INFINITE IDENTITIES: STAGING FANDOM AND DIVERSITY IN GEEK THEATRE

by

SCOUT STOREY

(Under the Direction of John Patrick Bray)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I demonstrate that geek theatre is creating a model for diversifying representation, attracting new audiences, and balancing sociopolitical content with entertainment. While a subcategory of genre theatre, I reserve the term "geek theatre" for products of geek self-representation, relying on fandom audiences' ability to recognize and understand tropes, references, and inside jokes of media culture as a form of communication and critique. Geek theatre not only has the ability to draw fandom audiences into the theatre, but also draws attention to bold representations of LGBTQIA+, women, and racial minorities, often in deeply intersectional ways. Moreover, the plays examined represent an overlap of the critical discourse of fandom with the critical discourses of theatre studies and academic theory. As case studies, I examine Kitty Keim's *Crabbe & Goyle Are Dead*, Crystal Skillman's *Geek!*, and Jon Carr's *The Wrath of Con* through the lens of fan studies; Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters* and Matt Cox's *Kapow-i GoGo* saga through queer theory; Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* and Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* through intersectionality; and Qui Nguyen's *Fight Girl Battle World*, Elaine Lee's *Starstruck*, and Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren's *A Klingon Christmas Carol* through posthumanism.

INDEX WORDS: geek theatre; performance studies; fan studies; transformative fandom; participatory culture

INFINITE IDENTITIES:

STAGING FANDOM AND DIVERSITY IN GEEK THEATRE

by

SCOUT STOREY

B.A., The University of Georgia, 2010

M.F.A., New York University, 2012

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2021

INFINITE IDENTITIES:

STAGING FANDOM AND DIVERSITY IN GEEK THEATRE

by

SCOUT STOREY

Major Professor:	John Patrick Bray
Committee:	Marla Carlson Carrie J. Cole David Saltz

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations”

I discovered “geek theatre,” both as artist and audience, in the autumn of 2011. First, I was working on my Master’s thesis in Musical Theatre Writing at NYU Tisch—a collaboration with composer Nick Morgan to create a video-game rock musical about a group of geeks navigating the zombie apocalypse, entitled *Headshot! A Geek Tragedy*. Though I had focused all my higher education around writing (both script and prose), this libretto marked my first attempt to write about the geek culture that defined much of my personal life. Second, Qui Nguyen’s *She Kills Monsters* premiered at the Flea Theatre in New York, directed by Robert Ross Parker and featuring the Bats, the Flea’s resident acting troupe. Both of these events were to shape my work as a scholar and a playwright moving forward. Experientially, being in the audience of *She Kills Monsters*—a play that uses the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons to navigate the complex relationships between geeks and their “mundane” loved ones—marked a convergence of live theatre and fandom. For me, these represented two worlds—both of which I inhabited fulltime, but which paradoxically never seemed to meet.[1] Both also represented two unique and heightened audience experiences that challenge the passivity of mass market consumption: the live event of theatre and the participatory nature of transformative geek fan culture.

Geek theatre’s potential for expanding and diversifying theatre audiences was immediately apparent to me. Years would pass before I began to grasp the extent to which numerous theatre groups, mostly small companies and troupes scattered across multiple cities

with active independent theatre scenes, were using geek content and aesthetic to diversify the stage and expand accessibility to non-traditional theatre audiences.

I use the term "geek" to indicate membership in any number of subcultural fandoms—including sci fi, fantasy, tabletop and video gaming, comics, anime, etc.—which have typically carried varying levels of social stigma. Fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins, in his seminal work *Textual Poachers*, refers to members of media fandom as "a group insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and worthless."[2] John Patrick Bray defines this type of fan as "one who enthusiastically participates in the construction of a subculture dedicated to an aspect of cultural or pop-culture mythology" and distinguishes geek fans from other types (such as sports or music fans) by their "low subcultural status." He also notes that "being a 'fan' is not an isolated occurrence, but rather relies on the participants' dedication to a group under a similar identity branding"—that is, geek fandom carries with it not only enthusiasm for a source text but membership and active participation in a culture, one marked by mainstream (or mundane) culture as "other."[3] I acknowledge that a "fan" is not always synonymous with a "geek." People can be fans of almost anything, and fannish activities such as sports and music fandoms, for example, are not only acceptable but expected in mainstream culture.[4] However, as I will be exclusively dealing with the subset of fan studies that deals with media fandom and other fandoms culturally stigmatized as "geeky," I will be using the terms "geek" and "fan" interchangeably, and the fan cultures I reference will all be geek fandoms.

In recent years, geek culture has been partially popularized with the rise of "geek chic," including mass market successes such as *The Big Bang Theory*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Disney's line of new *Star Wars* films. This manner of geek representation has appeared on the mainstream stage as well, including Broadway productions such as *Spider-Man: Turn off the*

Dark, which adapts source texts of an established comic book fandom, and *The Book of Mormon*, which depicts a geek protagonist who integrates his fandoms into the plot of his own life. This phenomenon of increasing visibility and acceptance in mainstream culture is significant and opens up pathways of accessibility not only for geeks to express themselves more openly but for non-geeks to explore fan culture. Still, differentiating geek chic from geeks' own cultural products and representations of themselves is also vitally important. Geek chic's attempts to market fan culture to the mainstream still retain strong tendencies to disregard fans' opinions and values in favor of mass palatability and tend to depict geeks themselves, although increasingly empathetically, as laughable stereotypes. In short, the stigma has been softened but not eradicated. I compare the myth that "geeks are cool now" to the scenario: "You've knocked me down and taken my toys, and now you think we're friends because we play with the same toys." While new adaptations of fandom's source texts may have gained popularity, immersing oneself too deeply within fandom culture still carries some level of social ostracization and outsider status, and the phenomenon of geek chic, while reducing open ridicule of geek culture, also effectively banishes geeks to the margins of their own fandoms.

I reserve the term "geek theatre" for products of geek self-representation. As Bray sums up in no minced terms, it is "a theatre for geeks, not for people who want to bully them."[5] In many ways, geek theatre is a sub-genre of genre theatre such as sci fi and fantasy. I define the term by two basic criteria: first, that its subject matter is that of an established geek fandom or genre and, second, that it is produced by members of geek fan culture, targeting a geek audience.

The phenomenon of geek theatre is an extremely recent one: so new that many of its producers have never heard such a phrase, or any that properly sums up their work. I myself had no term to describe *Headshot!* while in the process of writing it. While certainly falling within

the "zombie apocalypse" genre, this designation seemed insufficient to describe its true themes and subject matter, and I often found myself explaining the musical I was co-creating in lengthy and altogether unwieldy terms. Upon personally interviewing the very playwrights and directors who are actively producing geek plays, my use of the phrase "geek theatre" was frequently met with the response: "That's a thing?"

The phrase itself was originally coined by the Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company (VC), founded by playwright Qui Nguyen and director Robert Ross Parker. In an interview, Nguyen explains:

> When our producer Abby Marcus (who is now my wife) and I sat down to write our first grant, she needed to clearly state what we were doing in a simple mission statement. But it was hard to do so using traditional categories. […] So after hearing me go round and round, she simply stopped me and asked, ultimately, "What audience in NY are you trying to appeal to?" And without a pause I said, "Oh, the Geeks!" And in that moment she coined the term "Geek Theatre" to be an umbrella for the type of work we were doing. It was the first time I ever saw those two words together.[6]

Erin Underwood and Jen Gunnels, in their play anthology entitled *Geek Theater*, define as their criteria for inclusion science fiction and fantasy genre plays that are written for live production on the stage, whereas Bray differentiates geek theatre from such genre theatre in general by "its dedicated focus on geek culture, and its mission to create a theatre for a geek audience."[7] He argues that the success of companies such Vampire Cowboys, producing geek work, is a result of "actively cultivating not just an audience or a subscriber base, but a fandom."[8]

As an example of this geek audience, I could serve as Exhibit A. Indeed, I like to consider myself the original *She Kills Monsters* fan. My geekily enthusiastic and repeated spectatorship ultimately caught the attention of the cast, to the extent that I was bestowed with several production props and memorabilia (still proudly displayed in my home), attracted the amused attention of artistic director Jim Simpson and his wife Sigourney Weaver, and was dubbed by the Bats (even those who were not amongst the cast) as "that *She Kills Monsters* fan" for several years following. Subsequent to this production, I quickly became very familiar with the work of Qui Nguyen.

In his play *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, Nguyen metatheatrically sums up the nature of his own work:

> Fun fact: Qui Nguyen is a co-founder and Co-Artistic Director of Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company in New York City, an Obie Award-winning geek theatre company specializing in creating comic book styled theatrical shows that are filled with martial arts, badass ladies, physically weaker male characters who tend to need saving, and sudden and abrupt genre shifts.[9]

Nguyen discusses the subject more deeply in an interview with *Scarlet Betch*, emphasizing Vampire Cowboys' dedication to two fundamental concepts, the first of which is advertised as VC's main aesthetic and the second regarded as their "unwritten mission":

> A) Comic book geek theatre—we want to take a lot of genres and cram them all together and find a way to bring in the geeky audience and bring them into the theatre. Since a lot of theatre produced nowadays is not really made for that kind of audience. B) We want to promote multicultural casting and gay themes. But we

> couldn't fit it into the mission. So we decided to not put it in, that it would always just be the thing that we do.[10]

VC cofounder Robert Ross Parker explained to the New York Times, "One of the missions of Vampire Cowboys was always to make heroes out of women, people of color, lesbian, gay, transgender characters—those people who generally don't get to be heroes."[11] The Vampire Cowboys are far from alone in these endeavors. Geek theatre not only has the ability to draw fandom audiences—which, once engaged, has repeatedly demonstrated great enthusiasm, loyalty, and willingness to invest time and income in supporting their chosen media—but also frequently draws focus to bold representations of LGBTQIA+, women, racial minorities, and neurodivergence, often specifically underscoring the intersectional nature of identity. Many geek theatre groups emphasize diversity and positive representation as quintessential to their work as artists.

Geek culture has long adopted a mantra known as IDIC: "infinite diversity in infinite combinations."[12] The phrase comes from Vulcan philosophy in *Star Trek*, the series most frequently acknowledged as the original fandom from which modern media fan culture grew.[13] Transformative geek fandoms have long used tactics of resistant reading and creation of metatext to find the gaps in source texts with potential to facilitate diversity not often found overtly within the source texts themselves. This potential for and actualization of diversity (if often still imperfect) is a celebrated point of pride among fan cultures. Likewise, geek theatre creates a forum for minority self-expression and for openly dealing with issues of identity and social marginalization.

In addition to Vampire Cowboys, many theatres and performance groups actively producing geek work cite diversification and representation as priorities in their performances.

For example, Babes With Blades exclusively casts female, trans, and gender-nonconforming actors and, like Vampire Cowboys, specializes stage combat. In addition to revamped classics a period pieces, the theatre company also produces women-centric genre plays, such as sci fi. Another Chicago-based group, Raks Geek is a primarily queer and Asian-American performance troupe specializing in belly dancing and fire spinning (see Figure 1). Founder of and performer Dawn Xiana Moon stresses the intersectional nature of her identity and her work, the blending of cultures and imagination to create a space of expression for identities who do not fit neatly into single categories, speaking of art as a resistance and geek culture as a space where otherness can thrive:

> A body on a stage makes a statement. A female, POC body on a stage makes a statement. When I dance, I'm changing the narrative, the story of what an Asian-American woman is allowed to be. When I dance with Raks Geek, I'm making an audience laugh at the ridiculousness of a Wookiee shimmying, but I'm also bringing a new audience to an insular dance form, teaching them what bellydance looks like at a high level of technical and artistic proficiency, and defying a host of model minority and immigrant stereotypes.[14]

Raks Geek's performative fusion merges theatrical art of dance with the fan art of cosplay.[15]

Many academics working in fan studies have published on the subject of geek performance, particularly at fan conventions and in the form of cosplay. Taking a step further, Francesca Coppa likens the creation of fanfiction to stage performance, arguing that its focus on bodies is inherently performative in nature and its notorious repetitiveness resembles theatre's utterly accepted tendency to create and recreate a multitude of productions of single play scripts:

> If traditional theatre takes a script and makes it three-dimensional in a potentially infinite number of productions, modern fandom takes something three-dimensional and then produces and infinite number of scripts. This is not authoring texts, but making productions—relying on the audience's shared extratextual knowledge of sets and wardrobes, of the actors' bodies and their smiles and movements—to direct a living theatre in the mind.[16]

However, as of this writing, very little scholarship has been done specifically on the subject of geek theatre. Bray's article "There's Too Many of Them!" defines the genre and emphasizes its distinction from geek chic as well as its connection with minority representation.[17] Bray, however, provides only an introduction to the subject matter and its potential impact.

Most of the scholarly work focusing on geek culture, community, and creativity is done in media fandom studies, built originally upon the work of Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Constance Penley. Their foundational texts—*Textual Poachers*, *Enterprising Women*, and "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," respectively—establish the history of the media fan community, its female-driven writer- and reader-base, its emergence and subsequent distinction from the science fiction convention community, its tactics of resistant reading and creative production of metatext, its ethical practices, and its methods of community-building. Jenkins positions himself as both an academic and an insider of the fandom community, while Bacon-Smith positions herself strictly as an ethnographer. These scholars have published subsequent works tracking the fandom community's evolving culture and methods through the advent of the internet. While Bacon-Smith acknowledges live sketch performances in the context of conventions, these writers—and the many fan scholars who have

followed—have typically focused upon geek fan production of literature (fanfiction) and fan art, with little attention to theatrical performance.[18]

Other academics working in fan studies have published on geek performance, particularly at conventions and in the form of cosplay. Jen Gunnels and Carrie J. Cole, in response to Jenkins's metaphor of the fan as "poacher," have positioned fans as "ethnodramaturgs." Within this model, fans function both as ethnographers within the universes of their fandoms (immersing themselves, studying, and isolating cultural fragments) and as dramaturgs who translate and arrange these fragments into performances that are always necessarily unfinished, continuously evolving and expanding the metatext of the fan canon.[19] Eric Kahler has also written on fan performativity within the context of convention culture and its role in the formulation of identity.[20] While they bring the study of fandom into the realm of performance studies, these publications do not venture into staged plays.

Several theatre scholars have written recently on a resurgence of science fiction and fantasy theatre as well as live theatre's adoption of new technology, both as subject matter in exploring the modern human experience and as media to integrate into the live theatre experience as spectacle or audience interactivity. Michelle Poynton has explored relationships between new technology such as the smartphone, science fiction theatre, and participatory audiences.[21] Warren Kluber has published on plays that depict fantasy world-building within gaming as a method of exploring identity and rebelling against oppression.[22] None of these scholars has taken particular note, however, of fandom's role in these phenomena, nor have they isolated the trend of geek theatre and its particular affinity for diverse representation.

Several recent theses and dissertations have been written on fandom's continued appeal for marginalized individuals and its value as an outlet of creativity and self-expression. Jason

Tocci discusses the reclamation of once-derogatory terms such as “geek” and “nerd” into earnest expressions of identity, again differentiating this phenomenon from the recent trend of geek chic.[23] Christopher Louis Beauprey Cardiel examines geek misrepresentation in mainstream media over recent decades.[24] Margaret Ann Robbins has written on geek culture as a counterculture frequently utilized to discuss controversial cultural issues and how fandom practices can be integrated into a school setting to promote inclusivity.[25] These studies tend to focus on literature, mass media such as film and television, and/or convention events, not on representation in live theatre. Aya Esther Hiyashi’s dissertation explores geek musicals, but with a primary focus on music’s role in fan culture.[26] In this dissertation, I will unify the findings of media fan studies regarding the potential for inclusivity in geek fandoms’ methods of reading, transformation, production, and community-building with the work currently being done in geek theatre by a multitude of performance companies in cities across the United States.

Geek theatre, crafted by and for communities who operate on the margins of society, creates a culture of accessibility for a variety of unconventional audiences. While almost always written and produced primarily for entertainment—audiences show up looking for a fun time and tend to leave with this expectation satisfied—geek plays often tackle major cultural issues head-on. The techniques these plays consciously employ to inclusively expand representation and to address sensitive social and political subjects, while maintaining the goal of entertainment, can serve as models for possible approaches mainstream theatre might take toward diversifying casts, attracting audiences, and balancing politics, art, and entertainment.

Geek theatre represents a convergence of various fandom spaces and their transformative potentials—the expressive storytelling medium most often seen manifested in fanfiction, the performative and immersive elements seen in cosplay and LARP, and the communal experience

of fandom often only experienced live at conventions.[27] Perhaps most significantly, it enacts these quintessential geek experiences in a space—theatre—that, while targeting geek audiences, is much more accessible and comprehensible to non-geeks than most fandom spaces.

Because much of geek theatre deals with identity representation in very intersectional ways, in addition to fan studies, I will be drawing upon a multitude of theoretical paradigms as well as examining geek theatre's aesthetic roots in camp, metatheatricality, and parody to explore the work these plays accomplish in moving toward a more diverse stage and audience. The outsider aspect of geek creative production, which taps into a vast variety of minoritarian perspectives, lends itself to a sense of intersectionality, opening up to a number of relevant paradigms which can all shed light on geek performance's ability to decenter hegemonic narratives, diversify existing canon, and move toward utopian futurity with the ultimate goal of actualizing the fundamental geek concept of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. While I will discuss many intersectional aspects of these plays, in order to focus each analysis and deep-dive into various aspects of geek theatre's potential to expand representation of diverse subject positions, I have separated chapters into discrete theoretical paradigms as they resonate with case studies in geek theatre: media fan studies, queer theory, intersectional race theory, and posthumanism.

In chapter 1, "Infinite Fandoms," I will examine geek theatre as a point of accessibility, both from the aspect of geeks into theatre as well as theatre audiences into geek culture, and its emulation of geek culture's ability to serve as a haven for marginalized individuals and a safe space for creative expression. I argue that geek theatre's implementation methods of fan creative production, combining celebration and critique of source texts by relying on audience familiarity with these texts to create an encoded communal language of resistance, on the live stage

facilitates radical explorations of identity. Case studies will include Vampire Cowboys' production of *Geek!* by Crystal Skillman; Dad's Garage's productions of *Wrath of Con* by Jon Carr; and *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* by Kitty Keim.

In chapter 2, "Infinite Orientations," I will discuss geek theatre as queer theatre. Many geek plays foreground queer protagonists, experiences, and sociopolitical concerns. Well beyond representation, however, the aesthetic of geek theatre bears strong similarity to and significantly overlaps with queer theatre, including an affinity for camp and a desire to "queer" the existing canon, disrupting hegemonic normativity. Case studies will include the Flea Theatre's original production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen and the People's Improv Theatre's marathon production of the *Kapow-i GoGo* series by Matt Cox.

