into the classroom, but Terra felt support from her school, and Bob did not. Bob felt he could have students read comics and graphic novels as independent reading, but was worried he would not receive support from his new high school if he asked about buying a whole class set. These inconsistent findings show that some school settings still do not perceive comics and graphic novels as high literature that is worthy of study, and I believe one goal of these affinity spaces is to change this perception by making people more aware of the craft and technique of these graphic novels.

Several participants stated that primary benefits of the literary events of my study are exposure to more diverse literature and the opportunity to discuss these multimodal texts with people who have similar interests. Therefore, it can be concluded that CONS and book clubs in out-of-school spaces play a crucial role in exposing at least some participants to literature with diverse and empowered female protagonists and in fostering conversations surrounding the deconstruction of power and privilege.

Through attending literary events at Cons and book clubs and engaging with the generating content (such as the book club novels), my participants learned to better understand life experiences of people with different backgrounds and also gained a deeper appreciation for the craft of writing and the artwork of comics. Rick in particular noted that the MagiCon panels on the *March* series and the chance to hear John Lewis's story helped him to understand the life experiences of people who are different than him. As one of the two straight White men I interviewed for the study, Rick's observations about how he benefitted from the CON panels related to diversity were striking to me as a researcher.

Many creative types were encouraged by such events to work on their own content and also realized the difficulty of the work. Mandy, Tina, Michelle, Becky, Ansley, and Bob all noted feeling encouragement and support for their creative endeavors as a result of attending CONS, and Curt noted that he gains encouragement in this area from facilitating book clubs. Mandy, Becky, Alaina, Michelle, Ansley, and I have all gained benefits from Tumblr and fanfiction sites as places to receive constructive feedback on our creative writing.

This study suggests that book clubs, Cons, and online affinity spaces such as fanfiction provide educational outlets for participants as well as a place to form community and connection with those of common interests. The majority of Cloud Nine book club participants I interviewed

said their initial main goal for attending book clubs was to meet other adults in their community with whom they shared common interests, and that was my initial intent when I first moved back to our university town in 2013. However, over time, people reported that they continue to come to these spaces for both the connection and the intellectual stimulation of discussing books and other forms of media.

Limitations

This study focuses specifically on one bookshop's book clubs and two CON events in the Southeastern United States. Since I am currently situated in a very specific area of the country, I am only able to study the viewpoints of people in a large Southeastern United States city and a small university town. Additionally, since CONs cost money and since part of the point behind book clubs for a store are to encourage people to buy books, many of the people involved with this study were middle class and in a place of relative privilege in terms of socioeconomic status. Because the bookshop I studied is in a university town, and the CON literary events tend to bring in an educated crowd, the majority of my interview participants have a college degree, and some are completed or are working on graduate level degrees. As a follow-up study, I could consider studying library book clubs as a standard of comparison or literary events that do not incur a cost. I am, however, studying fanfiction and other online forums, as most online forums do not require participants to pay to use their services.

Also, I as a researcher, I came to this study from a place of privilege. I am a White cisgendered female who identifies as straight and who has a graduate degree. Therefore, the autoethnographic aspect of my study is coming from that perspective. Also, inevitably, it was hard for some participants to talk about issues surrounding race with me because I am of the

dominant race in the United States and also because we are currently in a sensitive political climate.

Based on reading their body language during the interviews, some of my participants seemed uncomfortable when the conversation turned to race, in part because it involved some people having to talk about White privilege. However, because I am a woman who is learning disabled and has an anxiety disorder, I can relate to feelings of my voice being silenced. Also, as aforementioned, I was sometimes able to self-disclose enough to help my participants feel comfortable enough to do the same. One of the goals behind this study is to give marginalized people—such as educators, women, LGBTQ people, and people of color—a voice. Hopefully, through my interviews and anecdotes, I have been able to do so.

Part of the hesitance of the participants of the book club to speak directly about the issue of race might have been that the bookstore, although not directly affiliated with the university, was extremely close to the university in proximity. Both the shop at which I collected my data and the new shop that opened a few months after the data collection period were in areas of town populated primarily by professors and college students, rather than additional members of the Athens community. Therefore, they might have felt surveillance from the university's Panopticon (Foucault, 1979), even though the interviews occurred offsite, either at the bookshop or at close by restaurants and coffee shops. They knew that I was a researcher affiliated with the local university, which could have had an affect on interactions. Also, in a town as small as our university town, even though I agreed to protect their identities, I have often sensed a fear that what one says will be repeated or known.

In contrast, none of the participants I interviewed solely about the CONS were affiliated with the university in any way. They also varied in educational background, in addition to race,

more so than the book club participants. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that formal education, while providing access to these events, could actually be hindering in terms of how open people are willing to be in dialogue, perhaps in part because of the feeling of surveillance formal schooling can bring.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS FOCUSED ON AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The purpose of this chapter is to give the reader an understanding of how my autoethnographic research accounts, analyzed from the perspectives of feminist poststructuralism and social semiotic spaces focused on affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), contributed to my research findings for this study. These vignettes were composed based on a combination of hand written field notes I took either during or immediately after the events of study, typed reflections about each interview I conducted, and additional reflections I wrote about my field notes after I transcribed them in detail from my written notebooks over to Microsoft Word accounts.

Additionally, I analyzed blog entries I have done in recent years in reference to both MagiCon and the Cloud Nine Bookshop book club events I attended. I also examined photographs from my old blog posts, particularly those related to the primary texts of costumes I wore at MagiCon and books I read both in preparation for literary events at MagiCon and structured book club meetings I attended at Cloud Nine Bookshop. My interviews with participants who have experienced these events with me gave me a better understanding of the knowledge others have received from attending the book clubs and literacy events. My autoethnographic methods of obtaining data helped me to understand how I, as a literacy educator, have both benefitted and been able to positively influence others through these endeavors.

While many of my reflections were valuable and contributed to my findings, I chose one primary reflection from a Cloud Nine book club meeting and one from a diversity panel at

MagiCon that best represent my findings for this study. The findings of the study are listed in detail at the end of this chapter and were aforementioned in Chapter four. Repeated ideas that surfaced from my autoethnographic data to contribute to my findings included the following: the desire for quality diverse literature with empowered female protagonists, embodiment issues, representation of women of color and women of size, marketability issues and representation, and the exploration of writing and artistic craft through book club attendance. The italicized parts represent my personal vignettes, and my analysis that follows will not be written in italics, to denote the change in tone.

MagiCon Diversity Panel Vignettes and Analysis

Italicized are the notes I transcribed at the event, and the following notes are the reflections I had later on, as related to my study.

One of the women on the panel who is both a writer and a publisher for a company that actively seeks out diverse literature told an interesting anecdote. An older white asked if he could read a book on her table/in her area at a conference/CON that was a romance with two Black people on the cover. It was also a story with a mystery element to it. He said that he didn't really care for romance, but he liked mystery, so he would read it.

The aforementioned writer commented that people of color condition themselves to read anything because they don't always see people who look like them in stories .It is possible to be "blind to your own mirror," yet people tend to want to read stories where people look like them. Yet, it's the writer's responsibility to write stories about humanity, so all can relate. J.K. Rowling is an intriguing example of a successful female writer; she used a pseudonym, according to the panelists, because publishers feared that boys wouldn't read fantasy story written by a woman.

The White man described in the anecdote above clearly wasn't aware of his White privilege and didn't think about the fact that some people cannot choose whether or not characters look like them. Then again, I understand to a degree. I used to be hesitant to read characters about LGBT characters because I didn't think that I, a woman who identifies as straight, could relate to a book about gay characters. Also, some extended family members and friends of mine used to make a few offhand comments about gay people that were not entirely positive, although that stopped over time. I've had to come to grips with the fact that I have a bit of fluidity in my own sexuality, although I am definitely more sexually attracted to men, and I think many people do, but don't really talk about it because it's still taboo.

So, all this is to say I used to be almost afraid to read books about gay characters. But David Levithan's books have changed me in that regard. He writes many books and short stories, some about gay characters and some about straight characters. And, I feel that I relate to them either way.

One scene in Levithan's novel <u>You Know Me Well</u> (2016), although about two gay male characters, hit me as so real that I started crying on an airplane this summer while I was reading it. So yes, if you make your stories relatable to all of humanity, then people will hopefully push past their own fears and read them anyway. I have, and it's opened my mind and my heart up so much in a way that has made me a better person.

As a creative writer in addition to being an academic writer, I continue to grapple with the question as to whether or not I should write about characters outside of my culture. The main character of my fanfiction stories is a Jewish girl. My sister is married to a Jewish man. Within such situations Jacqueline Woodson's (2003) philosophy is worth considering: in order to write about my race and culture, you need to have (literally and/or metaphorically) sat at my kitchen.

At the panel this year, the panelists talked repeatedly about not being paralyzed by fear when it comes to representation. They believe writers should use diverse characters, do the best they can with representation, yet also do their research and try to correct any errors prior to publication. As a literacy educator, I do not think there is necessarily a set answer to the question of who should tell whose story. However, during an era in which publishers and educators desire more diversity within children's and YA literature, it is a question that bears attention.

I came to this same panel at MagiCon two years ago. As was also the case with this year's panel, the consensus of the panel last year was that it is acceptable to write about characters outside of your culture. However, if you as a writer choose to undertake this task, then it is your responsibility to do your research and to represent groups outside of your culture well. Two of my friends in my program, Aaron and Missy, said they went to a Diversity panel at a local book festival where the message was essentially the same. One benefit that my colleagues and I had of attending festivals and CONS outside of our university in which people discussed diversity and children's literature is that we could learn about perspectives different than our own and/or ones that challenged those we had read about in our university courses. I believe that the process will ultimately contribute to us being more learned and informed scholars.

I recall that upon discussing the issue of representation, my colleagues and I were surprised at what we had heard in these out-of-school settings because we had read scholars in our children's literature classes who were critical and questioning of anyone who wrote about characters outside of their cultures because so many people have not done it well. This year, they made similar arguments, only they were more careful with their words. Therefore, I could not help but wonder if they got backlash a couple of years ago, or at least people questioning them?

As a literacy education and as a creative writer, I am inclined to agree that writing about a character outside of one's culture is an acceptable practice if done well, but it is not an endeavor that a writer should embark upon lightly. I believe this issue invites pertinent discussion about diversifying the literary canon and about who truly has power, in terms of publication and distribution of books. As consumers continue to request and even demand more diversity within publishing, the publishers will need to acquiesce, if they want to continue to sell their content.

The panelists were very aware of the affordances and disadvantages of diversity panels, based on my field notes:

Shelley, the female writer and publisher, noted that she's careful not to just serve on diversity panels. It's important, but she also wants to branch out to paranormal panels. She doesn't just want to be the "diversity girl," as an African-American female writer. Eric, the Asian male on the panel, stated that he thinks diversity should be more apparent in conversations in all panels.

I wonder, will it get to the point where we do not need diversity panels? I think it will eventually, but I don't think we as a society are there yet.

Some of my participants indicated in their responses that they want to learn more about feminism and about the issue of gender fluidity. Additionally, the anecdotes described above show that people need encouragement to read about characters that are different from them. In my opinion, so long as inequities based on gender and race exists, there is still a need for panels that specifically discuss gender and race representation in context to these texts. However, I wonder how these panels will continue to change and shape over the years.

As a literacy educator, I believe that conversations about diversity and identity issues on specific panels are necessary, so we as participants can consider how privilege, power, and

identity may impact what we currently read and how we might step out of our comfort zone to broaden our consumption to different literature and multimodal texts.

Graphic Novel Book Club Session Vignette

I actually thought <u>Bitch Planet</u> (2015) *was one of the more interesting books we've had so far. There were five of us there, including Curt and four women (age from mid twenties to sixties, but we were all white women). Curt was satisfied with that turnout because it was a good group with which to discuss* <u>Bitch Planet</u> *.We discussed science fiction as a place for writers to be more "over the top" and to delve deeply into identity issues because people won't get offended as easily and are willing to suspend disbelief. The very overweight black woman's body actually gives her superpower in this universe.*

The book and series *Bitch Planet* has implications for the issue of embodiment, as do many comics about diverse and empowered female protagonists. Through the study of multimodal texts, readers are asked to interpret the visuals in addition to the written words and consider the different aspects of identity. Science fiction gives readers an opportunity to understand literature in another world and creators an opportunity to explore different possibilities in regards to power relationships among characters, embodiment as a form of textual representation, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). The graphic novel book club initially had majority male attendees, but is now mostly attended by females who vary in age range, in part perhaps because, as Terra's and Ellen's interviews both noted, we tend to read novels that pertain to issues surrounding and questioning gender identity.

People had mixed feelings about the advertisements in the book. Some folks thought they bordered on being too preachy. Most of us appreciated the wit and the use of humor for a touchy subject and also, some people need to have the truth spelled out in their faces.

The advertisements in the book were puns on advertisements that one might see in a more current magazine, or a 1950s magazine, only more satirical in nature. Some of them blatantly criticized patriarchal governments and capitalism, while other criticisms were subtle. For instance, some of the advertisements sell products to females, with the hopes of improving the homes for men, and others sell beauty product specifically targeted for women. The reader is left to wonder, then, how much conditions have truly improved for women since the start of the feminist movement.

The discussion turned to Intersectional feminism; the middle class White woman at the beginning of the book thought she would get out of prison. Also, Terra pointed out that at the back of some of the individual, serialized comics, there are essays on such topics as intersectional feminism.

Bitch Planet is a work of fiction written in the comic form, yet there are more expository essays on issues regarding feminism at the back of the book. The novel could be taught in a classroom setting as a book with multi-genre writing, as it includes satirical advertisements, fiction of the comic form, and informative essays to help readers gain an understanding of feminist principles. Such texts can initially entice readers who would not necessarily be drawn to essays about feminism, yet serve as a form of education.

Some of the characters in the book have tattoos: "Born Big" and "Non Compliant". Terra said she met people at a CON she recently attended who have these tattoos! It was interesting that this comic has brought up enough passion to spark permanent tattoos.

Recently, at MagiCon and at academic conferences alike, I have met people with tattoos from their fandoms. Mine is the protector umbrella from <u>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</u> (2015), and I have seen some from <u>Bitch Planet</u> (2015) and the <u>Dr. Who</u> fandom. As soon as I find someone

who has a fandom tattoo, I feel an immediate solidarity with the person, even if his or her tattoo

is not of the same fandom.

The tattoos "born big" and "non compliant" are indicative of Foucault's (1978/1979) ideas regarding power. Rather than being disenfranchised for being larger and/or nonconformist women, the characters of this graphic novel have decided to empower themselves through their tattoos. They are taking over Patriarchy's power and deciding to own traits that would otherwise disempower and even disenfranchise them in a typical capitalist and patriarchal society. Rather than being content to be exiled to "Bitch Planet", they decide to fight back.

Additionally, this section shows that tattoos, as visual icons, can unite people within the same fandoms, along with other artistic representations of fandom. The "born big" and "noncompliant" tattoos unite people who are interested in the Bitch Planet comics, just as my tattoos serve as a visual that help me gain a portal into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandom events. Even without having a verbal conversation, fans can identify each other with the visuals of the tattoos.

Most of the women in this book are women of color. I pointed out that this is interesting

because although I don't know the background of the illustrators, Kelly Sue Deconnick, is a

White European woman. Curt said this makes him nervous, which I said was a fair concern. But

we all think that so far, based on the reading of the first volume, the writer did her research and

represented the characters well. The women in the book vary in body type and weight, which is

something that we as a group appreciated.

One important role these literary events serve is to discuss controversial issues such as representation. Some scholars do not think that creative writers should write about characters and cultures outside of their own, and others believe it is acceptable to do so with the proper

research. Regardless of one's stance on that issue, there is still a limited representation of characters of color in literature, including children's and YA literature. Discussing these issues helps with the awareness of the issue and also to possibly consider ways to diversity literature and exposure to diverse literature. For this particular novel, we appreciated the diversity of the women, in terms of embodiment and race.

Curt pointed out that we had not talked much about the process of reading a graphic novel in a while. I was glad he brought it up because I had already planned a graphic novels/comics lesson to teach in the Young Adult Literature course I was TAing for pre-service teachers, and that was one topic of conversation. Congruent to our class, some folks tend to focus more on the pictures, and some focus more on the words.