In chapter 3, "Infinite Cultures," I will discuss geek theatre's efforts to racially diversify theatre. In addition to casting practices, I will look at geek playwrights' outspoken concern with representation for minorities (both lack of representation and stereotypes within the available roles). I will focus on these playwrights' attention to creating roles for diverse ranges of actors and their methods of addressing racial identity and experiences at the intersection of geek culture with ethnic cultures. Case studies will include Vampire Cowboys and Ma-Yi's production of *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* by Qui Nguyen and Geffen Playhouse's production of *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* by Inda Craig-Galván.

In chapter 4, "Infinite Intelligences," I will examine how geek theatre, in the tradition of science fiction, uses posthumanism to grapple with social issues of inequality and how "personhood" is culturally defined. By exploring anthropocentric attitudes, geek theatre examines how humanity deals with the alien Other and how dominant hegemonies redefine personhood as a means of dehumanization and exclusion. Case studies will include Vampire

Cowboys' *Fight Girl Battle World* by Qui Nguyen; *Starstruck* by Elain Lee, with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place; and EDGE of Orion's 2018 production of *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren.

The live theatrical event of presenting geek fans' methods of storytelling, reshaping narrative, and performing identity represents the convergence of a variety of interests. The most significant of these include the desire to tell stories on one's own terms and be heard, to celebrate as well as to critique and repair beloved cultural artifacts, to ask uncomfortable questions within the forum of a safe space, and to find new methods of self-expression and of disrupting the oppression of the cultural hegemony. In this dissertation, I will examine how geek theatre goes about doing the work of disrupting hegemonic narratives and creating space for diverse representation and self-expression.

Figure 1: Michi Trota, Lee Na-Moo, Loki Deadman, Dawn Xiana Moon, Gaea Lady, Kamrah; Graphic design by Dawn Xiana Moon, original photo by Stage Photographic, used with permission of Dawn Xiana Moon and Raks Geek

[1] "Mundane" is a term used by geeks in fan culture to designate non-geeks. It is often used derogatorily, to reflect the manner in which mundane culture uses the term "geek" derogatorily.
For further discussion of this term and its use in fan culture, see Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation*, edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 310; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
[2] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 3.
[3] John Patrick Bray, "'There's Too Many of Them!': Off-Off Broadway's Performance of Geek Culture," *Theatre Symposium* 22, no. 1 (2014): 123-4.
[4] In an ironic and noteworthy reversal of participation in geek fandoms, the failure to participate in sports and music fandoms is often socially punishable by ridicule and ostracization.
[5] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 128.
[6] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 125.

[7] Erin Underwood and Jen Gunnels, introduction to *Geek Theater* (Marblehead: Underwords Press, 2014); Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 125.
[8] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 121.
[9] Qui Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2012), 22.
[10] Jason Tseng, "Interview: Qui Nguyen of Vampire Cowboys," *Scarlet Betch!*, February 26, 2010, accessed 30 September 2019, http://scarletbetch.blogspot.com/2010/02/interview-qui-nguyen-of-vampire-cowboys.html,
[11] Diep Tran, "How Mom and Dad Met, With Ninjas," *New York Times*, 5 October 2016, accessed March 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/theater/vietgone-qui-nguyen-manhattan-theater-club.html?_r=0.
[12] For an in-depth discussion of IDIC in fan culture, see Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992; Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," 308.
[13] "IDIC," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 25 November, 2018. http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/IDIC; *Star Trek*, episode 7, "The Infinite Vulcan," written by Walter Koenig, directed by Hal Sutherland, aired 20 October, 1973, on NBC.
For an overview of media fandom history, see Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006).
[14] Dawn Xiana Moon, "Of Asian-Americans and Belly-Dancing Wookiees," *Jim C. Hines*, 20 June 2017, accessed 1 October 2019, http://www.jimchines.com/2017/06/asian-americans-and-bellydancing-wookiees/. See also Dawn Xiana Moon, "A Work of Art is a Refuge and a Resistance," *Uncanny Magazine*, accessed 1 October 2019, https://uncannymagazine.com/article/work-art-refuge-resistance/; Dawn Xiana Moon, "Meet Dawn Xiana Moon of Raks Geek in Andersonville and Uptown," *Voyage Chicago*, 18 December 2017, accessed 1 October 2019, http://voyagechicago.com/interview/meet-dawn-xiana-moon-raks-geek-andersonville-uptown/.
[15] The term "cosplay" is a combination of the words "costume" and "play." As an activity, cosplay typically consists of building a costume based upon a fandom character and attending a geek/fandom social gathering—for example a convention, a release or opening night event, a themed party or festival, etc.—that can serve as a forum for the performance in costume. The cosplayer may or may not maintain the persona of their character throughout the performance.
[16] "Fanfiction" is a form of amateur literature that unofficially adapts preexisting characters, settings, and/or situations from copywrited source material that makes up the official canon of a fandom universe.
Francesca Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance," in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2014), 236.
[17] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!"
[18] See Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture."
[19] See Jen Gunnels and Carrie J. Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes: Fan Production as Ethnographic Fragments," *Transformative Worlds and Cultures* 7 (2011), accessed 13 August 2018. https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/241/220.
[20] Eric Kahler. "'Tell Me, Where Am I From?': A Study Of The Performance Of Geek Identity At Comic Book Conventions," Master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2015.
[21] Michelle Poynton, "Science Fiction Theatre as an Aspect of Digital Participatory Culture," Master's thesis, SUNY Buffalo, 2016.
[22] Warren Kluber, "Character-World Dialectics on the Contemporary American Stage: Gaming, Role-Playing, and Wrestling with Idioculture," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 2 (2018): 209-227. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2018.0028.
[23] Jason Tocci, "Geek Cultures: Media and Identity in the Internet Age," Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009.
[24] Christopher Louis Beauprey Cardiel, "Are We Cool Yet?: A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Nerd and Geek Representation in Popular Television," Master's thesis, Portland State University, 2012.
[25] Margaret Ann Robbins, "Confessions of a Fangirl: Interactions with Affinity Spaces and Multimodal, Multicultural Texts at Book Clubs and Fandom Events," Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 2017.
[26] Aya Esther Hiyashi, "Musicking Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media Fandom," doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2018.
[27] LARP, or Live Action Role Playing, is a form of role-playing game that, unlike video game or tabletop RPGs, involves physically costuming, performing in character, and acting out the events of the game, within a structured set of rules and safety parameters.

Chapter 1: Infinite Fandoms

First and foremost, a geek is a fan. More specifically, a person who identifies as a geek is someone who considers fandom to be an integral part of their identity. As geek theatre targets a geek audience, multiple factors are assumed in the production and reception of these plays: 1) that audience members are positioned to "get the joke," as they arrive already in possession of shared subcultural knowledge with no need for background, exposition, or explanation, and 2) that these audience members, while perhaps strangers to each other, are already inherently bonded as members of the geek fandom community.

Geek theatre, like all geek performance, is very much produced *by* geeks *for* geeks. This essential comradery and mutual respect shines through in the work and the relationships these theatre companies develop with their audiences, who not only share fandoms with geek theatre producers but in turn create new fandoms around theatres such as Vampire Cowboys. As playwright Crystal Skillman states in an interview with theatre scholar John Patrick Bray, "Geek theatre is about the fandom: getting together and seeing something you love.... Geek theatre cares about its fans. And they're not audience members, and they're not subscribers, they're fans."[1] Bray also points out that VC co-founder and playwright Qui Nguyen "considers himself to be a geek. In other words, Nguyen is already an active participant in the subculture."[2] In this way, producers and consumers of geek theatre are not set apart from each other, but instead inhabit the same shared space and community.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how geek theatre, as fan performance, represents a distinct subculture with its own customs and practices, creates a safe space for vulnerable Othered individuals to express and explore identity, and serves as a gateway for new audiences into the world of live theatre. I will use the following plays as primary case studies: *The Wrath of Con* by Jon Carr, particularly focusing on Dad's Garage Theatre Company's 2019 revival and subsequent production of *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*; Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company's *Geek!* by Crystal Skillman; and *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* by Kitty Keim.

In a World…

Both Skillman's and Carr's plays draw upon the culture of geek fan conventions (or "cons"), whereas Keim's script inhabits a realm more similar to fanfiction. All three playwrights rely on the audience's ability to understand the plays' references, whether to geek culture itself or to specific source texts, as each script is encoded to speak to very personal experiences that geeks tend to share. The tradition of fanfiction goes back to the very inception of media fandom, and the creation and distribution *Star Trek* fan zines is credited as the social network that would eventually develop into modern geek fan culture.[3] "Fanfiction" is any work of literature that draws upon established characters, settings, and/or situations from the official canonical universe of copyrighted source texts. In Keim's case, the content of *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* may be considered fanfiction of both J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.[4] Effectively fanfiction is not only playing but, in a legal sense, trespassing in other writers' sandboxes. As a result, practically all fanfiction is necessarily "amateur" and by nature challenges the boundaries of creative ownership, a point I will discuss further in this chapter. As a primarily literary craft, fanfiction is typically a solitary

endeavor (artistically, at least), whereas cons represent the height of geek socialization. Carr takes particular care in his script to differentiation fandom cons from professional conventions or conferences:

> LOOKER: How is a CON not a CONVENTION? Well I shall explain. A CONVENTION has a purpose. It is grounded in reality in order to serve a common goal. […] Oh but THE CON. The CON is an escape. It is the other side of Alice's looking glass. A place where the purpose of BEING is to simply NOT to be thyself. When one chooses THE CON they ingest the Blue Pill...[5]

Geeks attend cons for a multitude of reasons, including: to cosplay, to meet celebrity guests, to attend panels discussing a range of fandom topics, to shop for rare or crafted items among the dealers halls, etc. Yet first and foremost, geeks attend to find community and a social landscape to navigate in comfort, safety, and familiarity, where others share—if not necessarily their specific passions/fandoms—their passion *for* fandom.

Jon Carr's play *The Wrath of Con* was first produced at Dad's Garage Theatre Company in 2012, where it has enjoyed multiple revivals and, in 2019, a sequel. The setting is specifically inspired by Dragon Con, a prominent sci-fi/fantasy con held annually in Atlanta, GA—or "90,000 people spanning 5 hotels converging in one location to celebrate everything nerd"—but the story is meant to generally encapsulate the very personal and unique experiences of geeks gathering at a con, both the ups and downs.[6] The tale is narrated by the Looker, a parody of Marvel comics' Watchers and of the theatre audience in attendance: "S/he who exists only to gaze at the comings and goings of mankind. Never to interfere. Only to observe."[7] *WOC* and its

sequel, *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*, both highlight the personal and potent experience geeks feel when attending events such as Dragon Con.

Crystal Skillman's *Geek!*, the first and to date only play commissioned and produced by Vampire Cowboys by a playwright other than company co-founder Qui Nguyen, also takes place in the setting of a fictional con: Dante's Fire Con, an anime con inspired by Dante's *Inferno*. The plot follows two teenage geeks, Danya and Honey, who are desperately trying to fight their way through Fire Con to meet Samagashi, the elusive author of their favorite manga, *Dante's Fire*, and bestow upon her a series of videos they—along with their friend Ellen, who recently committed suicide—recorded in cosplay as their favorite characters. Skillman emphasizes the importance of both the epic fandom world constructed by the geek characters and the geeks' use of their fandom as an abstract mechanism by which to negotiate through personal and social issues in their everyday lives:

> In GEEK!, each character is cosplaying a character she loves from her favorite anime/manga, Dante's Fire (a fictional show created for this play!). There are heightened moments in the play where each character "sees" themselves doing heroic acts like their cosplay characters, but in reality these are real teenagers with real problems and in very real situations.[8]

The story of *Geek!* focuses on the struggles and vulnerabilities of "outsiders" and their use of fandom to create space within which to explore their identities and cope with loss.

The play *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* by Kitty Keim takes up a theme common in geek theatre: the prospect of being a side character in one's own life story. Graydon Schlichter, who first pitched the idea to Keim to take over as a playwright and later played Gregory Goyle in the play's premiere at Hollywood Fringe 2019, notes that the concept revolves around "two

characters from the Potterverse Canon who have less than a dozen lines between them," then drawing upon the structure and themes of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to explore "the absurdity that is bred from being unable to meaningfully affect your own life's course."[9] Keim's script follows the characters of Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, Draco Malfoy's thuggish henchmen, through all seven of their years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, corresponding with the story told in the books and films of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (see Figure 2). Like Stoppard's, Keim's play focuses heavily on the concept of agency and confronts its audience with the casual dismissal of people who do not present as "main characters" in the overarching official narrative.

Alternative Retellings

Geek creative production and performance falls under the umbrella of what Lawrence Lessig calls "remix culture," which he describes as "the appropriation and transformation of mass media texts (including films, television episodes, recorded music, video games, comic books, novels, and so on) into alternate versions, with traces of the 'source' texts lingering in the new 'takes,' the remixes."[10] As Henry Jenkins argues, it is this very performance of remixed material that sets fans apart from mere consumers: "As many fans suggested to me, the difference between watching a series and becoming a fan lies in the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement" and "fandom here becomes a participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community."[11] Jenkins is suspicious of the Brechtian concept of critical distance, suggesting that "rather than empowering or enlightening, distance is simply one of the means by which the 'scriptural economy' works to keep readers' hands off its texts" and citing

fan practices of critically dissecting and using their own "remixes" to correct the source texts they love so dearly.[12] Jenkins likens fan work to that of scholars:

> Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it.[13]

Constance Penley, applying psychoanalysis to the production of fanfiction, also refers to fandom as a "highly self-reflexive and self-critical" culture.[14] This type of fan behavior resists what Stuart Hall would term the "dominant-hegemonic position" in "decoding" a copyrighted source text, or the interpretation "preferred" by the producers who hold said copyright and strive to gatekeep its culture content. Rather, geek fans function from "oppositional" or, more often, "negotiated" positions, recognizing the intent of the producers' encoded message but choosing to decode the content in their own way, consciously restructuring the frame through which the content may be read.[15]

Numerous scholars in media fandom, or "geek" culture, pay particular attention to the creation of texts called "fanfiction." Since the beginning of geek fan culture, these texts have been circulated among geek communities, first in zines and later on the internet. Fanfiction is the practice of writing stories featuring known characters, settings, and scenarios from the universe of a fandom's source texts. Abigail Derecho discusses fanfiction as "a subgenre of a larger type of writing that is usually called 'derivative' or 'appropriative' literature, but which I choose to call archontic, a term borrowed from Jacques Derrida's definition of archives as ever expanding and never completely closed."[16] Abigail De Kosnik likewise adopts Derrida's term "archontic" in reference not only to the production of fanfiction but also the fan practice of distributing and

archiving such material indiscriminately, without gatekeeping on the basis of "merit."[17] De Kosnik uses the archontic principle to describe fan practices of commenting and expanding upon the source texts of their fandoms: "A virtual archive—let us call it a 'meta-archive'—is opened by each source text, and encompasses not only that source text but all variations and transformations of it produced by readers, viewers, listeners, scholars, critics, and fans."[18] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse apply another term to describe the same phenomenon:

> This *fantext*, the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters. These multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes are often contradictory yet complementary to one another and the source text. Nevertheless, working with and against one another, this multitude of stories creates a larger whole of understanding a given universe.[19]

Keim's play *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* serves as a prime example of this impulse, a retelling of the same story told in the original *Harry Potter* series from an entirely different perspective.

The script pursues deeper insight both into the Harry Potter universe itself and the nature of how canonically produced texts are often (consciously or unconsciously) told in a manner that reinforces the hegemonic status quo, in this case serving as a reminder, as Schlichter notes, that "history (even fictional history) is often written by the victors."[20] The script also opens up the world to greater diversity in its noted encouragement of race- and gender-blind casting:

> These characters and their universe are well-known enough that a wig, glasses, and/or house crest on their robes should make them instantly recognizable. Just because the source material for this work skews heavily white and male, does not mean that the casting of this work should do likewise.[21]

These desires to contribute to the universe of a fandom, to see oneself represented within that fandom universe, and to make space for such representation are at the center of geek culture. As a direct result, geek culture is inherently participatory and, I will argue, performative.

From Cosplay to Stage Play

Jen Gunnels and Carrie J. Cole's model of the geek fan as "ethnodramaturg" marks the convergence of the fannish behaviors of immersing oneself within a fandom universe to study and of contributing one's own creative content to that universe. "Fans, as ethnodramaturgs, carve out discrete objects of the fictive world for study and link them together in a performative story line."[22] In other words, geeks turn scholarship of their fandom into artistic production of their fandom. From the start, fan scholars have pointed out how geek culture's ethnographic tendencies not only produce trivia-style knowledge but prolific creative production. Jenkins observes, "Fans possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides."[23] As fandom scholarship has developed, some of the focus has shifted from fanfiction toward the more performative elements of geek culture.

These performative elements exist in geek practices such as cosplay, nerdlesque, and LARPing.[24] The importance of cosplay as both an immersion into a fandom universe and a public profession of dedication to that fandom is a major theme in Skillman's and both of Carr's plays depicting the events of cons.

> SHEILA: I just thought it would be fun to dress up.
>
> DIANA: WHOA WHOA WHOA. Fun?? Dress-up? You are not 5 and this is not your mommy's closet. You are a grown woman and this is not CosPLAY

> anymore, it's CosSERIOUS FUCKING BUSINESS. Creating a costume worthy of Con requires dedication, resources, and above all, panache. [25] (see Figure 3)

The dedication, specificity, and detail with which cosplayers construct their construct their costumes and performances are particularly (almost absurdly) emphasized in all three of these plays, as exemplified in the following instances of Skillman's *Geek!* (see Figure 4), Carr's *The Wrath of Con*, and Carr's sequel *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*, respectively:

> HONEY: You aren't going to take your costume off are you. (*[Squeaker] shakes head "no."*) You're going to keep playing— (*He nods his head "yes."*) Because you obviously spent a lot of time on that costume! You've even got some spylooking, super faraway hearing device in there—because that's Squeaker's skill! (*Squeaker is excited she notices. He nuzzles her.*)[26]

> LOOKER: Albert is beginning the assembly process for his Alternate Universe Boba Fett costume. He has spent $2,000 dollars and 3 years crafting it, it's made of actual steel and weighs 196 pounds. He will wear 3 similar costumes this evening.[27]

> ERIC: So this is an alternate Isekai anime version of Sniper Wolf from Metal Gear Solid, but it's gender-swapped and age-adjusted to reflect this one fanfiction where she's living in Chernobyl.[28]

Geek theatre in the form of scripted plays can point to both geek performances like cosplay and geek creative writing practices like fanfiction as direct antecedents. In the case of geek theatre, playwrights—often the artists responsible for the original inception of the geek performance—tend to self-identify as geeks, but the performers may or may not be geeks themselves.[29]

However, Francesca Coppa argues that even fanfiction itself inherently parallels theatrical production. For instance, "the writer is part of an interactive community, and in this way, the production of fan fiction is closer to the collaborative making of a theatre piece then to the fabled solitary act of writing."[30] Coppa is not the only fan scholar to see community in the creation of metatext.