Curt and I both said that we tend to focus more on the words, perhaps in part because we both have a theater background. I told the group that in my creative and fanfiction writing, I have received feedback indicating that I am really good at writing dialogue, in part because I'm a good conversationalist and I like to listen to people. However, my setting description and world building skills are not as strong. Curt said he felt the same was true of him. Maybe by reading more examples of good world building, we can get better at it in our own writing.

According to these findings, another beneficial element of attending these book clubs is discussing the craft behind writing. Many participants in this study who are drawn to these literary events, including me, are interested in becoming creative writers, artists, and/or creators ourselves. Therefore, through the in-person affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), we are able to connect to other individuals who share these interests and who can help us to understand the process behind writing and publication.

Although I have seen an increase in comics and graphic novels as utilized and in secondary and college classrooms, many students do not know how to read them critically and are not taught how to do so. Therefore, the conversation we had at this book club about the importance of knowing how to teach and read graphic novels could be one that is beneficial to literacy educators, particularly through the use of a concrete example.

For November, the group has decided to read Plutona *(2016), a book about a world in which superheroes exist and where they find a superhero body. I'm excited about this one, because it has a sci-fi element to it, and it'll be fun to see a book that touches on representation of superheroes. Also, the cast of characters is diverse in terms of size, gender, and race representation.*

For December, we will read two: Gene Luen Yang's Superman *(2016) which I am excited about because Gene Luen Yang recently won the MacArthur "genius" award, and* Faith *(2016), which is a heavyset girl superhero story. I think that conversation will be interesting.*

I think the concern Curt raised about her being a stereotypical fangirl is a legitimate one, as many fangirls tend to be stereotyped in media portrayals, but I'm going to hope it's done well. Curt says the reviews about it have been very positive, and I count that as a positive aspect. Apparently, Gene Luen Yang wants to create an All-Asian Justice League group of superheroes, and his new superhero book is the start of that. I think it's good that we are reading his work because he just got the MacArthur/Genius award and is definitely a known presence in the comics/graphica world.

Both of these book selections show Curt's conscious choice to include books in our discussions that are more diverse in terms of characters and representation. Gene Luen Yang's book includes Asian superheroes, and *Faith's* (2016) main character is a woman of size.

Although none of my participants specifically referenced women of size as being underrepresented in literature, this is something I personally have noticed, both in novels and in television shows.

In particular, there are not many average-sized women on television; most are very thin, and a fairly small percentage are significantly overweight. I believe a dialogue about why this tends to happen is necessary for classroom settings, as I and many other American women feel left out due to the limited representation of medium-sized to slightly heavy women in popular culture in literature.

Curt and I talked about cosplay double standards after book club. I think we got on that topic because we were talking about Faith, and about how it's nice to have a "girl of size" represented in a superhero story because that's another kind of diversity. I talked about how Halloween is hard for me, as a thirty-something, not skinny but not obese woman, I have a hard time knowing how to dress. I can't wear skimpy clothes because I'm not skinny and I'm not in my twenties anymore, and I could conceivably run into one of my students, especially in this town. But I have to still look kind of cool because I'm single and in my 30s, and the "plus size" clothes don't usually fit me either.

So I hunt, and I get creative, and I make it work. Miranda from the Sex and the City film and television shows was right, though. It's hard to find costumes for women that are not either a slutty nurse or witch. What does that say about society? I wrote a whole blog about this topic last September, which in hindsight, might have been the start of this dissertation project. No writing goes unnoticed: http://comicsandyalit.blogspot.com/2015/09/confessions-of-fan-girl-MagiCon-and.html

Reviewing this blog was an important aspect of my autoethnographic data collection process and made me more aware of costumes as a different form of text (Derrida, 1967; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The practice of CON attendees creating and/or buying costumes to represent their affinity for a fandom represents another portal into the fandom community (Gee, 2004; Clinton, Jenkins, & McWilliams, 2013).

Fandom communities can often be very supportive in giving each other feedback on such creative endeavors as fan art, costuming, and fanfiction. In that context, although costumes are a visual art, they are also a text that can be interpreted as a productive way to understand a person and their interests. Additionally, as noted in the previous chapter, the issue of women sometimes being mistreated within fandom communities because of their costumes is a serious one related to women's rights that needs to be addressed continually.

Also, Charles, who leads my dissertation boot camp, sent me these two images related to embodiment and female representation in comics, which Curt and I also referenced in our conversation. The cartoon showed male characters portrayed in the way that female superheroes normally are, in terms of the overemphasis on the body. They were examples of visual texts that can convey more information than a large amount of written text, which is one reason why comics can be a very powerful form for self-expression and autobiographical writing, in addition to telling superhero stories. The visual shows that female superhero characters still tend to be hyper-sexualized and more scantily clad than their male counterparts, another potential discussion topic for classroom settings.

Curt posited that part of the reason women are more pressured to look a certain way both in comics and costume is societal expectations: women are expected to look more buff and

show more skin than men. It seems as though society is more accepting of men's different body types than women's.

As someone who has a female body type that is not currently considered the ideal in American society, I am particularly sensitive to this issue. It's hard for me to go there, but especially after talking with one of my past students who suffered from an eating disorder during high school because she was self-conscious about being "pudgy," I think it's important. It is great that Curt acknowledges this double standard stuff as gay male. We then started talking about how most of our friends and people with whom we associate are in nerd culture, so we're a little bit more sensitive, and we don't necessarily care what more mainstream people think.

Apparently, the Cloud Nine employees have noticed that they do not get a lot of patronage from the Greek system population at our university and the more traditional southern crowd, with the occasional exception of football weekends, when more people are in town. They have talked about going to sorority/fraternity houses to visit and to say, hey, just so you are aware, we have a book store here that you can visit. Curt said that he liked the idea, but that he didn't really want to go because he felt like he'd stand out too much. I noted that I probably would too, just for different reasons. Sometimes, especially at this book club, the branch-off conversations are just as important if not more so than the book clubs themselves, which is part of why I love attending these events.

If book clubs meet often enough and form a sense of community, they can seem like a community of practice or an affinity space (Gee, 2004) with somewhat porous leadership and attendance, but nonetheless with their own sets of expectations and norms. Cloud Nine Bookshop book clubs seem to be an alternative culture/counter culture community within the larger context of a Southeastern university town, at which participants can come as they are and

discuss issues related to representation and diversity. Perhaps one role of traditional school settings should be to help students who feel they do not fit inside of a box to find a place where they can not only develop literacy skills, but also feel a part of a community.

Reflections on the Bookshop Space Post-Election

After looking back on my interviews, reflections, vignettes, and analysis, I realize that I was able to see from the beginning the faulty aspects of the CONS and their roles as in-person affinity spaces. For instance, I expressed disappointment in the comics panel at FantasyCon being almost entirely about comics written by White European men and with White European male protagonists, with only a few White European female superhero figures. In fact, looking back at my notes from the panel, I remember that I left it feeling angry, and my only solace was attending the *Stranger Things* (2016) panel with Michelle afterwards and bantering with other fans of the show about such topics as Nancy and her male love interests—which also had feminist implications because Michelle aptly pointed out that neither of the conflicting love interests was entitled to Nancy. At MagiCon, I very much enjoyed and benefitted from the panel on diverse Young Adult Literature and was able to grapple and struggle with how the understandings conveyed by the panelists both compared and contrasted to the understandings I had learned from graduate school.

Overall, I was able to look at these spaces objectively fairly easily, even though I have been going to MagiCon for ten years. Perhaps it is because, although I care about these spaces, I only go to them once a year, and they are not very much a part of my daily life. Since the carnivalesque atmosphere of CONS makes them conducive to being temporary, rather than permanent, spaces, it is easy for me to enjoy and benefit from them, but also to not get too emotionally invested in them. Both I and my participants were able to candidly discuss and

reflect upon the problematic aspects of literary events at CONS, perhaps in part to the lack of permanence of the space, and also the lacking feeling of surveillance we experienced while within these more loosely structured environments in reasonably neutral spaces.

However, for Cloud Nine, seeing both the positive and negative components objectively as a researcher proved to be more challenging, which I later realized after meeting with my dissertation committee members toward the end of this project. I believe part of this discrepancy is because both my participants and I went to the bookshop on a regular basis and saw it as a community place of comfort that we frequented during the course of this study. Perhaps it is in part because, like many people with whom I interact, I experienced psychological turmoil and heightened emotional anxiety after Donald Trump was elected president. In fact, in conversations with colleagues and friends after the election, I learned that many others were experiencing heightened anxiety, to the point of having a harder time focusing and sleeping during the month of November. Yet Cloud Nine, for me and for some other participants, was a place of solace where we could express our anger and frustration about the election results. Specifically, here are some of my reflections on the book club meeting that took place five days after the election:

We all came to book club tonight with the intention of talking about the book, although many people had trouble getting it read, in part due to the turmoil that happened as a result of the election week, when Donald Trump achieved a victory that shocked all of us. Of all of us in the group, not a single person voted for Trump. Several people who were there were people who I interviewed for my study: Rick, Kara, and Allen, specifically.

Kara talked in her interview about how she wanted to come to book club to be surrounded by like-minded people more so than to talk about the book. She lives with her grandfather, and they've agreed not to discuss politics. Also, she lives and works in a more

conservative area, though she eventually wants to move back to our more liberal university town. I pretty much felt the same way. I felt sick that day, probably in part because of the smoke, but I made myself at least skim the rest of the book so I could participate, and not just because it's part of my research. Even writing about it now is draining for me.

For the first ten to fifteen minutes of book club, we all pretty much just vented, but I think it was healthy venting. Emma, one regular book club attendee, works for the local university. At about 1:45 a.m. on election night, she had posted a rant that included "If you supported Donald Trump, then F*** You!" I remembered it because I saw it that night, and I too posted an angry note on Facebook about the outcome of the election, yet without profanity. Emma eventually deleted the post, for fear that she would get fired if she kept it up on her Facebook page. I had seen Emma's post on the Facebook group "Pantsuit Nation-Georgia" that she had some people who read the post thank her for expressing what they were not brave enough to express, yet others she had to apologize to. She elaborated on that with us and said that she talked one on one with some of these folks at work the next day. Some of them said "I didn't vote for her; I voted against Hillary." I've heard this same sentiment expressed.

I expressed some fears as a female academic who lives by myself, next door to a Trump supporter, and who writes articles with a more liberal agenda. Bruce expressed the fear of wearing a skirt. He feels okay about this in Barack Obama's America, but it not so sure how it will be received in Donald Trump's America. I think he will probably be fine in this town, of all places, yet I can understand his fears of the situation. He and another book club participant discussed the possibilities, medically and in terms of insurance, regarding a surgical gender change, as this participant knows some ways around the system.

Allen said the staff has been brainstorming what we, as a Cloud Nine Community, can do about this shit show of an election. We love the fact that Cloud Nine does school visits with authors, but perhaps that needs to extend beyond our local schools, so more students can hear voices like Jason Reynolds. However, Cloud Nine has definitely taken steps in the right direction by working with school librarians and books for keeps. They are going to continue to offer paperback options, and possibly start selling used books.

Also, when those of us who shop at the store regularly buy books, they would like to have the option to give a little bit of money to charity. We talked about other charity and nonprofit organizations to possibly volunteer for. We realize we need to be in this for the long haul. It was the first time since the election results that I had felt a sense of hope.

The following were the notations I made on this transcript during the data analysis phase:

"Interesting that in spite of our varying ages and educational levels, we're all of a more liberal mindset in this book club."

"I hadn't thought of this until reviewing this transcript, but 'Pantsuit Nation' and 'Women with Her' were affinity spaces of another sort because we were sharing our affinity for HRC and also writing reflections and sharing mementos as related to the election. A few women from book club were also on these forums, so we were dialoging with each other in more than one space."

"People are thinking about power dynamics differently in a world where Donald Trump is/is about to be the president."

"It's interesting to think about Power and control issues when considering who has access to books and to literary events."

These notations are insightful to review in hindsight because during non-interview conversations that took place during the course of my study and soon after, a few people told me that they did not perceive Cloud Nine to be a welcoming atmosphere for all and that, although not intentional, there seemed to be limited awareness among the staff that some people feel that way, particularly people who are not White middle class.

Initially, I will admit that I was surprised to hear these sentiments expressed. I had always felt welcomed at Cloud Nine, even after telling them that I wanted to use their store as a research site. Yet I also realize that I fit the normative attributes of people who tend to shop at the store: I am White European, middle class, educated, politically liberal, affiliated with the local university. As previously stated, book club attendees vary in terms of age, sexual orientation, gender representation, and religious beliefs (based on the limited information I derived from the book club sessions and interviews, though, admittedly, no one made comments that led me to believe they were of fundamentalist religious persuasions). Yet while 1-2 people are working class, the majority of us, including me, fit the profile described above. Therefore, it was hard for me at first to understand why some people feel like outsiders at the bookshops (as there are now two in town), though I have insider status because of my involvement with their book clubs.

With these ideas in mind, I looked back at the post-election meeting transcript again, as that data became even more pertinent than I realized at the time. Based on these notes, it appears that the Cloud Nine employees are aware of some of the privilege and inequity issues that exist with the store, but they have not figured out yet how to address them. As previously mentioned, the owner is my age (mid-thirties), and most of the employees are twenty-somethings, so they are young and only have so much life experience. I noticed the Whiteness of the bookstore, in

part because I have traveled and taught in other countries, but even I was not totally aware of the potential exclusivity of the place until others outside of my study referenced it.

Based on this transcript, the staff is trying to address the power and access issues by increasing their school outreach to areas outside of our county and by donating money to charities to increase access. They already do work with school and local librarians and charity organizations to increase access to books for people who might not be able to afford to shop at the store. Yet there is an issue that has not been fully resolved, which is how to bring a vaster variety of people to the physical spaces of the stores, so they can better participate in the literary events and book clubs and feel genuinely welcome.

Also, looking back on these notes and transcripts from the book club interviews, people were willing to discuss social class as an issue, and in many of the book club discussions, gender was discussed, and race was discussed in context to the novel *Shadowshaper* (2015). Yet in this post-election dialogue, no one directly brought up the issue of race, including me. Also, as aforementioned, some participants appeared to be uncomfortable when the subject was broached in interviews. Of the book club participants, the only two who made comments directly related to race were Ellen and Rick, who range in age from mid forties to early fifties and are two of the middle-aged participants I interviewed regarding book clubs, while most of the other participants were younger (early twenties to early forties). Perhaps Ellen and Rick are more aware of the race issues because they have more life experience and also are more willing to address them because they are more mature.

At the book club meeting referenced above, we were all very open to discussing why the election resulted the way we did, but looking back on my notes from that night, race seemed to be the elephant in the room. I wonder if this is in part because, unlike at the temporary spaces of

the CONS, the book clubs were places where we knew we would see each other at least on a monthly basis. Sometimes, this knowledge of a permanent versus a temporary space can impact one's interactions, along with what one feels comfortable discussing while taking risks. I believe classroom teachers should be mindful of this difference, since most classroom spaces involve students seeing each other regularly, at least for a given period of time.

From a feminist researcher's standpoint, I have to wonder why book club participants were hesitant to discuss race. The majority of my CON participants, while they did not always agree on race issues, were very open to discussing race and dialoguing about it. Some of my CON participants were non-White, and some were not, and they varied in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. Yet both CONS took place in a large city and drew in a more diverse crowd than the bookshop, which might in part account for why people were more open to discussing race. Also, as a White European woman from a southern family, I can understand the hesitance to discuss race, as I sometimes worry that I am going to come across as racist even when that is not my intention. Yet sometimes, not discussing the issue just makes it worse, as congruent with Collins's (2000) perspectives about institutional racism and why it continues. Looking back at these notes, I suspect that the fear of discussing such issues probably contributed to the election's outcome.

Yet the discrepancy in this issue between the book clubs and the CONS is indicative of larger issues. The bookshop is located in a small southern town near a university comprised of mostly White middle-class to upper-middle-class students, and inevitably, most of the bookshop employees are graduates of the university from humanities and/or education programs, which I know from personal experience are overwhelmingly White at the local university. Also, as a person of southern roots, I know that we sometimes do not want to "air dirty laundry in public"

and do not bring up issues that might offend people; as a woman in particular, I know we are supposed to be perceived as nice. But niceness can be a double-edged sword; it avoids conflict, and long-term issues are not resolved.