Conversely, some scholars argue that this meta-archive or fantext should be viewed as a source of contention and conflict within fandom. Derek Johnson states that "events in hyperdiegetic continuity that please one fan or interest group conflict with competing meta-textual interests of another. Co-present meta-texts, therefore, necessarily exist in opposition."[31] However, I would argue that variant interpretations of the canon are not necessarily in opposition, but rather are in conversation. With every addition to the meta-archive, the universe of a fandom becomes more complex, providing more for the fans to consider and discuss. These variant interpretations of fandom source texts are no more in conflict than two different productions of *Hamlet* that offer variant interpretations or imaginings. Derecho argues directly against the notion of competition between disparate versions, stating: "Fan fiction is philosophically opposed to hierarchy, property, and the dominance of one variant of a series over another variant. Fan fiction is an ethical practice."[32] Busse and Hellekson also make an argument for the unifying effect of cohabiting a universe rather than competing for dominance within it: "intertextuality of fannish discourse, with the ultimate erasure of a single author as it combines to create a shared space, fandom, that we might refer to as a *community*."[33] Fannish interpretation, in short, is not treated as a zero-sum game.

Gary Cross, in a dissection of the significance of nostalgia to modern culture, also notes fandom's ability to build alternate communities across traditional regional and tribal lines:

"Today nostalgia binds together not community or families but scattered individuals around seemingly ephemeral things that are meaningful to them personally."[34] This nostalgia, some of which can be symbolically possessed in the form of collectors' items, is highlighted in Carr's work, as his characters peruse the Con's vendors hall for that special object each is seeking:

> ALBERT: It's a simple thing. From a simpler time. Yet soooo elusive.
>
> HANK: A time when everything made sense.
>
> DIANA: A time when style mattered.
>
> SHEILA: I'll know it when I see it.[35]

For Carr and his characters, nostalgic memorabilia represent a uniquely personal part of the adult geek's experience. Cross, however, does not view fandom as a positive practice. He concludes that fans' desire for repetition is caused by the formulaic nature of television series, with "stories with repeated characters and settings. It is the quintessential media of memory because from the beginning it was riddled with repetition, and its viewers were conditioned to expect and even desire recurrence."[36] Cross sees repeated reconsumption such as fans practice to be problematic and worrisome, and he stigmatizes "the obsessive collector."[37] Ironically, however, his analysis displays almost total ignorance of any actual history or creative practices of geek culture. For example, the *Star Trek* series—almost universally acknowledged as the original fandom from which media fan culture grew—is conspicuously absent from Cross's history of retro and rerun television.[38]

Coppa, on the other hand, cites repetition as yet another point of comparison between fan creative production and theatrical productions. A single play script may have infinite possible productions, each with its own variations and interpretations, and these are not inherently seen as repetitive or derivative. Coppa points out that "in literary terms, fan fiction's repetition is

strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time. Theatre artists think it's fine to tell the same story again, but differently […] Moreover, there's no assumption that the first production will be definitive."[39] Warren Kluber argues that one of theatre's strongest points is its capacity to produce new and varying interpretations, and that this repetition of stories represents a collaboration of theatre artists across productions contributing to the creation and recreation of these stories: "Theatre affords us a privileged vantage point to bear witness to the co-construction and ongoing revision of characters and worlds."[40] Geeks, like theatre, repeat stories in order to draw further meaning from them, to rework them in new ways that resonate with our own lives and relevant sociopolitical issues. Furthermore, as Coppa underscores, "because fan fiction is an amateur production accountable to no market forces, it allows for radical reimaginings: plots, themes, and endings that would never be permitted on network television."[41] Geek fans, in fact, are notorious for taking advantage of their amateur status to write just want they want with no boundaries, as evidenced by one of the most widely discussed fan practices: the composition of slash, or same-sex erotica (discussed further in Chapter 2).

Rebel Alliances

Fanfiction writers have long put into production the practices scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Alexander Doty refer to as "queering the canon," or reading queer cultural tendencies into texts that either did not intend or were not free to openly express queerness.[42] (I will further explore the subject of geek theatre's correlation with queer theatre in Chapter 2). But queerness is not the only resistant message read or written into fantexts. Penley argues for fan culture and creative production as prime material for studying modes of resistant reading and repurposing texts as a means to navigate the chaos of real life: "so much could be

learned from [fanfiction] about how women, and people, resist, negotiate, and adapt to their own desires this overwhelming media environment that we all inhabit."[43] Writers such as women and minorities who have often been overlooked or kept out of the commercial sphere often find an artistic safe space in the world in fanfiction—not one that will provide any capitalistic return, but one that is free of culturally policed boundaries (see Figure 5).

The mere action of fanfiction production is itself an act of rebellion, one that disrupts the cultural values of private ownership and profit. In their place, fandom instead values "a holding-in-common of all culture as shared resource and property," as observed by De Kosnik.[44] She also marvels at fans' "ability to treat the culture industries' products as the incomplete, often impoverished, basic matter from which they construct meaningful texts for themselves and their affinity-based communities."[45] Skillman makes a particular point in *Geek!* of emphasizing her characters' use of their fandom to make meaning within their own lives: "Because acting out stories in your backyard or here—they aren't just stories—it's real and they mean something."[46] This sort of comment is not meant to indicate confusion between fiction and reality, but rather the value geeks' passion for fictional worlds can bestow to one's reality. Camille Bacon-Smith comments particularly on "how writing stories works out real-life problems and concerns about the life the writer leads both inside and outside of the fan community, and how writing is a form of reaching out to others, of making contact."[47] Carr emphasizes the value of this community in the lives of geeks, many of whom experience social ostracization due to their fandoms and, as a result, feelings of isolation in the "mundane" world (see Figure 6):

> ALBERT: So… why do people come to the Con year after year?
>
> SHEILA: What makes an introvert want to come to a place they've never been to before to interact with thousands of strangers? […]

DIANA: What possesses reasonable human beings to spend thousands of dollars on hotel rooms they'll only see the inside of for about six hours total in four days? […]

ALBERT: It's because the Con gives you the opportunity to revel in the things that you love.

SHEILA: It's a place to have experiences you never get out of the real world. […]

DIANA: I've been "different" my entire life. And it's not just because I read fantasy novels or that I tan my own deer hides. Because I've never fit the definition of what the world considers "normal," and people don't always have an easy time understanding things that aren't the status quo. […]

SHEILA: Everybody is just owning their weirdness! And it makes me feel less weird.

HANK: […] When in a place like this, you think that people who make stuff and who like stuff are two completely different species. But we're not! We're all just a bunch of people indulging in our passions, whether it's writing a novel or writing an erotic sixty-page fanfiction of the same novel. […]

DIANA: When you find out who you are just doesn't line up with the rest of the world, you have three options. You can either give in and be what everyone else wants you to be; you can ignore it and continue to hide your weirdness; or you can say "FUCK YOU" to normal and hoist that freak flag so high up in the air they can see it from Asgard. I'm not weird—I'm goddamn awesome. […]

> ALBERT: So why do I come to the Con? Because putting away childish things is for suckers. […]
>
> DIANA: Because it's the way the world SHOULD be.[48]

Gunnels and Cole insist on the world-changing potential of geeks' reimaginings, both of fictive universes and reality: "fan productions do grant agency in their subversion of narrative for their own purposes. Fans, acting as ethnodramaturgs, do change the world. They change, map, and remap the fictive world in which they play."[49] The value of artistically building new worlds resistant to the sociopolitical present is one shared by theatre theorists who look to utopian futurity as a means to actively work toward new ethics in reality.

Jill Dolan, making a case for the value of affective experience against the academic tendency toward detached distance, argues that "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world."[50] This description fits not only the affective experience of theatre-goers but the active efforts of fan culture to create such meaning and experience out of their passions for stories. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz also makes an argument for this sort of active utopian world-building, framing it as a call to action: "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds."[51] In fact, he directly argues against normativity, or "being ordinary," as antithetical to utopian world-building, as desire for such normativity breeds complacency toward the status quo and subsequently quells the need for imagination and alternative thinking.[52] In Skillman's *Geek!*, it is the conflict of the socially compulsive drive toward normativity that leads the character Ellen away from the safe spaces she creates alongside Danya and Honey within their fandom and, ultimately, results in her suicide.

(*Ellen has taken the camera off its tripod. She follows Danya filming/confronting her. Danya's responses are directly to the camera/Ellen*.) […]

ELLEN (*OFF CAMERA*): Do you know what kind of pressure that is? You always want it to be me and you against the world, but what if I wasn't here?

DANYA: (*Serious*.) What are you saying?

(*Video ends*.)[53]

Muñoz cites not only the self-restricting nature of normativity, but the community-building effect of utopian world-building activities: "the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity."[54] Fandom—particularly fan creative production, with its tendency to rewrite fictional worlds in ways that make space for marginalized and unrepresented groups—often exemplifies a culture of "belonging in difference." Geek identity frequently exists at the intersection of an already complicated sense of personal identity—it both parallels minoritarian feelings of ostracization yet also can cause minority cultures to marginalize individuals within them for their geekiness. (I will expand upon this subject in more detail in Chapter 3.) The celebration of weirdness that occurs within geek culture can sometimes serve as the only feeling of belonging outsiders who identify with geek fandom experience.

While many geeks use the source texts of their fandoms to create meaning in their personal lives—both Carr's and Skillman's plays underscore this practice—fan works such as Keim's *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead* take the process a step further, using personal insight to make greater meaning out of the source text and bring into focus social issues and power imbalances within the real and fictive worlds. On the surface, the play is a retelling of a known

story—the same seven years covered by the *Harry Potter* books and films. It is also a rehashing of the same structure and many of the philosophical debates posed by Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, with Potterverse twists—for example, in place of flipped coins repeatedly turning up heads, Crabbe and Goyle open a series of Chocolate Frogs to find a Nicolas Flamel trading card in each (a one in five-hundred chance), and the Player, whose identity depends upon the gaze of an audience, becomes Tinsy the house elf, whose identity depends solely on her indentured servitude (see Figure 7). However, as Bacon-Smith observes of much fan writing, "What appears to an outsider as boring repetition is the logical result of a worldview that sees every interaction as a multi-layered experience out of which reality is negotiated."[55] Gunnels and Cole also emphasize that fan creation of archontic texts and performances are often more complex than merely "playing" in another writer's sandbox, that in fact fans are using these creative impulses and the source material of their fandom to navigate real-world quandaries, whether personal or sociopolitical: "issues—socially relevant or not—are definitely revealed, provoked, and debated within fan works."[56] Derecho has highlighted the fact that such fan texts are "clearly intended to draw readers' attention to unjust power relations between dominant and subordinate subjects, to discriminatory policies, to psychological and institutionalized prejudices, and to the power of canonical texts to perpetuate stereotypes of race, gender, class, and nation."[57] The discourse of a fan text with the meta-archive of the canon is rife with meaning-making, relevant not only to the fandom but the sociopolitical reality which we all must navigate.

Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra[58]

The juxtaposition of fandom as a space in which to find community and meaning versus the chaos of mundane life is a common theme in geek culture and in media fan studies

scholarship. Many geeks describe the discovery of fan culture as a revelation that they are not alone. De Kosnik comments that "the experience described by fans is that of learning that a community exists to which one instinctively feels she is already a member."[59] Kluber, examining character- and world-building in plays that deal with the subject matter of gaming and wrestling, comments that people involved in these activities "frequently attest to being their 'true selves' in the game-world and not in everyday life" and that the characters of these plays, "inscrutable to their families, classmates, and community in real life—gain clarity, agency, and emotional expressivity in their game-worlds."[60]

This very inscrutability to others in mundane life is celebrated as proof of individuality within geek culture itself. Even Cross, though notably detached from any knowledge of fan creation, remarks upon fan preoccupation with "trivia" and the pride and status within fandom that such knowledge confers: "Nostalgiacs not only collect; they also master the details, knowledge that many of us might consider 'useless' but that is curiously empowering to those who have it."[61] This knowledge, often impenetrable nonsense to outsiders, becomes a common language among geeks. Gunnels and Cole comment that "fan material makes little sense when removed from the living background of the source material, and only when viewed in larger groupings does it become more meaningful as it provides further details of the fictive universe."[62] Dad's Garage's 2019 revival of *The Wrath of Con* and subsequent sequel production serves as an excellent example of this deeply encoded geek language. The two productions shared the same set design, with one notable difference. The set design includes a detail meaningless to anyone who has never attended Dragon Con, but for Dragon Con regulars symbolically encapsulates the con culture and experience: the stage floor is painted in the pattern of the iconic carpet of the host Marriott hotel's Marquis level (see Figure 9). This particular

carpet has spawned its own fandom, and cosplayers every year create Marriott Carpet Camouflage costumes (see Figure 8), a recognizable and quintessential part of each Dragon Con. However, after 2015 the iconic carpet was replaced with what has become known among fans as the "poop skid mark" pattern.[63] This change—and its impact upon con-goers—was reflected in the modified set of *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*, including a notorious pattern-disrupting patch installed incorrectly (see Figure 10). The carpet is never mentioned in the plays themselves and would go unnoticed by outside observers who attended either production, but to insiders the significance of this detail could not be more potent.

One cannot properly interpret a fan text without first being familiar with both the source text and, often, the fandom's discourse regarding the text. This inextricability from cultural knowledge is woven into Derecho's explanation of the nature of archontic creative works: "When one reads a work of archontic writing, in other words, one is really reading two texts at once. The prior text is available and remains in the mind even as one reads the new version. The two texts resonate together in both the new text and the old one."[64] Jenkins has noted the existence of this quality of intertextual discourse from the inception of geek fandom culture: "Fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community."[65] Geek theatre often draws upon not only the subject matter but the language of geek culture as well. Bacon-Smith observes that this cultural language serves to strengthen the very sense of community that defines and perpetuates geek culture: "When fans engage in the play-forms of parody and puns and witty conversation about their own material, they strengthen the sense of shared community, shared structures."[66] For instance, a scene in *Wrath of Con* draws upon two sets of fandom knowledge when it depicts the tribulations of

physically navigating a densely populated and chaotic con via a sequenced gauntlet of video game challenges to such as 2-D fighting game special moves and *Super Mario Bros.* platformer obstacles (see Figure 11).

Similarly, the script of *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*, which closely resembles Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in its general occupation of a vague nowhere/nowhen space until invaded by the action of the canonical plotline, refers to such interruptions of action into Crabbe and Goyle's existential reverie as "cut scenes," a video game term for movie-like scenes that the gamer merely watches instead of actively playing.[67] The RuneScape Wiki defines a cut scene as "an animated sequence usually occurring during a quest *in which a player has no control*" (emphasis added).[68] This very aspect of "no control" in one's own story is the primary theme of Keim's, like Stoppard's, script. This theme is highlighted most emphatically in the final scene of the play, immediately following Crabbe's death in the Room of Requirement in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, as Gregory Goyle contemplates the seemingly predetermined nature of their fate as sons of Death Eaters and House Slytherin and (for the first time in the script) utters Crabbe's given name instead of surname:

> RON: If he hadn't tried to kill us all, I'd be quite sorry he was dead. […]
>
> (*HARRY, RON, and HERMIONE exit stage right and the sound of battle gets louder. DRACO rises and looks at GOYLE, seemingly deciding how to handle GOYLE's obvious grief. DRACO raises his hand but stops short of touching him. DRACO turns and exits stage right […] leaving GOYLE in a small pool of light and silence, alone for the first time. […]*)
>
> GOYLE: So, there's an end to that. A battle that was never ours. Accessories to a feud played out by Potter and Malfoy and their parents before them. The

> great Cause of the Dark Lord and Blood Purity. But why? Why him? Why his own blaze of impersonal destruction? Death is not romantic… Not a voice beyond a veil promising eternity… Death is nothing… Just an endless time of never coming back or of haunting the halls of a castle that may not be standing by the end of the night… Death is— I can't remember… Our names shouted by a certain hat… a friend forced on us by House and Surname… an owl… a serpent. There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it.
>
> (*GOYLE looks again at where the door had been, his hand begins to rise to touch what he knows is just a wall again.*)
>
> GOYLE: Cra— Vincent?
>
> (*Blackout.*)[69]

Unlike Stoppard's, however, Keim's play opens up these existential themes and, indeed, live theatre itself to a new and unconventional audience—specifically, a fandom.

Who Looks at the Lookers

In Keim's case, the target fandom constitutes a massive audience base, as no one will debate the widespread popularity of the *Harry Potter* universe. However, I believe theatre producers would be unwise to overlook or dismiss fandom audiences in any form, large or small. Geeks of any fandom constitute a valuable target audience simply on account of the dedication and devotion these audiences bring. Geeks have proven themselves, without question, a loyal returning audience, willing to repeatedly invest time and money into their fandoms. Additionally,

fan audiences are unsurpassed in unapologetic enthusiasm. I have, on many occasions, been amused by the reactions of non-geeks when exposed to live geek audiences. A personal example of this reaction occurred at a *Distant Worlds* concert at Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2011. *Distant Worlds* is a philharmonic orchestra dedicated solely to playing music from the *Final Fantasy* video game series. I attended with a colleague and artistic collaborator, a gifted composer who is a seasoned patron of theatre and philharmonics… but has never played a *Final Fantasy* game in his life. As we left the concert, I asked for his opinion, expecting a response to the music itself, but he merely exclaimed in dumbstruck awe, "That was the most amazing audience I've ever seen!" His reaction evokes Bray's point that "the success of Geek Theatre in general, has to do with the relationship between the production and the audience."[70] Skillman makes the point herself that "Geek Theatre has found an audience by creating a human synergy with its fans via mutual appreciation, as well as a nuanced understanding and celebration of Otherness."[71] Bray goes on to conclude, as do I, that by "focusing on the emotional interchange rather than direct economic exchange (though it would be foolhardy to suggest one does not exist)," geek theatre can serve as a model, a prime example for other theatre companies, of how to bring new audiences into the theatre.[72]

Whether ushering new audiences into the age-old space of live theatre or merely expanding the forum of fan creative expression, geek theatre is bringing together two sets of performance practices to create a new, unique form. By opening the stage to fan practices, these plays use the language and methods of fandom to perform and explore the infinite nuances of identity in a safe and revolutionary space.

Figure 2: Gregory Goyle (Graydon Schlichter), Draco Malfoy (Anna Carlson), and Vincent Crabbe (Michael Lutheran) in Hollywood Fringe 2019 production of *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*, by Kitty Keim; Photo by and used with permission of Thomas Keim

Figure 3: Sheila (Anna Giles) and Diana (Whittney Millsap) in Dad's Garage 2019 remount production of *The Wrath of Con*, by Jon Carr, courtesy of Chelsea Patricia Photo with permission by Dad's Garage

Figure 4: Honey (Becky Byers) in cosplay as Virgie with Squeaker cosplayer in Vampire Cowboys' world premiere production of *Geek!* by Crystal Skillman in 2013 at Incubator Arts Project at St. Marks Church; Photo by Robert Ross Parker; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 5: Emily Williams, Sheldon Best, Eugene Oh, and Allison Buck in Vampire Cowboys' world premiere production of *Geek!* by Crystal Skillman in 2013 at Incubator Arts Project at St. Marks Church; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 6: Sheila (Anna Giles) and Albert (Maged Roushdi) in Dad's Garage 2019 remount production of *The Wrath of Con*, by Jon Carr, courtesy of Chelsea Patricia Photo with permission by Dad's Garage

Figure 7: Kiki Anderson as Tinsy the House Elf in Hollywood Fringe 2019 production of *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*, by Kitty Keim; Photo by and used with permission of Thomas Keim

Figure 8: Harrison Krix cosplay as Marriott Carpet Camouflage Soldier at Dragon Con 2014; Photo by Scout Storey, used with permission of Volpin Props[73]

Figure 9: The set of Dad's Garage's 2019 revival of Jon Carr's *The Wrath of Con*; Photo by Scout Storey

Figure 10: The set of Dad's Garage's 2019 production of Jon Carr's *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*; Photo by Scout Storey

Figure 11: Ronnie Johnson-Lopez as Eric in Dad's Garage 2019 remount production of *The Wrath of Con,* by Jon Carr, courtesy of Chelsea Patricia Photo with permission by Dad's Garage

[1] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 128.
[2] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 127.
[3] A number of scholars have discussed the integral role of fanfiction writers and fan zines in the development of media fan culture as it exists today. For a succinct overview, see Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom." For an in-depth ethnography of early fan culture and fanfiction production, see Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*.
[4] While Keim's script primarily adapts its characters and plot from the *Harry Potter* series, it borrows plot points as well as structure from Stoppard's play. A prime example is the reproduction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's coin flips (always coming up heads) in the form of Crabbe and Goyle's Chocolate Frogs always producing Nicolas Flamel cards, a clear AU (Alternate Universe) version of a canonical *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* scene.
[5] Jon Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, unpublished manuscript (2012), 1.
[6] Jon Carr, *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*, unpublished manuscript (2019), 7.
[7] I added the gender neutrality to the scripted line, as the Looker has been played by both male and female actors in different productions.
Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, 1.
[8] Crystal Skillman, "Geek!" in *Geek Theater: 15 Plays by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers*, eds. Jen Gunnels and Erin Underwood (Marblehead: Underwords Press, 2014). Kindle
[9] Barbra Dillon, "Fanbase Press Interviews Graydon Schlichter on the Upcoming Production of 'Crabbe and Goyle are Dead'(Hollywood Fringe Festival 2019)," *Fanbase Press*, 6 June 2019. Accessed 5 November 2019. http://www.fanbasepress.com/index.php/press/interviews/theatre/item/10015-fanbase-press-interviews-graydon-schlichter-on-the-upcoming-production-crabbe-and-goyle-are-dead-hollywood-fringe-festival-2019.
[10] Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

[11] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 56, 46.
[12] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 62.
[13] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 86.
[14] Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," 310.
[15] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 135-8.
[16] Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006).
Also see: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chigago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
[17] Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).
[18] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 34.
[19] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006), 7.
[20] Barbra Dillon, "Fanbase Press Interviews Graydon."
[21] Kitty Keim, *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*, unpublished manuscript (2019).
[22] Gunnels and Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes."
[23] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 49.
[24] The term "cosplay" is a combination of the words "costume" and "play." As an activity, cosplay typically consists of building a costume based upon a fandom character and then attending a geek/fandom social gathering—for example a con, a release or opening night event, a themed party or festival, etc.—that can serve as a forum for the performance in costume. The cosplayer may or may not maintain the persona of their character throughout the performance.
Nerdlesque is a subgenre of American burlesque that incorporates cosplay and geek references into striptease performance. For a brief overview of nerdlesque, see Sonia Weiser, "Forget Fan Fiction. In Nerdlesque, the Garters Come Off." *The New York Times*, 20 September 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/theater/nerdlesque-burlesque-nyc.html?_r=0.
LARP, or Live Action Role Playing, is a form of role-playing game that, unlike video game or tabletop RPGs, involves physically costuming, performing in character, and acting out the events of the game, within a structured set of rules and safety parameters.
[25] Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, 19.
[26] Skillman, "Geek!"
[27] Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, 30.
[28] Carr, *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*, 51.
[29] For instance, playwright Jon Carr self-identifies as a geek/nerd. However, Avery Sharpe, an actor who played Tim in *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness* at Dad's Garage in 2019 as well as the lead role in Carr's *Black Nerd* in 2018, does not personally identify with or participate in geek culture, and irony which he and I discussed after a performance of *Wrath of Con 2* that I attended on 7 September 2019.
[30] Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space," 236.
[31] Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom," *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 296.
[32] Derecho, "Archontic Literature."
[33] Busse and Hellekson, "Introduction: Work in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, 6.
[34] Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 14.
[35] Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, 22.
[36] Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia*, 114.
[37] Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia*, 245.
[38] For a few analyses of the role of *Star Trek* fandom in the inception of organized media fan culture, see: Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*; Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom"; Henry Jenkins, "*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread,

Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
[39] Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space," 229.
[40] Kluber, "Character-World Dialectics on the Contemporary American Stage": 227.
[41] Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space," 230.
[42] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1990); Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[43] Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," 309.
[44] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 10.
[45] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 10.
[46] Skillman, "Geek!"
[47] Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 93.
[48] Quotes from live performances are based on my notes in attendance.
Jon Carr, *The Wrath of Con*, directed by Scott Warren, Dad's Garage, Atlanta, 18 July 2019.
[49] Gunnels and Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes."
[50] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.
[51] José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
[52] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.
[53] Skillman, "Geek!"
[54] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.
[55] Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 66.
[56] Gunnels and Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes."
[57] Derecho, "Archontic Literature."
[58] "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra," meaning "working together" or "cooperation," has become a meme and a mantra among *Star Trek* fans. The phrase originates from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* season 5 episode 2, "Darmok," in which the crew of the *Enterprise* is tasked with communicating with a delegation of Tamarians, whose cryptic language remains undeciphered despite numerous failed attempts at contact. The Tamarian language, as the *Enterprise* crew learns, communicates ideas by symbolically referencing cultural mythology. Darmok and Jalad refer to characters in a mythical tale in which the two strangers come together in adversity at Tanagra and form a deep bond of friendship.
See "Tamarian Language," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 13 December 2019. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Tamarian_language; *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, episode 101, "Darmok," written by Joe Menosky and Philip LaZebnik, directed by Winrich Kolbe, aired 30 September 1991.
[59] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 140.
[60] Kluber, "Character-World Dialectics on the Contemporary American Stage": 219, 222.
[61] Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia*, 5.
[62] Gunnels and Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes."
[63] See "Marriott Carpet Pattern," *Dragon Con Eternal Members*, accessed 13 November 2019. https://dragonconeternalmembers.com/marriott-carpet-pattern/.
[64] Derecho, "Archontic Literature."
[65] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 76.
[66] Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 294-6.
[67] Keim, *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*.
[68] "Cut Scene," *The RuneScape, Fandom Wiki*. Accessed 12 November 2019. https://runescape.fandom.com/wiki/Cutscene.
[69] Keim, *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*.
[70] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 128.
[71] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 131.
[72] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 128, 122.
[73] See "The Marriott Chariot," *Volpin Props*, accessed 19 August 2020, http://www.volpinprops.com/the-marriott-chariot/?fbclid=IwAR20YTKYhozYmcfNJr6lPumASR5LoCWI4xs0UC1-vIo-YBjmVSKTQdOw-b4.

Chapter 2: Infinite Orientations

Many of my earliest experiences of geek theatre were also distinctly as queer theatre. The first geek play I attended, *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen, strategically parallels the teenage character Tilly's experiences of ostracization as both a geek and a lesbian. In 2011, when I saw the original production at the Flea Theatre and became a fan of Nguyen's work, I was still a year from beginning to come out as trans before subsequently transitioning, and my sexual identification at the time most closely aligned with lesbianism. I saw many of my own struggles and traumas in Tilly's, and most significantly I saw the intersection of her queerness and geekiness, more than compounding vulnerabilities, as complementary superpowers. In our world, *geek* and *queer* are both derogatory labels that have been reclaimed as badges of pride. What were once—and to some extent still are—weapons used to enforce ostracization have become flags in the fight for recognition. In short, despite continued outcast status in the hegemonic hierarchy, geeks and queers alike are becoming increasingly comfortable owning their otherness, and consequently, their awesomeness.

In this chapter, I will discuss geek theatre's many overlaps with queer theatre, in content and practices. I have found much of geek theatre to be queer on multiple levels: often literally in content, depicting queer characters and relationships, but also in its typically campy aesthetic and tendency to queer familiar cultural signs and materials. I will use the following plays as primary case studies: the world premiere production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen in 2011, directed by Robert Ross Parker at the Flea Theatre, and the PIT's (People's Improv Theatre)

2015 marathon production of the *Kapow-i GoGo* series by Matt Cox. I should note that both playwrights identify as heterosexual men. I have chosen these plays, however, on account of their focus on geeky, tomboyish lesbian protagonists, which deeply resonated with me personally, as a queer geek, particularly at a time while in a liminal flux between lesbian-ish and FTM transition, when I first encountered early productions of the plays.

And Her Name Was…

Qui Nguyen's plays have been nominated for two GLAAD Media Awards: *Soul Samurai* in 2009 and *She Kills Monsters* in 2012 (see Figure 12). These awards are intended to "recognize and honor media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community and the issues that affect their lives."[1] The queerness of Nguyen's leading characters is depicted as a sensitive point of vulnerability, opening them up to pain and alienation, but also, crucially, as the quintessential foundation of their passion, imagination, heroism, and ultimate badassery. Meanwhile the plays of Matt Cox, the best know being the Potterverse adaptation *Puffs: Or, Seven Increasingly Eventful Years at a Certain School of Magic and Magic*, are known for reinventing narratives from alternative perspectives, namely "anyone who has never been destined to save the world"—at least according to the dominant culture messages with which we've been constantly inundated.[2] Through *Kapow-i Gogo*, he remakes not only the image of a world-saving hero but also the model of sexual and gender expectations that delimit our society. Both playwrights have intricately woven both geek and queer identity into the fabric of their plays' worlds, themes, characters, and aesthetics. In Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters* and Cox's *Kapow-i GoGo* saga, these exemplars of geek theatre

foreground two unlikely heroines: awkward teenage lesbians, each on a quest to find her place in the universe, who both actively refuse to hide behind their magic swords.

Qui Nguyen's play *She Kills Monsters* centers around two sisters: "Agnes, being of average disposition, was into more typical things such as boys […] while her sister Tilly became fascinated with the dark arts—magic, dragons, and silly costumes."[3] After Tilly dies in a car crash, Agnes embarks on a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure authored by her estranged little sister, where she encounters fantastical personifications of Tilly's personal struggles, triumphs, and desires. While the conflict of *She Kills Monsters* revolves the vulnerability of young geeks (and queers) to ostracization, bullying, and dismissal by their mundane peers and families, Agnes ultimately comes to terms with her own grief via the support of Tilly's community of geeky friends and methods of strategic worldbuilding (see Figure 13).

Matt Cox's *Kapow-i GoGo* saga also focuses on an awkward teenage lesbian, but one who exists in, literally, a very different world. The plays *Kapow-i GoGo GOOO!*, *Kapow-i GoGo Z*, and *Kapow-i GoGo Returns* were originally developed serially in weekly episodes as a part of the Flea Theatre's *#serials*. The three series were later condensed and produced as marathon by the People's Improv Theatre in 2015, the production upon which I will be primarily focusing. The epic saga of the character Kapow-i GoGo begins in *Kapow-i GoGo GOOO!*, which introduces Kapow-i, a hyperactive blue-haired fourteen-year-old girl, and details her journey to achieve her dream of becoming the World's Greatest Fighter (see Figure 14). In the sequel series *Kapow-i GoGo Z*, Kapow-i meets the love of her life, Princess Cloudberry, and must transform into Super Kapow-i GoGo to stop the World's destruction at the hands of Blade Gunnblade, a government experiment with a tragic backstory. Though Kapow-i and Princess Cloudberry ultimately survive and save the World again, their happily-ever-after is foiled by

omen foretelling a dark future. In the saga's final series *Kapow-i GoGo Returns*, that dark future is realized as the World falls into war and chaos. Sacrificing herself, Kapow-i leaves a final message of hope for her daughter Giggle, who begins a new journey to become the World's Greatest Fighter.

The quest for identity is a powerful theme in Geek Theatre, as is the call to save the world. However, the world-saving begins with the creation, from the ground upward, of the hero within the human, and it begins with the least obvious of humans. In spite of significant struggles, Tilly and Kapow-i choose to define themselves on their own terms, rather than allowing themselves to be controlled by labels or social expectations, rejecting the so-called limitations set by outside forces of darkness.

The Quest for Lost Souls

Identity is a concept not particularly scrutinized by hegemonically privileged individuals. Representation is plentiful, and one need not grapple with pesky adjectives to clarify a readily comprehendible self-definition. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz points out that "the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self."[4] When individuals do not meet the pre-assumed image of "human neutral" —i.e., inhabiting dominant identity labels such white, cisgender, heterosexual, and male—labels come into play to differentiate the dominant from the abnormal. The social purpose of identity labels is a topic of significant interest among scholars. Judith Butler questions "To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?" She goes on to argue that "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood,

but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility."[5] In other words, identity labels are formed less with the intention to give voice to individuals of identity groups but to restrict identity to manageable compartments, with easily policed borders. Muñoz similarly argues that "these normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities," whereas the reality is that every identity is complex and intersectional.[6] Here I will discuss the intersection of the identity labels *queer* and *geek*.

The terms "queer" and "geek," like the groups they identify, have much in common. Both have been used as derogatory slurs, and both have been reclaimed and redeployed with pride. Both describe identities that cannot be seen, but rather are internally dictated by the feelings of the subject and externally categorized by behaviors. Both describe a collection rather than a singular identity group, as queer can apply to a vast range of orientations and genders, not all of them easily labeled, and geek encompasses a culture comprised of a multitude of fandoms. Either term alone already implies an amorphous and intersectional identity. I do not propose that queer and geek experiences be equated or directly compared, either in terms of identity formation or social oppression. Rather, along the lines of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim "*not* that all oppressions are congruent, but that they are *differently* structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments," I argue that there are inherent parallels in geek and queer experiences and that when they intersect, they complimentarily intertwine and reflect one another.[7]

In *She Kills Monsters*, the character of Tilly, as a geek and as a lesbian, embodies a dual experience of social ostracization. Her Otherness is imposed upon her from all directions—her home life and her school life, the intimate and the social. Presumptions of heteronormativity are layered on top of the normative structure of the mundane majority. She exists in a reality of binaries, all of which mark her as the outcast Other. The innate and intentional inequality of

social binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, white/of color, and normal/geek is a subject of much criticism by queer scholars. Sedgwick breaks down the concept of deploying binarism as a means of oppression:

> Categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions […] actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinate to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B.[8]

This very tactic of using a binary as a tool to demean and dismiss a disempowered group of people is purposely reversed by the geek community in labeling non-geeks as "mundane," so that instead of "normal/geek," the implied sense of derision can be turned in the opposite direction with the binary "geek/mundane."[9] Peggy Phelan also discusses this use of binary in hierarchical normativity: "One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. […] He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks."[10] In other words, while often effectively invisible in pop-culture media representations, the unvalued Other is made visible in culture when she is re-marked upon with labels designed to set her out as separate from the norm, as *weird*. The primary intention of her visibility is as punishment for deviance and to reinforce, through difference, the dominance and desirability of the hegemonic, valued "neutral," or normal. Tilly struggles with the labels of geek and queer in a social hierarchy where neither is accepted or understood. Her character is the breathing embodiment on stage of the real struggles of geeks, queers, and queer geeks in a world where their identities and feelings are marked valueless, where the unremarkable normative marks them out for ostracization, judgment, and dismissal.

The inequality of the geek and/or queer is never as distinctly or damagingly unequal as when faced with the friend or family member who either cannot or will not understand. Phelan's observation that, in a culture of marked binaries, "the always already unequal encounter nonetheless summons the hope of reciprocity and equality" resonates in Tilly's driving desires as a character.[11] Like Tilly, everyone wishes to be recognized and loved. However—like Tilly—too many geeks and queers are ignored as their mundane family or peers wait for them to "grow out of it" rather than reciprocating basic respect for their individual identities. Even should-be safe spaces are often forces for normalization, best expressed by Tilly's school experiences in relation to her attempts at self-expression—not only with her peers but with figures of authority:

> TILLY: I had a lame-ass school assignment that I decided to make awesome by turning it into a D&D game.
>
> AGNES: Did you at least get an A?
>
> TILLY: No, I got an incomplete. Mrs. Springer couldn't figure out what the hell I had written, so I had to redo it.[12]

Unlike Tilly's peers and teachers, Agnes ultimately—too late—comes to meet Tilly on her own terms, but Agnes's assumptions of normativity have permanent consequences both for herself and her sister.

Blatant condescension toward geeks, such as Tilly suffers in her school and in her home, is nothing new. It is a selling point in mainstream appropriations of geek culture, in which geeks' practices and passions are made a stereotyped spectacle. Agnes's grief for her sister's loss leads her to recognize and articulate the normative expectations her own dismissal and neglect placed on Tilly, as a queer geek:

> AGNES: Do you want to know what my memories of Tilly are? They're of this little nerdy girl who I never talked to, who I ignored, who I didn't understand because she didn't live in the same world as I did. Her world was filled with […] lesbian demon queens and stoner gods while mine… had George Michaels and leg warmers. I didn't get her. I assumed I would one day—that she'd grow out of all this—that I'd be able to sit around and ask her about normal things like clothes and TV shows and boys… and as it turns out, I didn't even know she didn't even like boys until my DM told me.[13]

The pressure to conform is what often keeps closet doors closed, while a war zone awaits outside.

In *Kapow-i Gogo,* Supervillain General President Thunderbolt succinctly sums up the casual entitlement of the normative majority: "I just want to rule all of humanity. Is that too much to ask?!"[14] His sentiment is reinforced by his superior/sister Madame Blood's evil plan to violently cleanse society and "ensure the casualties are those I deem not fit to live in my perfect World. The poor. The weak. People who talk at the theater. They will die."[15] Even amidst the campy humor, their "perfect World" eerily echoes rhetoric of a shining city on a hill.

Even after the Supreme Court ruling of Marriage Equality in 2015 that many have seen as the cultural turning point in the battle for gay rights, queers (youth especially) still struggle daily against oppression and suppression by the dominant "normal." Even in the best of circumstances, with the support of family and figures of authority, queers in their formative years still frequently fall victim to their peers and sociopolitical hatemongering—both directly and, under persecution, even at their own hands. This effect results from the enforcement of binary inequality, as David

Savran notes pointedly, “Most frequently, abjection is a result of the process of normalization, for orthodoxy defines itself only by constructing a heretical Other.”[16] Abjection, as a result, is too often internalized, only further perpetuating hegemonic normalization and the erasure of Othered identities. This pain is reflected in the dark words of Blade Gunnblade, whose identity is lost in a failed experiment imposed upon her by the hegemonic forces ruling the World: “I was innocent. And I was hurt. I shouldn’t exist. And so I’ll erase myself.”[17] Every Othered individual receives messages daily that s/he is a second-class citizen, less deserving and less human than the label-free norm.