According to the data of this study, there seems to be a disconnection between the people who attend the bookshop and the literature we study. Although the bookshop staff intentionally steers us toward literature with diverse characters, during the course of my study, we did not have a single person of color who came to either of the book clubs I studied, the graphic novels/comics book club or the YA book club either one. However, based on observations after the period of my data collection, I think there are attempts being made to diversify the bookshop's audience. Specifically, Roxanne Gay has been invited to speak in the bookshop town, an event sponsored by Cloud Nine.

As further discussed in Chapter Five, the lack of racial representation may be indicative of larger issues surrounding inequity and institutional racism (Collins, 2000). When institutional racism exists, racial inequities persist in American society and in higher education realms. Collins (2000) noted the following in reference to institutional racism:

> Overlaying these persisting inequalities is a rhetoric of color blindness designated
>
> to render these social inequities invisible. In a context where many believe that to talk of
>
> race fosters racism, equality allegedly lies in treating everyone the same. (p. 26).

Yet ironically enough, by not discussing issues involving race, we as a society take the risk of not encouraging social change. By not discussing the issue of race at book club meetings, we as a group might be, without meaning to, perpetuating the problem.

I believe this post-election book club meeting was the start of a dialogue that needs to continue and to go deeper. We discussed power issues, privilege issues, and socioeconomic

issues, along with political and gender issues associated with the election. Race was an issue that was not discussed as much as it should have been, a pattern which is interesting because the MagiCon panelists were more open to going in that conversational direction, despite some of the resulting tensions. The bookshop space, I hope, will eventually become more open to discussing issues involving race and power, in addition to gender, sexuality, and social class.

I was open to engaging my participants in discussions about race. However, I have had to think about the issue in the past because I used to teach at a middle school of a primarily African-American and Latin@ population, and also I have taken PhD-level Women's Studies, Education, and Humanities courses in which these topics were part of the class discussion. Although I do not know the whole backstories of my book club participants, our university is primarily White, and the town is fairly segregated by both socioeconomics and race, according to the neighborhoods in which the students and university employees tend to dwell. Therefore, some of the participants from the small university town might not have been used to dialoguing about the issue of White privilege, whereas my CON attendees (many of whom were from larger cities) were more open to discussing the issues.

Based on my data, age, life experiences, and place of living all have an impact in how open participants are to discussing the sensitive issue of race. As a researcher with feminist leanings who is of White middle class background, I will continue to consider how I can help participants feel comfortable talking about the issue. Sometimes, I know I could do a better job of acknowledging my own privilege, which is the first step in making change.

Findings

This section will outline the findings of this study specifically pertinent to the autoethnographic data. Some of the findings will overlap with those derived from the participant

interviews and vignettes, yet others will be more specifically related to my experiences with the events and spaces.

My interactions with these spaces show that there are more texts with diverse and nuanced female protagonists emerging, particularly within the realms of YA speculative fiction and comics. However, the majority of women represented are still thin, middle- class, straight, able-bodied White women. Even though most American women wear between a size 10 and size 14 in clothing, many of the comics I have studied and discussed within these spaces have women who are much proportionally smaller. The *Bitch Planet* comic/graphica series by Kelly Sue Deconnick previously mentioned does serve as an exception, as women of a variety of sizes and races are present in this comic series.

Additionally, the *Faith* series presents a White middle-class blonde woman, yet she is a woman of size, so she represents another form of diversity. Overall, however, women like me, who fall roughly within the realm of "American average size" do not tend to see ourselves portrayed in this literature. Mindy Kaling and Lena Dunham are about the only women I see on television currently who are closer to American average size for women, and unfortunately, this trend remains true in the literature I study, in addition to the costumes I viewed within these spaces. These embodiment issues should be the subjects of continued conversation because of the power issues involved, as some of these beauty standards do not apply as much to male characters.

A question that emerged in the in-person spaces in regards to discussions centered around YA speculative fiction and comics with diverse, nuanced female protagonists was the issue of who can write stories about diverse characters and also, who is the intended audience. The responses to these questions were different, but the topic was broached in a productive way in

both spaces. On balance, the topic of race was not as thoroughly discussed at the Cloud Nine

Bookshop events or interviews as it was at the CON events and interviews, which might be in

part due to the demographics of both places, as previously described.

The CON spaces, fanfiction forums, and book clubs of study have many attributes of

James Gee's (2004) affinity spaces, particularly the specific concept of passionate affinity spaces

(Gee, 2013), since the participants come together over a shared passion or affinity. However,

socioeconomic privilege is an issue in all of the in-person spaces, since people are encouraged to

buy books for the Cloud Nine bookshop gatherings and must purchase passes for the CON

events, although the CON passes are more economical than most academic conferences I have

attended. The CON participants are becoming more diverse, yet everyone at the Cloud Nine

book clubs I attended was White, and most of them were middle-class people with at least a

college level education.

As previously noted in Chapter Two, Gee's (2013) recent book *Games and Learning*

addresses this issue of affinity spaces in an interview between Henry Jenkins and Gee. The

interview is worth reviewing in more detail in this chapter because the issues relate to those that

participants in the physical spaces grapple with, particularly Cloud Nine Bookshop.

Upon asking the questions for the interview, Henry Jenkins stated the following:

The part of your argument for affinity spaces that gets the most pushback from

my students is your claim that "a common passion-fueled endeavor—not race,

class, gender, or disability—is primary." To many this seems like a very utopian

claim for these spaces. (Gee, 2013, p. 7).

Jenkins continued this pushback by noting "yet, surely, inequities impact participants at all

levels, from access to the technology to access to basic skills and experiences, to access to the

social networks that support their learning" (Gee, 2-13, p. 7). Jenkins then posed the important question of how we can address these very real and present inequities "while recognizing that there are indeed ways where class, race, and gender matter differently in the kinds of spaces you are describing?" (Gee, 2013, p. 7).

The question Henry Jenkins asked here is a legitimate one that became more of an issue than I initially realized, in part because I eventually recognized as a result of this study that I am blind to my own White privilege at times. I can relate to struggling with money because my family and I have done so at certain points in my life. Therefore, I was very quickly aware with the economic privilege issues surrounding these spaces, particularly because they were factors that I had to take into consideration as a graduate student studying these spaces, so I could plan accordingly. But, with the exception of brief periods of time I have spent traveling, studying, or teaching abroad, I have been in a country in which I am of the majority race.

Therefore, while I was aware that I would have to build trust with my participants because of my privilege as a White woman and as an educated researcher, it was only during my dissertation feedback committee meeting that I became fully cognizant of the race issues surrounding the space of the Cloud Nine book clubs. Part of why I was more aware of it at the CONS is because it came up more explicitly during some of the panels than it did at the book clubs. Also, while I enjoy the CONS, I only attend the CONS once a year, so I do not have the same emotional attachment to them as I do to the book club that has been one of my only safe havens during the three plus years I have lived in my university town since starting graduate school, so it was harder for me to look at the setting completely objectively.

With those factors in mind, Gee's response to Jenkins's question was "the statement that passionate affinity spaces are focused on a shared passion (and shared endeavors and goals

around that passion) and not race, class and gender…is not an empirical claim; it is a stipulation.…But then, such spaces become a goal and an ideal, and we can talk about how close or far away from that goal and ideal we are" (Gee, 2013, p. 7). Therefore, while the spaces have many attributes of passionate affinity spaces, they might be falling short in some spaces, and continued work will need to be done.

Even in contexts like my university town, efforts have been made toward change. During my undergraduate years at this university, I attended a campus-wide leadership retreat that, in some ways, better fit this particular aspect of affinity spaces because we had a more diverse audience, and almost everyone felt welcome. Yet with continued work, I believe that in all of the in-person affinity spaces that I studied have the potential to have the same level of inclusiveness as the campus leaders' retreat and the similarity of common passions and interests.

For Cloud Nine in particular, part of this work may involve continuing to recruit authors who come from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. As previously noted, Roxanne Gay will speak at an event this June, which is a positive step. Back in January, the bookshop had a statement of inclusiveness in response to Donald Trump's immigration ban. Because of its location in a small university town comprised mostly of middle-class White students, faculty, and staff, Cloud Nine staff members will need to make continual efforts toward inclusivity if they want their sites to fully operate as affinity spaces. In terms of the content we discuss and the level of interest people exude, my experiences and my participants' experiences show that the sites are operating as affinity spaces.