In contrast, the queer, geeky World of *Kapow-i GoGo* approaches both *geek* and *queer* not in juxtaposition with the normative but *as* normal. Within its fictional utopian World, neither queer nor geek behavior is ever remarked upon. Kapow-i is a hyperactive and awkward image of the average adolescent geek while actively and successfully filling the role of an anime/video game/comic book hero. She wields swords larger than she is and has biological children with her lesbian wife, all of which fits without question into the laws of physics and social structure of her World. Why shouldn’t a tiny teenage girl be The World’s Greatest Fighter and seriously kick some evil ass? Why shouldn’t a girl fall in love with another girl? These are perfectly normal events in the World of *Kapow-i GoGo*. Labels such as “queer” cease to have any meaning.

Even without the juxtaposition of geek or queer with “normal” onstage, geek theatre recasts Otherness as natural in such a way that even a majoritarian audience can engage and even go so far as to empathize with the characters. Bray comments on Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company’s “ability to represent the hopes and fears of comic book geeks in a way that is not ‘Othering’ but embracing.”[18] This geek representation contrasts with those common in mainstream media and even geek chic such as *The Big Bang Theory*, which, while empathetic

toward its geeky protagonists, persists in depicting geeks as sad and desperate for sexually fulfilling relationships that they are (obviously) too socially pathetic to achieve. Phelan states, "Representation reproduces the Other as the Same."[19] Here, she is concerned with the whitewashing of the Other by the normative, the appropriation and erasure of the Other's true identity. Indeed, this phenomenon is cause for concern, for geeks as well as oppressed culture. However, there is another level to this action—that is, representing the Other as *the same*, or simply human. The stronghold of normativity is defended with the *otherness* of the Other. Butler has commented on the problem of minority representation in a culture that dehumanizes minorities that "the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended."[20] When the geek and queer are represented unapologetically and yet become real to the "normal" spectator as a subject with humanity, the bastion of normativity begins to crumble. The questioning of self too often imposed upon the geek and queer by social expectations turns back upon those who have never experienced a questioning of self. The Same (or normative) may be considered to be universal, the neutral guiding star of what it is to be human, but geek theatre restructures the paradigm to place the queer and geeky experiences as a truer universal. After all, in the face of a cookie-cutter culture, what is more universal than not fitting in?

We live in an age when both geeks and queers have been appropriated by the mainstream, not only recognized but trendy—*cool*, even. Struggles of invisibility can certainly no longer exist, not when so *visible*. One should ask, however, on whose terms are queer and geek stories made visible? Representation of queer culture is dominated by the homonormative, middle-class, white gay male, usually ignoring the LBTQIAP and beyond altogether. Savran has noted that "the very category 'queer' in the commercial theatre designates as a rule plays by and/or about

gay men."[21] Even these representations are notorious for being written, directed, and acted by heterosexual, cisgender individuals. Queer narratives are relegated to the shadows behind the flashing neon G eliciting raving praise for its so-called progressiveness, all the while whitewashing lived queer experiences. Savran goes on to argue that "until women and persons of color are able to procure the same highly visible forums as white gay men in which to present their work, a truly universalized and democratized queer theatre will remain a utopian fantasy."[22] Meanwhile, geeks are told by mainstream culture that they're "cool" now because of geek chic.[23] The most socially acceptable—that is, closest to normative—example possible of queer identity has been lauded for its edginess, while stereotyped geek caricatures are thrown forth for the amusement of the non-geek masses—but everything's "cool" now since the characters inspire at least a surface-deep level of empathy in the normative audience who cannot tell the difference. This phenomenon is credited as "recognition" and "visibility."

Queers and geeks may be defined and ostracized for who and what they naturally love, but these are not the only desires inherent in their lives and art. Like all human beings, geeks and queers alike desire recognition and respect. However, often Pride is a response to the disrespect and dismissal received from the outside world and even loved ones. What is worse, the need for recognition, for Others who are defined by internal impulses rather than visible external factors, is counterbalanced by a fear of rejection. Just as queers are frequently confined to closets by fear, so are geeks often confined to basements to seek refuge in their geekery alone or in small havens of similarly outcast friends.

I Love Y… Y… Yams[24]

Geek and queer narratives and creative expression have much in common beyond their experiences of oppression. If there is one thing that sets apart both queers and geeks, it is love. While love may be a universal emotion (and a cliché in most storytelling media), the *way* in which queers and geeks love is both what defines and marks us as abnormal. The desires of geeks and queers, from the perspective of the mundane and cisgendered heteronormative, are viewed as *strange*. In the case of geeks, the strangeness lies in their deep love for things deemed trivial by mundanes, such as fictional worlds and nostalgic memorabilia (as opposed to more acceptable obsessive interests, such as sports and celebrities). Much as queer romantic love is socially considered to be ascribed to the wrong object, being a fan is socially acceptable when applied to sports teams or popular music, whereas geek fans apply this sort of love to the wrong thing. In other words, according to mainstream culture, queers and geeks both ascribe an appropriate kind of love to an inappropriate object.

Abigail De Kosnik points out that "fans are often defined (primarily by their detractors) by the strength of their emotional responses."[25] Like much of human desire, this sort of love is ineffable and often painful. It is a deeply essential, yet somehow undefinable, wish of s/he who feels it. It is referred to in *Kapow-i GoGo* vaguely and repeatedly as "something else." The realization of the identity of this "something else" is often life-altering, echoing many geeks' potent first experience of entering fandom communities, an experience De Kosnik refers to as "the moment of discovery."[26] She also points out that the "privileging of feeling" is a distinguishing factor in both queer and geek art and archives.[27]

Both Tilly and Kapow-i are repeatedly defined by their *love*—certainly queer desire, but also love for heroic concepts like truth and justice. Tilly's class of paladin in *Dungeons &*

Dragons is defined in the Second Edition *Player's Handbook* as "a noble and heroic warrior, the symbol of all that is right and true in the world," and Tillius is hailed in-game as "healer of the wounded, defender of lights, eater of tacos."[28] Kapow-i's perseverance over her foes is frequently credited not to her strength but to her will, e.g.: "Because your power comes from evil. Mine comes from hope. And *love*."[29] Their strengths are constantly defined as coming from love, the key (rather than physical strength or even magic) to keeping the dark forces of darkness at bay (see Figure 15). The lesbian nature of their romantic desire is incidental to their passion as heroic adventurers. Love, both eros and agape, is seen as the ultimate superpower.

Ultimately, however, these romances and their sexual desire are indeed quintessential to both characters' self-definition. Both emphasize the powerful emotional connection of love, never identifying their feelings as lust, yet both also physically highlight the embodied nature of these feelings. Tilly implements her in-game persona to actualize her desire, creating a fantasy world in which Tillius and Lilith are lovers with a very physical relationship, whereas she is denied the real-world subject of her desire, her closeted best friend Lily. Kapow-i, by contrast, fumbles comically through her confusion over how to identify her desire. Still, her feelings, while naively earnest and innocent, are frequently voiced in very physical terms: "Man I feel funny. In my stomach. And also *my body*."[30] Focus on physical bodies in conjunction with sentimental emotion is a common theme among fanfiction, one with a strong queer undercurrent dating back to the beginning of media fandom with the distribution of *Star Trek* zines.[31] Francesca Coppa argues an inherent parallel between fanfiction's focus on physical bodies and theatre, where bodies on stage are the primary medium of communication in the art form. While she notes that some fanfiction is even written in script form, most is written in literary prose, yet Coppa posits that "fan fiction directs bodies in space even when it's not overtly written in

theatrical form."[32] In addition to fanfiction texts commonly going into minute detail on the eroticized articulation of characters' physical forms, often significantly in sentimental terms, Coppa points out that the audience is already familiar with the bodies being articulated, envisioning them as the actors cast in the original source media. One of the most highly discussed aspects of fan culture is the production of slash fanfiction. "Slash" is a term applied to fanfiction about same-sex romance between canonical characters of a fandom universe. The privileging of sentiment is a frequently noted aspect of fanfiction, often written by women and reflecting female desire, both sexual and emotional. [33]

Much of Kapow-i's plot and motivation in every chapter of the *Kapow-i GoGo* series revolves around lesbian love.

> KAPOW-I: Have you ever felt.... feeeeeelings?
>
> PRINCESS CLOUDBERRY: Like you have to go to the bathroom?
>
> KAPOW-I: No like this...
>
> *Two fancily dressed singers enter. They sing a song about love. Everyone does a movement sequence that shows that love [has] no boundaries.*
>
> LYRICS: […] It doesn't take a genius. And you won't read it in books.
>
> But you can feel it in the air between her many longing looks.
>
> Feelings. Feelings. This is a song about feelings. […]
>
> She really loves you. Just open your eyes… to what's inside.
>
> Kapow-i. Kapow-i. Kapow-i loves Princess Cloudberry.
>
> There's no way you can misconstrue this song.[34]

While saving the world becomes everyday and uninspiring to Kapow-i, her feelings for Princess Cloudberry keep her fighting for love. Similarly, a significant portion of the motivation behind

Tilly's creation of New Landia is in creating a space where her sexuality is recognized, her feelings are reciprocated, and her desires may be fulfilled: "I'm female, she's female, and we're lovers."[35] In the twenty-first century, more and more canonical texts are depicting queer characters and relationships, and some twentieth-century media fandom source texts such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* are known to flagrantly tease as lesbian romance. Most slash fanfiction, however, couples characters who are not officially portrayed as queer in the source texts. The term "slash, which as Camille Bacon-Smith points out is "derived from the orthographic character (/) used to separate the names or initials of the two or more characters involved in a sexual-romantic relationship," dates back originally to "K/S" or the Kirk/Spock pairing in *Star Trek* fanfiction.[36]

Fandom scholar Ika Willis sees this sort of negotiated queerness out of the source text as a self-fulfillment of "demands made by a reader's desiring subjectivity: one of those demands might be precisely that the fictional universe should have space for the reader herself, for her desires, her demands, her politics."[37] To much of mainstream culture, the default heterosexuality of fictional characters is presumed until proven queer. Willis discusses the oppressive and ironic erasure of queerness within fantastic genres that, removed from our own sociopolitical reality, should be teeming with queer possibility:

> Here fan fiction becomes a way not so much of "filling in the gaps" with a known unknown, but rather a way of negotiating the "painful gaps" left in the encounter between a reader's "felt desires" and the read text, which is itself structured by the conscious and unconscious desires of another subjectivity.[38]

Of course, lack of evident homosexual activity in the limited span of canonical material presented should not preclude queer possibility.[39] In the case of *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk, for

instance, the character is indeed seen on numerous occasions acting on heterosexual desire. All of these trysts, however, are portrayed as passionate flings with no enduring commitment, hardly even qualifying as "relationships," meanwhile starkly juxtaposed to his enduring lifelong bond of friendship with Spock, which involves the very personal intimacy of a psychic mind meld. Moreover, Kirk is portrayed as enjoying sexual intimacy with a number of alien species, which in itself implies some degree of pansexuality.

Alexander Doty argues that, when it comes to popular cultural texts, "queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or 'reading too much unto things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along."[40] He challenges the assumption that the dominant heterosexual readings of mass media texts are "preferred" or in any way more legitimate than queer readings, pointing to inherent queer subcurrents and homoeroticism. Instead, Doty's argument chooses not to assume that the straight, cisgendered, white male is necessarily the primary target audience to receive these texts, rather imagining the queer viewer as an equal spectator with equally legitimate interpretations of the encoded messaging, that these messages are already inundated with inherent queerness.

> After all, the queerness I point out in mass culture representation and reading […] is only "connotative," and therefore deniable or "insubstantial" as long as we keep thinking within conventional heterocentrist paradigms, which always already have decided that expressions of queerness are *sub*-textual, *sub*-cultural, *alternative* readings, or pathetical and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there—after all, mass culture texts are made for the "average" (straight, white, middle-class, usually male) person, aren't they? I've got news for straight culture: your

> readings of texts are usually "alternative" ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture.[41]

Like Doty point regarding popular films, Sara Gwenllian Jones posits the question for television: "Is fantastic genre cult television perhaps inherently queer?"[42] She argues that queerness is not only inherent to mass media cultural texts, but in fact heterosexuality is antithetical and therefore wholly incompatible with the sort of action-adventure television series that most often produce fandoms. She points out that leading character pairs in these series are typically focused on enduring same-sex bonds, such as Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* or Xena and Gabrielle in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, or are somehow star-crossed in their heterosexual pursuits, such as Buffy and Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a romantic relationship in which intimacy will lead to the loss of the vampire Angel's soul. These complications are integral to the characters' pursuits as heroic adventurers, as they necessitate the circumnavigation of the mundane in favor of the exciting escapist narratives that audiences seek in the fantastic:

> Heterosexuality is as much a matter of social practice as it is of sexual practice. As social practice, it assumes a narrative form of its own, with plot points of courtship, marriage, domesticity, reproduction, child-rearing, provision for the family. […] As social practice, heterosexuality is antithetical to the exoticism and adventure that characterize the fictional worlds of cult television series. If heterosexual relations between major characters go beyond the preliminary of courtship, this exterior narrative of social practice is invoked and both the cult fiction and its fans are unceremoniously returned to the structures, realities and stresses of everyday life.[43]

Jones therefore calls into question whether slash should be understood as "deviant" at all, arguing that queerness is in fact the more legitimate reading of these texts.

Regardless of whether queer readings are regarded as resistant or inherent, the adoption and adaptation of popular cultural texts is a quintessential practice in both geek and queer cultures.

On a *Camp*aign

Geek fandom's expansion—or, some would argue, disruption—of the official canon with its production of archontic metatext moves toward what Sedgwick calls "a vision of an exploding master-canon whose fracture would produce, or at least leave room for, a potentially infinite plurality of mini-canons."[44] Robert H. Moser, Alberto Tibaji, and George Contini, through their personal practice of scholartistry and the theatrical exploration of queering and recombining narratives, emphasize that "from a theatrical standpoint, the loss of an exclusive source and viewpoint defies the classic Aristotelian narrative device of a single protagonist and shifts to a communal voice."[45] In other words, the abandonment of the concept of a canonical source text or official version moves instead toward a shared narrative, creating space for a community of individual voices to express common experiences as their own but that are not individually owned. The explosion of the academic master-canon is meant to disrupt the hegemonic dominance of a Western, white, heteronormative, and relentlessly male point of view, making way for masterful works of art that not only allow for further inclusivity but expand and reshape the definitions of mastery and art. The production of fan works to create unofficial canons—or rather, outside the control of producers in possession of the legal copyrights—also redefines these terms, removing the power to set such terms from the hands of those who have traditionally

wielded it. In both cases, these redefined canons challenge the neutrality and authority of the "official" canon and choose to substitute alternate perspectives as equally legitimate and worthy of recognition.

The practice of commandeering, or re-appropriating, mass media texts and repurposing them is characteristic—and I believe quintessential—to both queer and geek cultures. Muñoz refers to this process of "disidentification," which he posits as a third option outside the binary of identification (with the "preferred" hegemonic reading of mass media texts) and counteridentification, which can reify the hegemonic narrative by defining itself in opposition to it and as a result perpetuating its discourse.[46] De Kosnik has highlighted that "both queer and fan groups grasp the power of appropriating and transforming received cultural texts."[47] Muñoz provides a name for this transformation deployed as a sociopolitical act of inclusivity and identity formation:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.[48]

This term can be applied to multiple performative tactics employed by both geek and queer cultures. Firstly, and perhaps most impressively, it applies to the labels "geek" and "queer" themselves. As Muñoz explains, "disidentification is a mode of performance whereby a toxic

identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories" and constitutes "a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self."[49] Along the same lines, Savran argues that via its reclamation, the term *queer* takes on "a deeply utopian designation" that unlocks a multifaceted potential for resistance:

> a locus of refusal; an unbinding of psychic, sexual, and social energy; a destabilizing third term; a principle of radical democratization; a postmodernist renovation of camp; an afront to the bipolar system of gender and sexuality; a way of transcending both assimilationist and anti-assimilationist politics; a privileged mode of subversion.[50]

The reclamation of these labels and the choice to self-identify as a geek or a queer with pride is a disruption to the dominance of normativity and a defiant act of self-affirmation. In addition, it is an act of communal bonding, of unity in diversity against oppression, implementing, as Moser, Tibaji, and Contini posit, the power of "language serving as both a shield and weapon and the collective empowerment that can come from appropriating otherwise derogatory terms."[51] The repurposing of hegemonic tools of oppression such as slurs is a powerful weapon, and it is far from the only recycling and repurposing performed by geek and queer cultures.

The repetition of mass media texts into new performative scripts with a twist, often in a simultaneously doting and critical manner, is a defining feature of both geek and queer creative production. Bacon-Smith observes that a creator of fanfiction "re-creates the commonplace and known artifacts of mainstream culture, remaking them into the alien and strange. In the process she reinforces the social construction of the group through its source products, and presents for questioning the artifacts of the commonplace in the larger culture."[52] Muñoz identifies this type

of behavior as a disidentificatory act by which "a minority culture reappropriates the dominant culture."[53] Geek theatre and queer performance achieve this end by the same means—through camp.