As is the case with my participants' findings, my autoethnographic findings show that the fanfiction forums as well as the in-person spaces of CONS and Cloud Nine bookshops provide encouragement for aspiring writers and artists as well as a greater appreciation for the art behind

the creation of these texts. Through attending these literary events, my participants and I have learned more about the writing process of authors and the artistic endeavors of comic drawers. Additionally, we have received encouragement to continue to work on our own art, perhaps because these spaces allow us to explore interests by choice.

Limitations

I have attended MagiCon for ten years and Cloud Nine Bookshop events for three and a half years, so I had data for this aspect of the study that expanded beyond the data I was able to collect through interviews and field notes during the limited time frame of September 2016-January 2017. This was my first year at FantasyCon, so although I was able to obtain valuable insight through Michelle and through and my own field notes, I feel that I would need to attend the event at least a second time to fully understand its implications for literacy education.

Yet at both MagiCon and FantasyCon, I learned valuable insights from panels I attended related to writing, comics, female protagonists in speculative fiction, the *Harry Potter* fandom, and the impact of literature and television shows with adolescent central characters. The fact that I was only able to attend one bookshop's events and two CONS for this study, due to a limited amount of time, gives me an understanding of these events based on only three sites. However, I was able to understand them in depth, based on spending nearly the entire time span at both *MagiCon* and *FantasyCon* and attending book clubs at Cloud Nine with a researcher's perspective over a period of several months.

I wish I could have interacted with more participants who were of minority races. However, Cloud Nine Bookshop and FantasyCon are both relatively small spaces, and my span of participants was limited. *MagiCon* is a larger space, but it takes time to not only interact with participants, but to also earn their trust to the extent that they are willing to conduct an interview

over fairly sensitive matters. To extend my work related to fandom and literacy practices, I would like to visit more CON spaces over a period of several years, potentially including other CONS in different geographic locations besides the Southeastern United States. I believe that regional differences could make a major impact on the data I receive.

Additionally, as a White European woman, there are spaces I cannot enter as a researcher without potentially being perceived as intrusive, or even as a colonizer. For instance, the Black Girl Nerds group meets up in person at CON events. I can continue to attend panels related to diversity issues, but if I were to enter spaces specifically designated for people of color, I would very quickly be perceived as an outsider, and understandably so. Because of my outsider status, I would not be able to form the same rapport with participants or be privy to the information that I was in the spaces I participated in for this study. Therefore, my hope over time is to continue to do this work and to eventually collaborate with other researchers who have similar interests and who may have access to fandoms, CON spaces, and additional affinity spaces that I might not be privy to as a White middle class woman.

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Congruent with feminist poststructuralism, many of the narrative reflections, both from me and from my participants, pertained to issues of power. As Foucault (1979) stated, power is not fixed, but is fluid. The common link among my participants' literacy practices was the desire to take back the power that they feel has been relinquished by Patriarchy. This stance was not limited to women interviewees. Rick acknowledged the power and privilege that he has as a middle-aged White middle-class male, yet attends these events in part because he is open to hearing about the life experiences of others who do not have the same level of privilege.

Through fanfiction, female writers and LGBTQ writers are able to achieve a certain amount of social and cultural capital that they would not be able to in more male-dominated spaces. By attending these spaces in which diverse literature is discussed, my participants were exposed to literature that they otherwise might not have been exposed to and able to question, trouble, and deconstruct the representation of the diverse female characters. Hopefully, this process will begin to carry over more into secondary and university classroom settings.

Both the texts being read and the sites of interaction with those texts are important to this process of seeking power shifts. For these feminist affinity spaces, the generators are the diverse YA, speculative, and graphica texts that are discussed; besides the print texts being explored, the accompanying media and costumes are also being "read" as generators. The portals are the access to the books and/or passes to the CONS. All of these create a bond among the participants due to their common interest in literature and the creative aspects of fandom, and the space

affords an opportunity to talk about the diverse, nuanced female characters as well as the other aspects of the content that participants admire and respect.

Review of Research Questions and Findings

Given our identities and individual interests, how are participants' understanding/interpretations of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists influenced by literary events outside of traditional school settings, including CONS, bookshop events, and Fanfiction forums?

A key component to the in-person events at bookshops and CONS is exposing participants to this diverse literature, some of which is not considered canonical or brought into traditional school settings. Rick discussed John Lewis's *March* series, which is very present in schools due to the numerous awards it has won. But many of these texts might be in school and university libraries, but only discussed in school settings on a limited basis, with specific examples being the *Bitch Planet* comic series and *Shadowshaper* (2015). However, through our discussions at both the CONS and the book clubs, we as participants were better able to appreciate both the writing and artistic techniques of the comics/graphica texts. Since comics and graphica texts have been marginalized until more recently, these conversations are of the utmost importance, in terms of giving these texts more literary merit.

Additionally, through these discussions, the participants and I were able to question and unpack the representation of diverse female characters, whether or not we felt we were the target audience of the book. For instance, at the Cloud Nine bookshop meeting about *Shadowshaper* (2015)*,* we appreciated the author's attempt at telling the stories of characters diverse in terms of race, culture, and sexual orientation. However, we sometimes questioned how authentic the characters seemed, even though the author was writing about his own culture. These findings

point to a larger issue within diverse children's and YA literature, which is the desire for literature that is both diverse and of high quality. Through having these conversations of representation and literary quality, both in-person and in online spaces, we as consumers can continue to demand more, in terms of both having a more diverse representation of characters and of having literature that is of notable literary quality.

Several of the participants discussed fanfiction as well as other online spaces as giving access to writers who, due to their lack of privilege, might not otherwise have the opportunity to present their work and/or let their voices be heard. The participants and I both acknowledged that on fanfiction sites, the quality of the writing is mixed because although there is the opportunity to give feedback on the writing, fanfiction stories are not vetted in the way that writing in some more traditional publishing forums is. However, fanfiction forums, based on the responses of my participants as well as my own experiences, give female and LGBTQ writers a chance to circulate writing that might otherwise go ignored and also give readers who have an interest in these voices more texts to explore. Additionally, the fanfiction sites give writers an anonymity that feels protective, therefore encouraging content that they might not feel comfortable sharing if their true identities were known.

What are the similarities and/or differences, if any, between the past and present literacy education experiences and the discussion interests of persons who participate in CON and bookstore discussions of diverse comics and YA speculative fiction, with empowered female protagonists?

For many of us, both parental involvement in our literacy practices and exposure to books through public libraries played a crucial role in our literacy development and also in our passion for literature. The implications here are that families play a very important role in encouraging

people to have habits and practices as enthusiastic readers—including being open to press against traditional boundaries for determining literary value. Additionally, public libraries can level the playing field in terms of privilege, as they provide access without regards to financial privilege.

The in-person affinity spaces of book clubs and fandom events provide very valuable spaces in which we can discuss multimodal literacy texts and express our affinity for these texts. However, they meet on a limited basis, sometimes as often as once a month, sometimes as little as once a year. Also, as one participant pointed out, there is sometimes a long wait time that exists between when books of popular series come out, and the readers want to be fueled during that wait time. Therefore, forums such as fanfiction allow these consumers a chance to express themselves creatively and dialogue with other fans about these texts.

Also, even though my participants and I range in age from 24 to mid-sixties, all of us acknowledged the role the Internet has played in our literacy practices and how it has had a drastic effect on both literacy and on fandom. The Internet has given us a more vast variety of forums from which to absorb information. Rick and Elizabeth, for instance, both discussed the important role that podcasts have played in helping them learn about literature and other topics that are important to them, such as fandom.

As Jessica pointed out, Twitter and Tumblr are also helpful online spaces on which to dialogue about these texts, controversial representations within them, and what they would like to see more of within the content. The online spaces, therefore, have empowered readers and consumers not to rely on capitalistic and patriarchal power structures alone, or ideological state apparatuses, to obtain access to this content and the opportunities to discuss them.

What role(s) do literacy events at CONs and bookshops play in fostering literacy education through discussions of diverse comics and YA literature with empowered female protagonists?

Through these events, my participants and I have become more aware of what is still lacking in terms of representation. Specifically, some areas of diversity that are still underserved and underrepresented, even within the genres I am looking at specifically, are women of color, LGBT characters, characters with mental health issues, and characters with chronic illnesses. In particular, the limited representation of characters with chronic illnesses is not something I would have considered had one of my participants not brought it up. I was more aware of the other three aforementioned categories, but based on the responses of my participants, some of them would not have been if it were not specifically raised as an issue within these spaces.

Additionally, I would argue that through learning about characters of different backgrounds, readers and people within these forums are better able to build empathy for people who have experiences that are very different from theirs. Hearing John Lewis recount his experiences of the Civil Rights Movement has helped me and some other participants to better understand the challenges he experienced during the movement. Reading more work by LGBT authors who present in these settings has helped me, as a person who identifies as straight, to be more empathetic toward the experiences of LGBT people and also to better examine my own hidden prejudices.

A common thread of my data is that through these panels and book clubs, many of my participants see more possibilities: for their own potential as creators (of visual art and writing), for how the Internet will continue to push current creators for better and more diverse content, and for how there will be more diverse representation for female characters in the years to come. Several of my participants referenced speculative fiction and comics as being conducive to

empowered and diverse female characters and LGBT characters because of the possibilities that futuristic worlds present for a better and more equitable world. These findings are congruent with the literature I have studied and reviewed for this project, and I anticipate that this conversation will continue within the academic community in the coming years. Although there is work that remains to be done in these spaces before they have all of the attributes of Gee's (2004) affinity spaces, they do provide a forum in which to discuss and/or portray writing from people of varying backgrounds and interests. Participants are able to write and/or talk about important issues regarding representation of characters and power issues within the stories.

Implications for Research and Teaching

Attending these events as a participant-observer helped me to become more self-aware of my reading and text consumption preferences and how to combat my own hidden prejudices. Many of my participants commented that they enjoyed the opportunity to talk with me, and in some cases other focus group members, about these topics of interest, as they are not topics that tend to come up in everyday conversation. Conversations about identity issues can be uncomfortable to have, and I believe that is especially true in a sensitive political climate such as the one we are in right now.

The interview structure itself sometimes provided an opportunity for discussions that would be less likely to happen otherwise, even in supportive environments like a CON or book club. I was able to engage my participants in a dialogue about race and gender in context to literature, but in some cases more than others, and I wish I could have done so more successfully in some instances. However, I believe these dialogues, and in some cases people's hesitations, show that these conversations need to continue to occur. If students learn how to have these dialogues both in their own chosen affinity spaces and in more formal schooling settings, I

believe they will learn to broaden both their exposure to multimodal texts and their empathy for others.

For some participants, the primary motivation of going to these events is to learn about the content. For many, though, the initial motivation was more so social, but in part because of the connection to others with similar interests, they gradually became more interested in the content. My participants for this particular study are people who are drawn to literacy, either out of being autodidacts or because we came from families and/or schooling environments that encouraged social literacy practices.

For me and for my participants, these affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) were important spaces for us to learn about topics that sometimes get ignored in more traditional school settings, such as speculative fiction, comics, art, and creative writing. For some of us, it is food for the soul in addition to academic knowledge, perhaps even akin to religious experiences for some. Sometimes we were learning about our own limitations. Some of the participants and I, based on the data, may be blind to our own privilege in some areas. However, the fact that we are open to discuss issues involving power, deconstruction, representation, and race shows that hopefully, through engaging in the discussion of diverse texts, we will improve in our ability to understand people's different life experiences and to talk about them honestly, so as to continue to encourage forward progress and self-understanding.

For my further research, I might expand these ideas and questions to include people who are not as naturally drawn to social literacy experiences as the adults I interviewed for this study. What might such a similar study look like for younger students, and/or people who are not initially interested in the content? How might we continue to expose people to these important

multimodal texts who do not have the initial interest or knowledge base through such forums as libraries and the Internet? These are questions I will continue to ask myself as a researcher.

As a teacher, I will continue to attend these and similar events in part for exposure to this literature. Several participants referred to YA literature and comics as becoming more mainstream and canonized in recent years, but in my opinion, they still do not get the academic attention or study in classroom settings that they warrant. Therefore, part of my intent in writing and speaking about this literature is to raise awareness, and one motivation as an attendee is to learn more about books, comics, and other content to bring back to literacy education classrooms, in hopes that pre-service and current educators with whom I work will share these texts with their students. Continued research for me as a practitioner could also be how pre-service teachers respond to these texts and what implications their responses may have for increased classroom use.

Additionally, I hope to bring work related to affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) and fanfiction into classroom settings. Building on their prior work, Jen Scott Curwood, Jayne C. Lammers, and Alecia M. Magnifico published a 2017 book chapter entitled "From research to practice: Writing, technology, and English teacher education" in the book series *Advances in Research on Teaching.* Their research pertains to how they bring their experiences in out-of-school affinity spaces to their course work with pre-service teachers. I plan to consult this work for ideas in my own post-secondary classroom, whether I am teaching pre-service teachers, humanities students, college freshmen, or a combination in the future.

As a specific example of a classroom unit I would do based on this research study, I would like to have my students follow a fandom for a month and create a multi-genre research project based on the experience. Whether I am teaching an English literature course or a literacy

education course, students could benefit from doing research about a popular culture fandom of passion and how this fandom leads to the development of creative production and literacy practices. By researching the history of the fandom, students could write the expository element of the paper.

The more creative, multimodal element of the project would involve either a fanfiction story or fan art, along with an explanation of the creative process and how the in-person and/or online interactions of the fandom affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) influenced the creative process. As a follow up, I would encourage the students to post the writing piece or art on an online forum such as Tumblr, fanfiction, or other related sites. By doing so, they would have the full experience of being involved with an affinity space (Gee, 2004) without my guidance as an Instructor. Therefore, hopefully, they would have a more fully authentic experience of interacting with the affinity space and from gaining the feedback or (mostly) supportive members of the fan community, who tend to be very invested in giving newcomers creative feedback, based on my personal experiences (Jenkins, 2013b).

Final Thoughts

I chose to study events in which people discuss comics, speculative fiction, Young Adult Literature, and fanfiction because I am passionate about these forms of media and the diverse representation of female characters within them. I believe all of these forms of media have contributed to the empowerment of women in recent times. Yet it is important to study media in which women are portrayed as empowered, nuanced, diverse, and capable. Through studying my and my participants' interactions within these in-person and online affinity spaces, I hope I have examined the benefits of studying this literature, therefore encouraging increased attention to it

in both formal and informal school settings. I also hope to continue to study how fandom

encourages artistic production, aesthetic experiences akin to religion, writing, and socialization.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Greetings _____,

I am writing to see if you would be interested in doing an individual or small group interview with me for my dissertation study. My research project titled *Confessions of a Fangirl: Interactions with Multimodal, Multicultural Texts at Book Clubs and "Fandom" Events*. Through this research study, I hope to learn about how book club and fandom events contribute to people's understanding of diverse comics, Young Adult Literature, and speculative fiction texts, particularly those with a diverse representation of female characters.

If you decide to be part of this study, information will be gathered through a series of book club participations, literary event participation/observation, reflective writings from me and from you (if you choose to share them), individual interviews, and focus group interviews. I think you would be a good participant because: (list specific reasons here)

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I will not use your name or workplace on any papers that I write or publish about this research. If you want to stop participating in this project, you are free to do so at any time. You can also choose not to answer any questions that you don't wish to answer.

If you choose to withdraw, I as the researcher will retain and analyze already collected data relating to the subject up to the time of subject withdrawal. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed. There will be no monetary incentive for participating in this study.

If you'd like to participate, please let me know via response to this email, and we'll coordinate interviews and other logistics.

Best Regards,
Margaret

Appendix B: Participants

Note: I conducted formal interviews with all except for Curt and Melinda. Although I did not conduct formal interviews with Curt and Melinda, they provided important insight at informal conversations I had with them at the events. The categories are filled out based on how they personally identify.