John Patrick Bray identifies in geek theatre what he calls a "geek aesthetic" that embraces a campy, metatheatrical tone and style: "the scenes are quite short, self-aware, and episodic—often relying on stage combat (a protagonist versus a threshold guardian) to advance the narrative."[54] Stage combat is one of the aspects Vampire Cowboys plays are specifically known for, along with the blending of genres and use of projections. Additionally, many geek genres and media are predisposed toward action-style fighting, a common element in sci fi, fantasy, comic books, anime, and video and tabletop gaming. *Kapow-i GoGo* and *She Kills Monsters* are both teeming with fight sequences, both delightfully fun and—at least in these professional productions—impressively choreographed, and Kapow-i and Tilly, though unconventional, are action heroes. These fights purposely aim for the epic, beyond-realistic nature of the genres they impersonate: combat that is too large for a stage, for real human bodies, and the effect is created through enthusiasm and creative use of camp, as Cox exemplifies in the stage direction: "It should be as stupid and spectacular as possible" (see Figures 16 and 17). [55]

The most distinct feature I have noticed in geek plays, in fact, is not stage combat but a camp aesthetic and sense of humor that expresses, in Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner's assessment of camp, "ironic and nostalgic sensibilities, wherein beloved cultural icons are paid homage and deconstructed simultaneously."[56] A metatheatrical self-awareness underpins the geek aesthetic. With it comes an awareness of the audience's familiarity with the tropes being parodied and possession of cultural knowledge, including specific mass media references. This aesthetic also displays a consciousness within the play of its own status as

parody. For example, the script of *Kapow-i Gogo Returns* overtly makes fun out of audience awareness of the popularity of Marvel comics and films as well as the dangers of copyright lawsuits:

> KAPOW-I: I'm going to need a team. The best this World has to offer. A group of people… who need to avenge something. Avengers.
>
> TWIG: Don't call it that.
>
> KAPOW-I: I won't.
>
> TWIG: I'm just saying you can't…
>
> KAPOW-I: I won't call it that.[57]

Likewise, the narrator of *She Kills Monsters* is described as speaking "a lot like Cate Blanchett in the *Lord of the Rings* movies" and in the original production glides ethereally around the stage by the magic of rollerblades.[58] Audience familiarity with such cultural references is a key component of geek theatre's sensibility and its relationship with its audience (see Chapter 1), and it is by playing off this familiarity that geek theatre makes a sociopolitical statement by creating room in these worlds for geeks themselves to inhabit, regardless of representation within the source texts. Muñoz credits the sociopolitical power of queer camp to such cultural familiarity with recognizable images and the meaning—not to mention feelings—they invoke: "Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy."[59] Pamela Robertson, in discussing feminist camp, echoes fandom's complex relationship with beloved texts and disidentificatory readings: "dominant texts and resistant viewers interact to produce camp, and by reconceptualizing resistance and subversion to account for the way in which camp's simultaneous pleasures of alienation and absorption refuse simplistic categories of dominant-versus-resistant readings."[60] It

is this tension between love of a fandom universe and the erasure of self-representation and desire within the official canon of that universe that produces fan creation.

For the geek, source texts are both fun and serious, and fans maintain both a passionate love for the material, which they take extremely seriously, and also a critical distance, which allows for criticism, correction, and even making mockery of it. Yet the difference between the dismissive, even harmful mockery by mundane culture and the parodic mockery found in fan creative work is a foundation of respect and affection. Shugart and Waggoner emphasize that "an important component of camp's style is the presence of self-love rather than contempt, such that camp's performances are presented with an attitude of tenderness within the parody."[61] Christopher Isherwood writes, in the earliest text on the camp sensibility, that taking a thing seriously is essential to camp's mode of making fun: "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."[62] Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" suggest that camp engages in a "more complex relation to 'the serious'. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."[63] Sontag also specifically differentiates, as I have argued with "geek chic" (see Chapter 1), between what qualifies as "camp" and what is "chic." The key, in her argument, is *passion*: "Without passion, one gets pseudo-Camp—what is merely decorative, safe, in a word, chic."[64] The difference therefore rests between personal identification with and investment in the subject being camped versus merely adopting it as a trend. Camp, like queerness and fandom, is an expression of love (see Figure 18).

Sontag's definition of camp, however, posits that "pure" lacks self-awareness—that is, it is not in on its own joke, only the audience perceives its campiness—and is apolitical.[65] She goes on to argue that self-aware camp is less satisfying in effect.[66] On both of these accounts, I

drastically diverge in opinion, arguing instead that the most poignant camp is both conscious and political, including the camp aesthetics seen in queer and geek theatre. In fact, Sontag's vision of camp that is unaware of its campiness and takes itself entirely seriously parallels astonishingly closely with the image of the geek that mass representation reproduces for mundane consumption, from William Shatner's infamous exclamation "It's just a television show!" on *SNL* to *The Big Bang Theory*'s adorkable protagonists.[67] Yet geeks' own production of fandom texts shows a keen sense of self-awareness, deployed—perhaps ironically in stark contrast to Sontag's preferred form of naïve camp—in the form of campy metatheatrical scripts such as the plays of Nguyen and Cox. Bray, stating that "plays such as *She Kills Monsters*, which appropriates the *Dungeons and Dragons* tabletop role-playing game, are both poignant and over-the-top campy fun," highlights the affectiveness of geek theatre's camping of mass media objects to which fandoms ascribe in shining a light on the real-world human struggles of queer geeks.[68] Queer and geek cultures use camp as a rebellious mode of recognizing their oppressors' weapons of mockery and erasure, then re-forging these weapons into armor, turning mockery into parodically humorous celebration and invisibility into flamboyance. In true comic-book style Philip Core refers to camp performance as "the heroism of people not called upon to be heroes."[69] Taught shame by society, the liberation of pride is embraced wholeheartedly and thrown back at a normative culture in the form of campy revelry. As performative examples, gay pride parades and cosplayers at fandom conventions have a multitude of factors in common—far from the least of these are flashy costumes, a sense of community, and the act of, as Bray writes of geek theatre, "celebration of Otherness."[70] People come together at these events to celebrate their identities and to seek haven in a community that understands and shares their feelings and desires.

Shugart and Waggoner have distilled the "defining features of the camp sensibility as established in the existing literature: irony, aestheticism, performance or theatricality, parodic humor, and resistance" and suggest camp as an ideal tool for "strategic (re)configurations in the context of contemporary popular media fare but to the ends of resistance and subversion rather than hegemonic control." [71] Returning to the contrast of camp with chic, Mark Booth also emphasizes camp's inverse relationship to hegemonic power: "True chic is an expression through extreme elegance of superior power, as opposed to camp which is a self-mocking abdication of any pretentions to power."[72] Much fan work, by consequence of adapting copyrighted texts, inherently abandons the pursuit of commercial success or professional gain in favor of personal fulfillment in the creation itself, in a phenomenon much like Sedgwick observes:

> Unlike kitch-attribution, then, camp-recognition doesn't ask, "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says, *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? […] And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle?[73]

Geek theatre, like all fan creative production, creates for the creator's own pleasure, and for the pleasure of fellow geeks, often with disregard for mainstream marketability or acceptability.

The duality of the vulnerable position of the Other with the celebration of the uniqueness of Othered existence creates a powerful result. Geek and queer identities grapple with differing types and levels of Othering, but in the theatre, both respond in similar ways: not only with campy aesthetic, but often with optimism. The damage inflicted by a hostile, non-inclusive society may indeed cause bitterness and skepticism—reflected in the dark apocalypse of *Kapow-i*

GoGo Returns and the villainy of the succubi and other antagonistic forces in Tilly's game that betray her real-life struggles—but it also inspires idealism toward the possibilities of a better world. Theatre creates a particularly imaginative space to explore those possibilities. As Savran states, "In theatre, the possibility—nay, the necessity—of multiple identifications and desires in real time and in real space—across genders, sexualities, races, and classes—renders it a particularly utopian medium."[74] Laughing in the face of disheartening reality, the hopes of queer theatre fill the space created by the imagination of geek theatre.

Worldbuilding

Muñoz has written, "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house."[75] He goes on to say, "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[76] In discussing queerness, he has also described the typical geek, and he has done so quite literally. Geeks are defined precisely by their affinity for "other worlds," the fictional universes their fandom texts create. These are the landscapes traversed by Gunnels and Cole's "ethnodramaturgs," gathering fragments to reshape into performative statements of love and identity.[77] Geek theatre additionally utilizes the creative space of the stage. As Savran points out: "the theatrical apparatus also and always produces possible—and alternative—worlds."[78] The performative space of the theatre, for creating characters and realities in a lived medium inhabited physically by both performers and spectators, combined with the ethnodramaturgy of fandom makes geek theatre an ideal artform for worldbuilding.

A large part of these better worlds that geek theatre strives to create hinges on equal representation of society's Others. As Nguyen often mentions, an "unwritten mission" of the Vampire Cowboys is a commitment to diversity and queer visibility. Likewise, in an interview, *Kapow-i GoGo* playwright Matt Cox states, "Diversity is important for representing life and creating different works across the entire spectrum."[79] Neither writer has made a point of advertising a political or social agenda—their work is entertainment first. However, their primary goal of entertainment has in no way hindered them from representing their views of a more democratized theatre—and world—clearly and openly in their plays (see Figure 19). Like all creative production with fandom, they use the fragments of fictional universes known to their audience, distilling the potency of these cultural signs and reassembling them to produce new meaning. Muñoz comments on the strategic redeployment of recognizable cultural fragments rearranged into resistant configurations and, imbued with the energy of performative possibility, its potential for envisioning queerer landscapes:

> Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.[80]

While clearly never intended to depict realistic views of human existence, the landscapes of geek theatre teem with queer possibilities to be explored, perhaps with fragments that can be returned to and performed in our own world.

The creation of worlds within geek theatre takes different forms. Most commonly, the entire story will take place in a fantasy paradigm, with its own rules and culture. *Kapow-i GoGo*

inhabits such a realm, as do most Vampire Cowboys productions. *She Kills Monsters* does not. Rather, it balances depictions of the real world with an escapist *Dungeons & Dragons* utopia created by Tilly: New Landia, with the wrongs of her reality set right (mostly anyway). In Tilly's words, "We play it because it's awesome. It's about adventures and saving the world and having magic. And maybe, in some small teeny capacity, I guess it might have a little to do with wish fulfillment."[81] Tilly's New Landia, though filled with monsters and obstacles, realizes her vision of a utopian landscape. She is able to step out of a reality where she feels invisible, persecuted, and powerless and into a world where she is loved, valued, and badass. Warren Kluber sees the game-world imagined by Tilly, as with many geeks and queers, as a space within which identity can be developed and explored: "The sexuality of Tilly's character can only manifest in a world that supports it; *gayness* is made a quality of her world before it becomes a quality of her character."[82] As her reality at home and at school precludes the fulfillment—or even recognition and acceptance—of her sexual identity, she is able to realize and perform a projection of her identity in the alternative landscape she creates for herself. Rather than being strange and outcast, she creates a haven where everyone else is like her—queer.

AGNES: Why is everyone gay?

KALIOPE: Because it is the will of the creator.[83]

Tilly reverses the assumption of heteronormativity—an assumption emphatically voiced by Agnes—inventing a fantasy where queer becomes universal rather than peculiar (see Figure 20). Her creation defiantly rebels against the social order being imposed upon her, itself a fiction masquerading as inevitability. Muñoz criticizes this narrative of inevitability: "Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality."[84] Instead, like the World of Kapow-i GoGo,

where lesbianism is not only unremarkable but can biologically produce children without scientific or male intervention, Tilly's model subverts the social construct equating "natural" with the heteronormative nucleic family. Butler discusses the power of such performative subversion:

> The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of "the original" […] reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original.[85]

Savran has pointed out that "the continued association of the heterosexual with the universal and the homosexual with the particular has been an obstinate mythology"[86]—but not necessarily in the utopian worlds of geek theatre. Tilly imagines more than a world to which she can escape and play the hero: she imagines a world where she could fit in. Geek theatre sends the message that this imaginary realm need not be purely fantastic—it can be home to anyone willing to hope for it.

For queer individuals and communities, social progression forges into uncharted territories, redrawing boundaries previously accepted without question by society. Geek theatre dares to envision worlds where these boundaries do not exist. Muñoz "point[s] to a queer feeling of hope in the face of hopeless heteronormative maps of the present," indicating that the hope itself is inherently strange, a strangeness echoed by Blammo GoGo, Kapow-i's son from an alternate, apocalyptic timeline: "There's something else in the air. I think it's called… Hope. Is that it? Is that the right word? I've literally never used it before."[87] The terrain of Tilly's New Landia and *Kapow-i GoGo*'s The World may indeed be treacherous, but these stories envision

heroes up to the task—queer teenage girls armed with love and idealism (and a magic sword or two). Kapow-i may become frustrated by a World in constant need of saving, but she is empowered with the ability to save and to change it—an optimistic notion indeed. Tilly invents a utopia, while Kapow-i inhabits one, but the recognition of monsters even within utopian landscapes betrays a need to constantly remain on guard against injustice, to fight to maintain the ideals from which even heroes fall short.

> KAPOW-I: Giggle, this World. It makes you cynical. It makes you angry. Sometimes it makes you just… evil. But in the face of all that. I want you to remember this: Don't stop. Don't ever stop fighting. Never give up. And believe in yourself. Believe in others. Just… believe.[88]

The flawed ideal of a world-saving hero is compounded with the failure of utopia to fully correct the issues that plague reality.

The idealism of geek theatre is tempered by dark undertones. Part of this is parody. The apocalyptic landscape of *Kapow-i GoGo Returns* gleefully mocks dark and brooding subgenres of anime and comic books, and the sinister shadow of the dragon Tiamat is lightened by the comically cliché high-fantasy tropes in which she is steeped. Yet bursts of disconcerting commentary pop up to shatter the campy, farcical fun of the show. The realities of not only an oppressive heteronormative and mundane social hegemony but of mortality loom over Tilly. As Agnes deals with the trauma of her reality and the shortcomings of the game that was meant to be an escape, she lashes out at her sister's creation: "This is a stupid game, and you're not real, and none of this matters because you died."[89] The corrective magic of New Landia can only stretch so far. The audience is subject to a jarring sense of empathy with the characters and their desires, no matter how comically these might be presented, and an uneasy recognition of real-

world issues and forces of oppression. The utopian World of *Kapow-i GoGo*, where love triumphs and all dreams are achievable, is under constant threat of takeover by the forces of evil: "Ultra Corp: *Building a Perfect World. Or else.*"[90] Of course, these forces are about as realistic as the bad guys of Saturday morning cartoons, but Cox's satire capitalizes on their simplicity to comment on more complex issues of reality, including a delicate and crumbling sense of cooperation between peoples of differing cultures and identities. The underlying message struggling to break through beneath the extreme caricatures and absurd storyline is that the universe doesn't need a World's Greatest Fighter—it needs people who care enough to fight.

In a world riddled with monsters and epic fights to the death between good and evil, there also exist magical tools and a system of logic that governs how these monsters and heroes face off. Adventurers level up through experience and defeat foes through cleverness and bravery. There are rewards for progressing through the plotline in concrete and linear triumphs. Even the absurdities—for instance, being unable to take the easy road because an inconvenient bush is blocking the path—are laid out in such a fashion that the end goal might be most meaningfully achieved.

> KAPOW-I: Ah. You've… you've got to be kidding me. There's a bush in my way. Shit. I'm not getting past that. […]
>
> MASTER MASTERWHISKEYS: No, Kapow-i! […] You just have to use… Cut! Cut the bush down!
>
> KAPOW-I: I don't know about that, but I'll try. […]
>
> (*And she hits it with her sword. It falls to the ground.*)
>
> KAPOW-I (CONT'D): Wow. How did I never think of that?[91]

The normative power structures might not be as obviously identifiable or easily battled in the real world as in Tilly's New Landia or Kapow-i's World. The modes of resistance are more subtle and less spectacular. In a better world, queer forms of self-expression would be seen as natural and unremarkable. However, in the world we have, these same acts of self-expression can serve to knock down the barriers and overcome the oppressors, even if the heroes often go unheralded in the world they actively save.

Even within their respective fantasy landscapes, the characters of geek theatre undergo struggles of dehumanization. From the dark elves and demons that constitute Tilly's adventuring party to the alien ancestry and cyborg modifications of the GoGo family, strangeness is woven into the identities of these worlds' inhabitants and frequently noted in the plays' texts. Comic relief characters such as Team Trouble even face xenophobia, in the form of violence and racial slurs such as "Raccoon Man" (see Figure 21):

> MR. SNUGGLES: Woah woah. My species are called Bluffkins. And there are little to no similarities to your standard raccoon. Also couldn't help but notice you are pointing a gun at us. Are you going to kill us?[92]

Even a young Kapow-i is the subject of criticism and dismissal on account of her gender:

> TUXEDO GARY: You know there's no way you could beat me. You're just a girl.
>
> KAPOW-I: Why don't you say that to my face!
>
> TUXEDO GARY: I literally just did.[93]

Both Cox and Nguyen have stated their commitment to diversity, and furthermore, neither appears satisfied tackling any one issue alone pertaining to underrepresentation. If Tilly Evans exemplifies the vulnerability of the queer geek coming into her own awesomeness, Blade

Gunnblade by contrast personifies an identity that has been erased and fractured by the imposition of a damaging cultural hegemony. Yet even Blade Gunnblade, an archetype of broodiness, defies gendering, originally portrayed as male in the Flea Theatre's *#serials* and later as female in the PIT's streamlined marathon production (see Figure 22). Hir gender is regarded as unimportant in defining the character, never questioned and generally unremarkable. Meanwhile, in a culture of real-world normativity, Tilly is able to claim her identity defiantly if painfully, proudly raising her flag bearing a label marked as valueless. In this way, as in numerous others, geek and queer share an essential truth: the act of claiming identity is often an act of breaking the identity imposed upon us.

Theatre, as an art of lived action, is uniquely equipped to perform not only identity but the activism of questioning identity. Savran proposes a view of theatre as "the queerest art, perhaps […] because writing and performance always function to disarticulate and disrupt identity—whether the identity in question is that of the playwright, the performer, or the spectator."[94] Geek theatre, like queer theatre, seeks to redefine the normative, calling into question the nature of "normal." It not only disarticulates the "what is" of the normal, however, but rearticulates identity in a utopian projection of "what may be." Princess Cloudberry, in the face of an apocalyptic landscape, refuses to relinquish the strategies of hope and love in striving toward a better future: "We'll create a new World. One where people don't hurt each other. One where evil is forever eradicated. One where love conquers all."[95] Her words have the appearance of optimism to the point of naivete, but her determination and refusal of the inevitability of the present echoes Muñoz's "charge as spectators and actors […] to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve a new one."[96] This vision of utopian futurity is not intended as a

simplistic model of a perfect society, but rather a conscious act of belief in the value of working toward a better world instead of conceding defeat in the acceptance a broken present one.