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Sexual Orientation	Event(s)
Landis	Mid 60s	Female	White	Lesbian	MagiCon (past) and various smaller Cons
Leah	Mid 60s	Female	White	Lesbian	MagiCon (past) and various smaller Cons
Jessica	Mid 30s	Female	African-American	Straight	MagiCon (goes to other Cons throughout the year)
Ansley	Early 30s	Female	White	Straight	MagiCon
Becky	Early 30s	Female	Asian	Bisexual	MagiCon
Bob	Mid 30s	Male	White	Straight	MagiCon
Alaina	Mid 40s	Female	White	Straight	MagiCon
Kevin	Mid 30s	Male	Asian	Straight	MagiCon
Tina	Late 20s	Female	White	Straight	MagiCon
Mandy	Mid 30s	Female	White	Straight	MagiCon
Melinda	Early 30s	Female	African-American	Straight	MagiCon
Michelle	Mid 20s	Female	White	Bisexual	FantasyCon
Rick	Mid 40s	Male	White	Straight	MagiCon and Bookshop
Elizabeth	Mid 30s	Female	White	Asexual	MagiCon and Bookshop
Kara	Mid 20s	Female	White	Straight	Bookshop
Ellen	Early 50s	Female	White	Straight	Bookshop
Terra	Mid 20s	Female	White	Straight	Bookshop
Bruce	Early 40s	Genderqueer	White	Queer	Bookshop
Julia	Mid 20s	Female	White	Straight	Bookshop
Curt	Mid 20s	Male	White	Gay	Bookshop
Allen	Mid 20s	Male	White	Gay	Bookshop

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guides

MagiCon Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What panels at MagiCon did you tend to gravitate toward, and why?
2. Are there any panels you attended at MagiCon that related to identity and/or diversity issues, particularly related to representation of diverse/empowered female characters? If so, what were your thoughts on them?
3. If applicable: based on your interest in literature and writing, do you attend any related panels at Dragoncon? If so, what are your thoughts about them?
4. What, if anything, do you learn from attending Dragoncon?
5. Can you think of experiences growing up, via school or otherwise, that got you interested in fandom, literature, and/or writing? Explain
6. Have you done any writing related to your interest in fandom and/or diverse literature (ex: fanfiction)?
7. What motivated you to attend and present (if applicable) at Dragoncon this year? What were your thoughts on the experience?
8. For authors: What made you decide to create a writer name for yourself? What influenced your decision to make your writer name gender neutral?

FantasyCon Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What fandoms do you consider yourself to be a part of? When and how did you initially become interested in your fandom? How long have you been participating in your fandom communities, and in what way?
2. What panels and events at FantasyCon do you tend to gravitate toward, and why?
3. Have you participated in any fanfiction or related writing forums? Do you think this activity has impacted your understanding of female empowerment and/or diversity? If so, how? If not, why might that be the case?
4. Have you participated in any fandom and/or literary events recently related to diverse and empowered female protagonists? If so, can you tell me more about these?
5. Can you think of experiences growing up, via school or otherwise, that got you interested in fandom, literature, and/or writing? Explain
6. Do you engage in cosplay at your fandom events? If so, what have been some of your favorite costumes, and how do you go about making/obtaining your costumes?
7. How do you think you benefit from being part of a fandom and/or Con community? What do you think you contribute?
8. How, if at all, do you think fandom communities (both online and in person) have changed over time, in terms of content and participation?

Cloud Nine Bookshop Interview Guide

1. What are your thoughts on some of the more recent books that we've read for book club and/or the ones we just read? (Ex: *Shadowshaper)*
2. What motivated you to come to and/or facilitate YA book club at Avid? What do you think you get out of coming/gain from coming?

3. What, if any, are the important societal issues that come up in book club books and/or conversations, particularly related to identity, gender, and race? Do you think any of these relate to the books that are chosen? Why or why not?
4. What other book clubs, if any, do you attend at Avid or otherwise?
5. Who do you think tends to come to YA book club at Avid?
6. Can you remember any childhood experiences, in school and otherwise, that led you to interests in reading and writing? Explain
7. How, if at all, has coming to book clubs shaped you as a reader and/or a writer?
8. Why do you think it's important to discuss books with diverse characters, particularly diverse and empowered female characters?
9. How, if at all, do you think coming to book club helps you professionally?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to say on this topic that we haven't yet covered?

<div align="center">

Cloud Nine Bookshop and MagiCon
Dual Participants Interview Questions

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Cloud Nine Book Club Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on some of the more recent books that we've read for book club and/or the ones we are soon to read?
2. What motivated you to come to the YA book club at Avid? What do you think you get out of coming/gain from coming?
3. What, if any, are the important societal issues that come up in book club conversations, particularly related to identity?
4. What other book clubs, if any, do you attend at Avid or otherwise?
5. Can you remember any childhood experiences, in school and otherwise, that led you to interests in reading and writing? Explain
6. How, if at all, has coming to book clubs shaped you as a reader and/or a writer?

MagiCon Questions:

1. Are there any panels you attended at Dragoncon that related to identity and/or diversity issues? If so, what were your thoughts on them?
2. What panels at Dragoncon did you tend to gravitate toward, and why?
3. What parallels, if any, do you see between your experiences at Dragoncon panels (particularly related to literature and comics) and Avid bookshop book clubs?
4. What do you learn from attending Dragoncon?

Appendix D: Sample Interview and Tags/Notations

somebody there to do that, I think that everybody focuses only on how terrible everything is and they don't focus on the little bits of humor that make the situation survivable. So, I think Zander was important in his own way and I can see it more as an adult than I could as a kid.

MARGARET: That makes sense. You have a different perspective of your older…?????? Funny person…well, you kind of touched on this already but how do you think fandom communities have changed over time, if at all, as somebody who has been ??? for a fairly long time?

MICHELLE: I'd definitely say maybe become more inclusive. I think that it was a combination of people simply demanding more options and also more diverse creators just getting a shot of having their stuff out there. I think that fandoms are easier to get than they used to be. Back in the day, access was a little bit of a problem especially for me in a rural area. I didn't have Internet until I think I was like fourteen. So, it was a little bit tougher to find out about events or to know when the new books would be released, things like that….you had to really be on the ball. So, I think now it's really easy to…if you decide one day that you really want to be interested in Captain America you can spend a weekend knowing everything that you ever wanted to know. And so I'd say that the access to those groups is a lot easier than it was when I was growing up.

MARGARET: It sounds like part of it is the Internet.

MICHELLE: Internet changes everything. I think it also made it more acceptable because I know that I was made fun of in middle and high school for being as into Harry stuff as I was but as an adult no one cares and none of the teens that I know now are saying they're being made fun of at all for being interested in them. I think that exposure, even for people who aren't necessarily interested in fandom, people who aren't interested in it, being exposed to it has made them care a lot less about it and so there is a lot less push back towards kids who might be really into something.

MARGARET: Yeah, I think that makes sense…it's almost like more exposure makes it more normalized for lack of a better word.

MICHELLE: Definitely.

MARGARET: Yeah. Well, is there anything that you haven't said about fandom that you want to say still?

MICHELLE: I would say that the important thing about fandom today is that fans have more control over fandom than we've ever had before. I think that we have a responsibility to use that in a way that can create positive change. I think that if we, for instance, wanted to demand fandom be more inclusive we can make it more inclusive. We have buying power, our dollar says more than it ever has, our money goes further than it ever has. I think that we could impact things that aren't even related to fandom if we wanted to. Like I think eco issues, there is

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Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:03 PM
Comment [36]: Xander was comic relief

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:03 PM
Comment [37]: That response is definitely a trend. The internet in some ways gives marginalized people more power. People who are not White men can voice our opinions and say, we want more representation in these fandoms.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:04 PM
Comment [38]: That correlates with what others have said.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:05 PM
Comment [39]: Public libraries and schools do give people access to the Internet who would not otherwise have it, though, as a way of leveling the playing field.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:06 PM
Comment [40]: Interesting! The books didn't come out until I was in late high school, and the movies when I was in college. So no one made fun of me for reading the early books or going to the movies, but we were older and more mature by then.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:06 PM
Comment [41]: This correlates with the geek adolescent articles that my colleague from boot camp gave me.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:07 PM
Comment [42]: This came out in Can and Tia's interview as well.

Margaret Robbins 2/19/2017 1:07 PM
Comment [43]: I agree, which is why I started working on this project.

Margaret Robbins 4/21/2017 3:29 PM
Comment [44]: Yes, fans/consumers do have power. Erin talked about this in her interview as well. The Internet has increased the amount of power consumers have in the process.