Save the World… Again

While the world is becoming more affirming and less exclusionary for geeks and queers, outsider status remains a constant struggle. Theatre possesses the capacity to create a space for expression, and geek theatre has determined unapologetically to do so. As indicated by the misfit D&D adventuring party of *She Kills Monsters* and totally non-avengers team-building exercise of *Kapow-i GoGo Returns*, Othered individuals of all oppressed identities are fighting the same hegemonic forces of darkness. Of utmost significance, however, is the reminder to every outcast minority that the struggle of Otherness, while individually unique, is shared, and the very aspects of our identities that make us most vulnerable are also often our greatest source of strength. Geek theatre calls for a simultaneous declaration of individual weirdness and the banding together of all Others, inviting the unlikeliest of heroes to follow Tillius the Paladin's call to venture and Kapow-i GoGo's final hail: "It's your World now, kid. Protect them. Be the fighter I never could. And remember: You just have to Believe. Also. You can cut down any bush with any sharp object. Cool? Cool."[97]

Figure 12: Maureen Sebastian as Dewdrop (left) and Bonnie Sherman as Sally December (right), in the world premiere production of *Soul Samurai* by Vampire Cowboys and Ma-Yi Theatre Company in 2009; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 13: (from right to left) Allison Buck as Tilly, Margaret Odette as Lilith, Satomi Blair as Agnes, and Megha Nabe as Kaliope, in the world premiere production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen in 2011 at The Flea Theatre; Photo by and used with permission of Joan Marcus

Figure 14: Promotional Kapow-i GoGo trading card, featuring Madeleine Bundy; Used with permission of Matt Cox

Figure 15: Promotional banner for *Kapow-i GoGo*, featuring Madeleine Bundy as Kapow-i GoGo (left) and Eliza Martin Simpson as Princess Cloudberry (right), with rainbow-themed "believe"; Used with permission of Matt Cox

Figure 16: Satomi Blair as Agnes fighting Tiamat, in the world premiere production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen in 2011 at The Flea Theatre; Photo by and used with permission of Joan Marcus

Figure 17: Madeleine Bundy as Kapow-i GoGo (left) and Andy Miller as Gyga Gogo (right), in the PIT's 2015 marathon production of the *Kapow-i GoGo* saga; Used with permission of Matt Cox

Figure 18: Madeleine Bundy as Kapow-i GoGo (left) and Eliza Martin Simpson as Princess Cloudberry (right), in the PIT's 2015 marathon production of the *Kapow-i GoGo* saga; Used with permission of Matt Cox

Figure 19: (from right to left) Edgar Eguia as The Great Mage Steve, Jack Corcoran as Chuck, Raúl Sigmund Julia as Orcus, Allison Buck as Tilly, Margaret Odette as Lilith, Satomi Blair as Agnes, and Megha Nabe as Kaliope, in the world premiere production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen in 2011 at The Flea Theatre; Photo by and used with permission of Joan Marcus

Figure 20: Allison Buck as Tilly (right) and Margaret Odette as Lilith (left), in the world premiere production of *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen in 2011 at The Flea Theatre; Photo by and used with permission of Joan Marcus

Figure 21: Matt Cox as Mr. Snuggles (left) and Karsten Otto as Mr. Smiles (right), in *#serials* at the Flea Theatre; Used with permission of Matt Cox

Figure 22: Asia Kate Dillon as Blade Gunnblade, in the PIT's 2015 marathon production of the *Kapow-i GoGo* saga; Used with Permission of Matt Cox

---

[1] "About GLAAD," GLAAD Media Awards, accessed March 14, 2017, http://www.glaad.org/about.
[2] "Puffs," *Matt Cox Land*, accessed 9 February 2020, http://www.mattcoxland.com/puffs-1.
[3] Quotes from Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters* are based on the original production directed by Robert Ross Parker at the Flea Theatre in 2011. Page numbers are based on an unpublished early copy of the script provided to me by the playwright. Subsequent published versions have undergone edits.
Qui Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, unpublished manuscript (2011). 2.
[4] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.
[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23.
[6] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.
[7] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 33.
[8] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 9-10.
[9] See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.
[10] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.
[11] Phelan, *Unmarked*.
[12] This aspect of the scene has been removed from subsequent drafts of the script and does not appear in published versions.
Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 47-8.
[13] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 77-8.
[14] Quotes from Matt Cox's *Kapow-i GoGo GOOO!*, *Kapow-i GoGo Z*, and *Kapow-i GoGo Returns* are based on the script for the People's Improv Theatre's marathon production. Page numbers are based on an unpublished copy of the script provided to me by the playwright.
Matt Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 106.
[15] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 231.

[16] David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), x.
[17] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 175.
[18] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 130.
[19] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 3.
[20] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 4.
[21] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 63.
[22] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 80.
[23] See Introduction and Chapter 1 for further discussion of the impact of geek chic on geek culture
[24] Through Kapow-i and Princess Cloudberry's many difficulties confessing their love to each other, the word "yams" becomes a recurring joke/metaphor for their feelings.
Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 154.
[25] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 152.
[26] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 136.
[27] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 152.
[28] In *She Kills Monsters*, which takes place in the 1990s, Tilly's playgroup are playing *D&D* 2nd Edition.
Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition: Player's Handbook* (Lake Geneva: TSR Inc, 1989), 27.
Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 17.
[29] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 81.
[30] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 50.
[31] A number of scholars have discussed the integral role of fanfiction writers and fan zines in the development of media fan culture as it exists today. For a succinct overview, see Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom." For an in-depth ethnography of early fan culture and fanfiction production, see Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*.
[32] Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space," 228.
[33] For further scholarship on women producing slash fanfiction, see Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture"; Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines," *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014); Joanna Russ, "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love," *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
[34] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 127.
[35] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 36.
[36] Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 53.
[37] Ika Willis, "Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006).
[38] Willis, "Keeping Promises to Queer Children."
[39] Notably, the tradition of homoeroticism in literature—especially cross-racial homoeroticism in American literature that romanticizing escaping to the frontier or to sea—has long been noted by literary critics. Adventure television follows in this tradition, perhaps exemplified by the relationship of human Kirk and Vulcan Spock (played by Jewish Leonard Nimoy opposite William Shatner as the white leading man) in their exploration of "space, the final frontier."
See Leslie Fielder, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in *The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Works*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Library of America, 2010): 225-233; Leslie Fielder, "Home as Heaven, Home as Hell," *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984): 145-167.
[40] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 16.
[41] Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xii.
[42] Sara Gwenllian Jones, "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 119.
[43] Jones, "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," 125.
[44] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 49-50.
[45] Robert H. Moser, Alberto Tibaji, and George Contini, "*Always (K)new*: Recombining Identities and Queering Narratives through a Transcultural Theatre Project," *Latin American Theatre Review* 52, no. 2 (2019): 62. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0003.
[46] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

[47] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 153.
[48] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.
[49] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 185.
[50] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 57.
[51] Moser, Tibaji, and Contini, "*Always (K)new*": 63.
[52] Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 157.
[53] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 121.
[54] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 126.
[55] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 84.
[56] Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 53.
[57] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 254.
[58] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 1.
[59] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.
[60] Pamela Robertson, "What Makes the Feminist Camp?" *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 278.
[61] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 34.
[62] Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 110.
[63] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 60.
[64] Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 59.
[65] Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 54.
[66] Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 58.
[67] *Saturday Night Live*, season 12, episode 8, "William Shatner/Lone Justice," directed by Paul Miller, written by Andy Breckman, A. Whitney Brown, E. Jean Carroll, Tom Davis, James Downey, Al Franken, Eddie Gorodetsky, Jack Handey, Phil Hartman, George Meyer, Lorne Michaels, Kevin Nealon, Herbert Sargent, Marc Shaiman, Rosie Shuster, Robert Smigel, Bonnie Turner, Terry Turner, Jon Vitti, and Christine Zander, aired 20 December 1986, NBC Studios.
[68] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 125-6.
[69] Philip Core, "From *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth*," *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 86.
[70] Bray, "There's Too Many of Them!": 130.
[71] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 44, 149.
[72] Mark Booth, "*Campe-Toi!* On the Origins and Definitions of Camp," *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 74.
[73] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 156.
[74] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 74-75.
[75] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
[76] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
[77] See Chapter 1 for more on geeks as ethnodramaturgs.
Gunnels and Cole, "Culturally Mapping Universes."
[78] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 75.
[79] Adam Szymkowicz, "I Interview Playwrights Part 812: Matt Cox," 21 January 2016, accessed 4 December 2016, http://aszym.blogspot.com/2016/01/i-interview-playwrights-part-812-matt.html.
[80] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195-6.
[81] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 82.
[82] Kluber, "Character-World Dialectics on the Contemporary American Stage": 226.
[83] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 36.
[84] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.
[85] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 41.
[86] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 65.
[87] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 28.
Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 282.
[88] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 274.
[89] Nguyen, *She Kills Monsters*, 76.

[90] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 40.
[91] This recurring theme/joke throughout the *Kapow-i GoGo* plays references the *Pokémon* video games, in which certain paths on the worldmap are often blocked by a small tree that can eventually be passed by using the move "Cut" (acquired after a specific level of progress through the gameplay).
Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 198.
[92] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*.
[93] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 20.
[94] Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, 70.
[95] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 191.
[96] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200.
[97] Cox, *Kapow-i GoGo*, 277.

Chapter 3: Infinite Cultures

Two truths press upon my consciousness as I undertake to write this chapter. First, systemic abuses against people of color and Black Lives Matter protests continue and reach a heightened pitch in the wake of the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor: just two, at the time of writing this chapter, of the most recent in a multitude. Second, while I have thus far spoken as an insider to geek and queer cultures and experiences, I now must enter into the fraught discourse over racism in American culture from an unmistakable position of hegemonic white privilege. I will strive to contribute to the conversation by highlighting works of geek theatre that I believe demonstrate productive methods through which artists of various racial backgrounds actively engage issues of systemic racism in American culture.

This chapter examines geek theatre's exploration of the expression and experience of race and intersectionality in cultural identity. I work within a definition of race as a social reality of lived experience and identity. While I do not mean to conflate racial identity *with* cultural identity in terms of their definitions, I will focus on ways in which racial experience resonates and creates tension within individual cultural identity, particularly in the lives of geeks of color, and the ways in which cultural racism is thrown into relief by geek theatre's overlaying of racialized embodiment onto traditionally whitewashed or stereotyped genre tropes.

The case studies I will examine are Qui Nguyen's Vampire Cowboys play *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, which deals with the subjects of intersectional identity and racist stereotyping, and Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama*, which confronts

systemic racism and violence as well as the process of grief through a comic book aesthetic. Both of these plays explicitly practice restorying of preestablished cultural history, mythology, and iconography as a resistive measure to undercut erasure, dehumanization, and violence against people of color.

And I'm a Badass!

Geek playwrights of color, when dealing directly with race in their plays, frequently emphasize the dissonance of individual lived experience against the racial expectations of mainstream society, cultural expectations arising out of their own ethnic communities, and the predominantly white presumptions of geek culture.

Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, co-produced Off-Broadway by the Vampire Cowboys and Ma-Yi Theatre Company in 2012, chronicles the playwright Qui Nguyen's attempt—via the super spy genre and incorporating ninjas and aliens—to write the true story of his cousin Hung Tran, a Vietnamese refugee who lost his entire immediate family during their journey to America. (I will differentiate between the actual person of Nguyen and his avatar on stage by referring to the character of the playwright as simply "Qui.") Part 3 in "The Gook Story Trilogy"—preceded by the plays *Trial by Water* and *Blood in America—Agent G* opens with Hung's return to Vietnam for the first time since his childhood escape, which he alone survived of his entire immediate family. Hung metatheatrically disrupts his own play by dragging Qui onto the stage and demanding the story finally be told properly, questioning the playwright's artistic choices and motivations in staging the real Hung Tran's personal tragedy. Playwright Qui and super-spy Hung chaotically navigate the trials of racist Asian stereotypes, attacks by Viet Cong and ninjas, a plethora of stylized genres, and the pressures of their

respective pasts coming back to haunt them. Finally, Qui comes to terms with his failure to realize his earnest desire to tell the truth of Hung's story of survival, a failure resulting from his invention of dramatic plot twists in pursuit of making "good theatre" to serve the whims of his playwriting instructors and critics. *Agent G* ends with Qui alone centerstage in a freestyle rap recounting the true events of Hung Tran's traumatic journey to America. The fictional stage character Hung accepts Qui's final attempt to "tell this story right" with the simple acknowledgement: "It's a start."[1]

Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama*, produced at Geffen Playhouse in 2019 and recipient of the 2017 Rosa Parks Playwrighting Award, focuses on Sabrina, the black mother of a fourteen-year-old son, Tramarion, who is shot and killed when a white cop mistakes his "Know Your Heritage" trophy for a weapon. Despite the support of her sister Lena and the attempted but rejected support of Flat Joe, "someone else's Black son; the boy who lived," Sabrina retreats into herself under a barrage of sympathetic but exploitative media attention.[2] Unable to cope with a reality without her son, Sabrina escapes into the fictional world and character of the Maasai Angel, a superhero created by Tramarion and Flat Joe. After facing her ultimate supervillain—her own rage at her son for leaving and at herself for letting him go—she returns to reality "with her newly-gained superpower, compassion," to care for Flat Joe, who has brought her a published copy of his and Tramarion's comic.[3]

While all rife with comedic elements and campy, nostalgic aesthetic, at their core these plays grapple with the lived experiences of people of color in America struggling against stereotyping, dismissal, and embodied vulnerabilities in everyday life. Each also consciously restories established plots and personas to serve distinctly different purposes than originally

intended, serving to illuminate, ironically by way of fantastical genres, the failure of our cultural mythology to account for true trials of lived experience.

Infinite Intersections

In his web article "Decolonizing My Fandom," Shawn Taylor vocalizes the dilemma of navigating whitewashed fantastical genre texts as a fan of color (FOC). This dilemma includes problematic identification with the protagonists offered by source texts and interacting within a geek culture in which the presumption of whiteness, as in mainstream culture, is considered normal.

> When I think of a superhero, I immediately conjure images of Batman, Spider-Man, or Captain America (no women, no POC). Science Fiction? Asimov, Clarke, Gibson, Sterling, and (most thankfully) Octavia E. Butler. I have to wade through Greek and Arthurian mythology before I get to the mythology and folklore of the African Diaspora. In all honesty, it hurts. […] Boomer from *Battlestar*? Uhura and Sulu from *Trek*? Lando from *Star Wars*? You know it's bad when you can name every POC character surrounded by predominantly white casts on television and in film. I cannot tell you how many white male SF authors I've read in my life, but I can name every woman and POC. Every. Single. One. They were/are that rare.[4]

African-American Studies scholar Jonathan Gayles, in his documentary *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books*, expresses a childhood feeling of dissonance between the imaginative escape comics provided his young mind and the whiteness of the superheroes depicted therein: "I had a sense that I was dreaming someone else's dreams."[5]

Gayles and Taylor are far from alone in these experiences. Scholars and fans of color frequently express complicated identifications with beloved genre fictions, which mostly whitewash the bodies and experiences of people color out of the story, and with the meager number of POC characters who represent both empowering, resistive social commentary and problematic racial stereotyping.

In his semi-autobiographical play *Black Nerd*, Jon Carr's protagonist Marcus rejects the social compulsion to cosplay as one of the lamentably few black characters represented in his fandoms. He notes the scarcity by citing "the Big 5" costumes that black men typically cosplay at Dragon Con: "Lando Calrissian, Morpheus, Wesley Snipes' Blade, Nick Fury, and for some reason the Old Spice guy. Every year we get a new popular black guy. Maybe a Luke Cage or a Black Panther but the big 5 are always there in force."[6] Carr's play also explores ways in which popular movies ignore the subject of race, as in the case of *Back to the Future*. When Marcus steps in as Marty McFly, he laughs at Doc Brown's assertion that he must travel into the past to save his parents from danger, retorting: "Of course they're in danger. It's 19-fuckin'-55!"[7] With this succinct joke, Carr not only makes a jab at the whiteness of the film's cast but also highlights its nostalgic whitewashing of America's past.[8]

Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso point out that in academia, "the ideology of racism creates, maintains, and justifies the use of a 'master narrative' in storytelling," and within this narrative, "unacknowledged White privilege helps maintain racism's stories."[9] This ideology also holds true in fictional storytelling. Elyse Rae Helford proposes the term "erace" to describe this phenomenon: "Erace refers to the refusal of race as a significant factor in a writer's work. Race is always present, but as 'whiteness' is rarely discussed self-consciously in writing from white-dominated cultures, such work is not 'eraced' but 'deraced.'"[10] The genre traditions upon

which fandom culture and thus geek playwrights draw are steeped in racist tropes and eracures that paint stories of whiteness as "normative, benign, and frequent," in the words of fandom and race scholar andré carrington, who goes on to argue that these genres "perpetuate a discourse of participatory culture in which only White male audience members can enjoy the pleasures of identification."[11] Fandom scholar Henry Jenkins remarks that fandom, often a space of hegemonic resistance for outsiders, is also extremely vulnerable to such cultural blindness:

> Fandom is always already political for fans of color, even as many white fans steadfastly defend fandom as a play space, "free from politics." The ideal of fandom as a "safe space" reflects various forms of white privilege, seeing whiteness as neutral or apolitical, whereas other racial categories always represent the "threat" of "special interests," which can be accommodated only when people "make an issue of it."[12]

Thus, while many geeks embrace fandom's potential for sociopolitical resistance and others do not, fans of color (FOC) find themselves necessarily at odds—often despite a desire to apolitically engage with fandom merely for personal enjoyment—with the cultural presumption of whiteness that positions all FOC's fan creations as already inherently political.

Much like the "moment of discovery" experiences many geeks recount of encountering fandom culture for the first time, FOC tend to experience a second "moment of discovery" in finding that, despite the popular myth of the geek/fan being more or less exclusively white heterosexual men, they are in reality far from alone or anomalous in fandom culture, as Rukmini Pande points out:

> It is clear that the discovery of "others like me" was an important one in terms of articulating a differential fannish identity. It is also clear that the presumed default

> representation of fans is a powerful influence on media fandom participants themselves, even if "logically" it does not hold up to interrogation.[13]

Despite the whiteness of the master narrative, FOC *do* regularly identify with fantastical genre fiction and participate in geek fan culture, including the practice of creating fan work that makes space in the narrative for their own stories. However, the intersection of geek identity with minoritarian racial identity often leads to pressures from both identity cultures, which often fail to recognize the FOC's intersectionality as legitimate.

Kwasu David Tembo recounts childhood experiences of being Othered both by hegemonic white culture and by peers of his own race:

> I was labeled "too white for the black kids" based on my interest in art deemed by my black peers to be quintessentially white. To my surprise, the white boys in the dorm stood in solidarity with [the dorm bully], sharing his displeasure at my "eclectic" tastes. It was an instance of also being "too black for the whites" and as such, a common enemy, target, or Other for the short-sightedness of both groups. At that age, being of a "third kind" in that way filled me with rage as it was clear to me that my allegiance was to no flag or shade but to sound and feeling; an allegiance to art.[14]

David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, referencing seminar material from Interaction, Inc., define "third culture" upbringing such as described by Tembo and Nguyen: "A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any."[15] Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her theory of intersectionality, criticizes "dominant conceptions of discrimination [that] condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage

occurring along a single categorical axis," and bell hooks indicts such cultural pressures that cause individuals to fracture along these singular axes: "Dominator culture wants us to lack a language to fully express the beauty and power of diversity."[16] Tembo, while expressing the pain at being twice-Othered, argues for hybridity as an ultimately liberating positionality, stating that his "experiences as a beyonder/thirdspacer have revealed the fact that despite humanity's pretensions at dominance and power, being is intractably myriad, and that its complexity is inherently combinatory."[17] This experience of a quintessentially combinatory identity is at the heart of plays like Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*.

From its opening images, *Agent G* inundates the audience with cheesy genre tropes and stereotyped images of Vietnam. Immediately upon his introduction, Hung sets the tone by metatheatrically commenting upon popular cultural imagery of Asians and the suspect nature of claims to "truth" (see Figure 23): "Hi, I'm Hung Tran and I'm a badass. I know karate. And I'm Vietnamese… you can tell by my rice hat. […] And what you are all about to see is completely true. And as we all know, true stories wet your vaginas and get your dicks hard. True stories are awesome!"[18] Contrastingly, immediately upon his own introduction, the character of Qui denies his qualifications to stage "truth," either about trauma or race: "I write action-adventure comedies now. COMEDIES! I don't know how to do this. I do shows about ninjas and zombies and b-boys."[19] (see Figure 24) Despite Hung's demands that Qui do the story justice, he also repeatedly calls into question the playwright's ability to address the subject matter of intercultural identity, particularly underscoring Qui's ignorance about real Vietnamese culture.

When the characters arrive in Ho Chi Minh City, they are greeted with stereotypical images of rice hats, Vietnamese noodles, Vietnamese whores, and Vietnamese paper lanterns:

HUNG: What the fuck is this!?! […] Just because you wrote down Vietnam a dozen times doesn't actually make it Vietnam.

QUI: Well, that's what Vietnam looks like.

HUNG: That's what Vietnam looks like?

QUI: (*Indicating the set which is in this moment just a giant word* VIETNAM) Yes, motherfucker, can you not read?

HUNG: […] You've never been to Vietnam, have you?

QUI: Not. Recently.

HUNG: When was the last time?

QUI: Well, if you include my adolescence and the trips we took when I was just an infant… I guess… zero.[20]

Likewise, when integrating dialogue in Vietnamese, Qui is immediately called out and admits: "Okay, okay. I can't speak Vietnamese either. But this is theatre. I don't have to know Vietnamese to be able to communicate that you two are speaking in Vietnamese because I am fluent in the language of art."[21] One such "Vietnamese" conversation includes:

DINH: Ching chong ching chong you speak ching chong, White lady?

MOLLY: Ching. CHONG!

DINH: Ching chong awesome!

MOLLY: Ching chong I KNOW!

DINH & MOLLY: Ching chong!

HUNG: Qui, seriously?[22]

Qui's artistic representation of Asianness in *Agent G* and *Trial by Water* ultimately draw accusations of being racist against Asians and, "deep down," being a white guy.[23]

Recounting an interview with Nguyen, Diep Tran states: “If Mr. Nguyen could be described in only four words, it would be ‘not the model minority,’ as he puts it.”[24] Nguyen explains that, growing up in American culture as the son of two Vietnamese immigrants, “When my parents told me stories about Vietnam, they told me the real stories, what actually happened […] But what I imagined was kung fu movies. Because the only things I ever saw [growing up] that had a lot of Asian people in it, were kung fu movies.”[25] *Agent G* physicalizes his sense of displacement in the form of the Gookie Monster (see Figure 25):

GOOKIE MONSTER: Whaddup, my chigga.

QUI: Hey there, Gookie Monster.

GOOKIE MONSTER: You look like someone just punched you in the dick. What’s wrong, son?

QUI: I’m reading this letter from an angry audience member about one of my plays. They don’t like the way I depicted Asians in it.

GOOKIE MONSTER: Well, let’s not lie to ourselves, you do suck at being Asian. […] I know white boys more Oriental than you, son. They study Buddhism, take karate, play video games, date Asian bitches. Do you do any of that stuff?

QUI: No. But I’m actually Asian.[26]

The conflict between Nguyen’s individual identity and the popular expectations of Asian identity becomes especially pointed when Gookie Monster lists traits and likes that Asians are “supposed” to have, and Qui dismissively replies: “Yeah… I’m not into any of that shit […] to hell with all that noise. […] I’m gonna go grab me a cheeseburger.”[27] Just as Qui is accused of

not being Asian enough, Tramarion is similarly accused of not being black enough in Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* (*BSHMM*).

Tramarion's friend and fellow comic artist Flat Joe directly labels him "the dorkiest lil nigga," to which Tramarion, concerned about his mother overhearing, replies, "Hey, shut up. You know you can't say that word in here."[28] Playwright Jon Carr expresses just such an identity.[29] The social struggles associated are underscored in *Black Nerd* as Marcus is introduced in an awkward family reunion montage, from which he is kicked out for not behaving black enough. Throughout the show, he messily navigates both failing to fit in culturally with his black family and enduring racial insensitivity from white people such as his geeky best friend Cosmo. Marcus's social struggles are exemplified in a comedic split scene between two different dates: one with a white woman, who condescends, "I need a Denzel that will just rip my clothes off and not a Kanye that's gonna design them," and the other with a black woman, who merely states, "I need a man."[30] Both rejections mark him as perceived failure as a black man, due to his nerdity.

Humor scholar David Gillota remarks upon the increasing visibility of black nerds (or "blerds") in popular culture, particularly comedic figures such as Donald Glover, Keegan-Michael Key, and Jordan Peele who subvert "the hip, loose, and stylish visions of black masculinity that are most often represented in popular culture" and inherently assert that "binaries such as 'too black' or 'not black enough' […] are simply invalid."[31] Media audiences scholar Stuart Hall discusses the complexity of intersectional identity, which is frequently reduced in popular rhetoric to oversimplified definitions of racial identity, and the resulting internal struggle of pitting singular aspects of a person's hybrid identity against each other:

> We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities.

> Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms: they are often dislocating in relation to one another.[32]

Crenshaw similarly argues that "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences," making the further point that "ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups."[33] The male characters in *Agent G* and *BSHMM* explicitly express "third kind" identities and clash with cultural racial expectations, struggling with the friction generated when they attempt to express themselves as individuals against these expectations. Ron Eglash, scholar in ethnomathematics, discusses American pop culture mythology's "racist stereotype of Africans as oversexual and Asians as undersexual, with 'whiteness' portrayed as the perfect balance between these two extremes. Given these associations, it is no coincidence that many Americans have a stereotype of Asians as nerds and of African Americans as anti-nerd hipsters."[34] *Agent G* subverts the Asian male stereotype by presenting Hung as a sexually vigorous badass, while *BSHMM* subverts the stereotype of black masculinity by presenting Tramarion as a blerd, primarily interested in heritage trivia and comics.

Nguyen's play takes the intersectionality of his racial identity even further. The character Qui is "intentionally played by an African American actor," a choice played for laughs in the opening sequence and eventually called out over halfway into the play (see Figure 26)[35]:

> HUNG: I've been meaning to say something ever since you stepped onto stage. But this—this is how you see yourself?
>
> QUI: I don't know what you mean.

HUNG: Do you have a little bit more soul here than you do in real life? You know—a bit more hip? A little more "athletic"?

QUI: I'm also a professional fight director.

HUNG: And you're black?

QUI: I was born and raised in a primarily middle-class African-American neighborhood in El Dorado, Arkansas.

HUNG: And that makes you black?

QUI: This is what my heart looks like.[36]

Socialization is, of course, a key aspect of identity development. Even so, the problematic issue of Asian appropriation of blackness immediately rears his head. Since *Agent G*, pop culture has seen the rise of comedic figures such as Awkwafina, who has created a persona around performing behavioral signifiers considered to be culturally black, arguably both transgressive and appropriative.[37] Qui's justification also echoes language frequently used to express identification as transracial. However, the character's appearance as a black man undermines its own legitimacy in the ridiculousness with which it is portrayed, and his statement that his "heart" is black is, I believe, not a claim to transracial identity but an act of the geek creative practice of racebending.

Refracting Color

The debate over the legitimacy of "transracial" identity—fueled by increasing public support for and rhetorical backlash against the recognition of transgender identity—boiled over in 2015 with Rachel Dolezal's claim that, despite being born white, she identifies as a black woman.[38] A common justification for legitimizing transracial identification, that race is a

construct undermined by scientific research in genetics, fully equates racial identification with cultural identification. Ijeoma Oluo, recounting the experience of interviewing Dolezal, articulates her frustration with this argument:

> "Race is just a social construct" is a retort I get quite often from white people who don't want to talk about black issues anymore. A lot of things in our society are social constructs—money, for example—but the impact they have on our lives, and the rules by which they operate, are very real. I cannot undo the evils of capitalism simply by pretending to be a millionaire.[39]

Oluo also articulates the most essential argument against transracial identification, that it is a one-way street by which people of color can never choose to identify as "white" and, as a result, expect social recognition as such in a culture that privileges whiteness:

> The degree to which you are excluded from white privilege is largely dependent on the degree to which your appearance deviates from whiteness. You can be extremely light-skinned and still be black, but you cannot be extremely or even moderately dark-skinned and be treated as white—ever.[40]

In short, the idea that a person may identify as transracial contradicts everyday lived experience for people of color who are visibly identifiable as nonwhite, becoming yet another exclusive privilege of whiteness inaccessible to people of color. Thomas D. Rowland and Amanda C. Barton highlight the underlying reality that "the most important aspect of race by this definition is that it is visible."[41] However, Nguyen does not present or attempt to "pass" as black in real life.

Rowland and Barton, analyzing the performance of race in online gaming, go on to argue that the performative aspects of race as culture "can determine one's ability to pass as another

race, but also allows one to parody the representation of another race," which resonates both with *Agent G*'s myriad parodies of Asianness and the parodic representation of Qui—actually Asian and accused of inner whiteness—as black.[42] Of course, the "blackness" Qui "represents" here—if any—would certainly align with that of a blerd, most closely resembling figures such as Tembo, Carr, Key, Peele, and Glover, whose personas, as actual black men, are "too white" and culturally at odds with dominant concepts of black masculinity. Qui's embodiment by a black actor is an act of the resistive fandom practice of racebending, which remixes established characters and cultural signs of race by changing their skin color—and by extension their social and cultural background.

Initially, the term "racebending" was used by the fandom community to decry Hollywood casting white actors as characters who have traditionally been portrayed as people of color in the source texts' original medium. However, the term dynamically took on a life of its own and has evolved in its application to geek fandom practices of suggesting actors of color to play characters originally white in the canon, of creating art or fanfiction that changes the race of an originally- or presumed-white character, and of cosplayers of color embodying traditionally white characters.[43] Jenkins points out that:

> Changing the sexual orientation of a character has a long fannish history, whereas changing racial identities pushes much further against the grain. And fandom norms often dictate which ships are preferred, further marginalizing forms of fan production that seek to transform our understandings of race. Given all of this, racebending represents a particularly vivid example of such negotiations, preserving aspects of the original characters fans have found pleasurable, while generating alternative representations.[44]

Fandom scholar Ellen Kirkpatrick expands upon this concept that "remixed images distort and disturb canon," arguing that "racebending becomes a particularly powerful form of activism when it brings lived experience to the surface."[45] Nguyen's resistance of racial signifiers and cultural definitions, both by parodying Asianness and casting himself as black, highlights his struggle for self-definition against the grain racial expectations.

A *New York Times* review of *Agent G* poses the question "what does assimilation mean to a Vietnamese-American playwright who grew up in Arkansas, married a white woman and feels black in his 'heart'?"[46] In addition to grappling with his own sense of Vietnamese heritage and pop-culture stereotyping of Asians, Nguyen's "Gook Story Trilogy" chafes against pressures placed upon him to fulfill a set of theatrical expectations as an Asian playwright, beginning with the torqueing of Hung Tran's story in *Trial by Water*.

> ABBY: Cue a group of Qui's former playwrighting instructors. GO! […]
>
> DINH: The original story has no dramatic arc. […]
>
> SAN: Overall, it needs to be more Vietnamese.
>
> HUNG: It needs to have Vietnamese in it. […]
>
> DINH: This is how you should write it.
>
> SAN: To make it more Asian.
>
> HUNG: We shouldn't forget it's Asian.
>
> SAN: Because you are Asian. That's how you got into graduate school in the first place, isn't it? Because you're Asian.
>
> DINH, HUNG & SAN: Make it more Asian!
>
> (*The group of college professors make chinky eyes at Qui.*)[47]

Qui also finds himself constantly compared (unfavorably) to playwright David Henry Hwang, whose work also points to the irony of representing Asianness through a white, Western lens. Shortly before the *Agent G*'s final scene, David Henry Hwang appears and confronts Qui—"however this D H H is more like Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson than the actual playwright"—admitting to sending ninjas to take him out and challenging him to a rap battle for dominance of the New York stage.[48]

> DAVID: Let me ask you something. How many other East Asian Playwrights have made it on Broadway?
>
> QUI: Well…
>
> DAVID: NONE! And as long as I'm here, I'm going to be the only splash of yellow on the great white way, do you hear me, DOWN TOWN playwright?
>
> QUI: That's uncalled for.[49]

Promotional trailers for Ma-Yi's Off-Broadway production of *Agent G* feature Nguyen claiming close personal friendship with David Henry Hwang and apparently stalking Hwang all over New York. A short video epilogue presented after the play features Hwang beating Nguyen to a pulp before stating: "I'm David Henry Hwang, motherfucker! Don't mess with me."[50] All of these comical scenes serve to underscore the absurdity of comparing Nguyen's work in geek theatre with Hwang's dramatic style by reducing their identities as playwrights to race.

The subject of narrative origin is a major theme in geek plays such as *Agent G* and *BSHMM*. A great deal of focus is dedicated to the dissonance between lived experience and the erasures that occur in the "official" narratives, both in fictional popular media and in news media and history. A great deal of focus is also placed upon the empowerment of artists of color

independently creating and controlling their own narratives. While this creation does represent an act of resistance, it is even more fundamentally the simple act of creation—the desire to express and be recognized. This impulse manifests potently in Qui's (reflecting the real Nguyen's) drive to tell the true story of his family and in the authorial endeavors of Flat Joe and Tramarion as aspiring comic book artists (see Figure 27). The triumphs achieved in the simple realization of the stories' telling are posed as acts of hopeful futurity against the weight of past of present erasures in dominant modes of storytelling and reporting.

Breaking…

Black Super Hero Magic Mama deals heavily with the subject of police violence, particularly against unarmed black men and boys. In the wake of Eric Garner's death and the news that the officer who killed him would not be indicted, Ta-Nehisi Coates cautions his teenage son:

> But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements.[51]

This warning echoes the public rhetoric that scrambles to justify the deaths of unarmed citizens, often entirely innocent of any crime or guilty of only minor nonviolent offences. Craig-Galván cites the death of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice and its stirring of fears for her own son as inspirations for her play.[52]

The shooting of Tramarion in *Black Super Hero Magic Mama*—especially as an easygoing, unthreatening, unarmed, blerd-type figure—exemplifies the failures of American culture to grapple with its ingrained impulse toward violence and ongoing history of systemic racism. Tramarion represents the epitome of innocence and exemplary behavior, making the vulnerability rendered by his skin pigmentation all the more striking. Coates emphasizes this vulnerability in his fixation upon the death of Prince Jones, a young man embodying the very definition of a model minoritarian figure but nevertheless unable to escape reductionist racism and a violent death at the hands of police:

> Prince Jones was the superlative of all my fears. And if he, good Christian, scion of a striving class, patron saint of the twice as good, could be forever bound, who then could not? And the plunder was not just of Prince alone. Think of all the love poured into him. […] Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into him, sent flowing back to the earth.[53]

Tramarion's exaggerated nerdiness emphasizes the extent to which the cultural presumptions around blackness are reductive to stereotyping, perhaps best exemplified not by his shooting but in his media representation:

> CONNIE: Micah, what's the photo we're running?
>
> (*A series of PROJECTED photos. Maybe they include Tramarion holding a 4th of July sparkler; Tramarion wearing a backpack, all smiles as he heads into class; Sabrina and Tramarion hugging and smiling; the boy at*

Christmas time; blowing out birthday candles. You know, carefree Black boy stuff.)

(*The last photo is of Tramarion, gangsta pose, dressed in an Easy E costume for Halloween*.)

CONNIE (CONT'D): Micah. Let's go with this one.[54]

While clearly spotlighting underlying racism in police training and field execution, the trauma Sabrina endures in the aftermath focuses upon the media attention.

The show's visual projections provide a theatrical spectacle that reflects the media spectacularization of the event and aftermath of Tramarion's death, incorporating actual news reels of similar real-life incidents. Sabrina's awareness and reception of the media coverage is presented as broken and caustic.

TOM: Connie, such a tragedy. Another tragedy. Some are calling this... a tragedy. His green and white letter jacket, riddled with bullets. […]

CONNIE: *Black* history quiz show […]

CONNIE & TOM: "Know Your Heritage!"

CONNIE: Actually won the competition— […] there with the team's coach, a Corey Brackett. […]

TOM: Did this so-called "coach" have any prior run-ins with the law, Connie? A criminal record? What was he even the coach of, Connie?

CONNIE: There's no telling, Tom. […]

TOM: The glint.

CONNIE: Confusion.

TOM: Tramarion Jackson held up what officers believed to be a weapon. In reality, it was—

(*A spotlight on the trophy*.) […]

CONNIE: The boy was killed, instantly.[55]

The figures of Tom and Connie, later represented in Sabrina's mind as supervillains Human Hyena and Lady Vulture, represent the complicated relationship between public sympathy and media exploitation of tragedy.

In addition to the media attention that exacerbates her grief, Sabrina is inundated with the burden of the police officer's and coach's guilt (see Figure 28):

COACH BRACKETT & DAVE: I'm sorry.

DAVE: I mean that. I never thought I'd be one of those cops involved in the middle of something like this. I'm usually the one who... I'd be at those rallies right now if they'd let me. I'd tell the world. This was a horrible mistake. That's all it was. Your kids have a right to live. They matter. It wasn't about that. It was dark.

COACH BRACKETT: It was late.

DAVE: It was a mistake. […]

COACH BRACKETT: I am good at my job.

DAVE: I'm a good cop.[56]

Both of these figures exemplify Coates's denouncing of intention as a relevant factor to embodied reality: "Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, 'intend' for you is secondary. Our world is physical."[57] Dave Lester, though, specifically represents white insensitivity to culturally racist attitudes, particularly the inherent blindness associated with self-

comforting leftist beliefs in "being woke." The white sense of denial of personal or cultural racism runs deep and is reinforced by cultural fantasies of wokeness and post-racial egalitarianism. Coates observes that within this American construct, "the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration. And the word racist, to them, conjures, if not a tobacco-spitting oaf, then something just as fantastic—an orc, troll, or gorgon."[58] The unrecognizable monstrousness within the self is therefore projected onto the fantastical. The attempts at self-exoneration that litter Dave and Corey's appeals for understanding and absolution ultimately evolve, in the absence of forthcoming forgiveness, into their shifting of blame to Sabrina herself as a mother, extending the sense of denial into further projection in lieu of self-examination.

The story of *BSHMM* revolves around a mother's grief over the death of her adolescent son in a police incident. While the play reflects public social grief at the repeated and seemingly unending violence upon black bodies, for Sabrina the death of her son is very singular:

> LENA: You need to go out there. There's a movement happening. Trying to happen. But they're waiting for you. You've got to speak out. Say something. They need you right now.
>
> SABRINA: Who? Who needs me?
>
> LENA: The people are angry.
>
> SABRINA: They're angry? (*She laughs at the thought*.)
>
> LENA: Yes. They are. People are pissed. Our community is pissed. Do you know how many deaths this makes?
>
> SABRINA: *(sharply)* One.[59]

Her evolution into the figure of a superhero begins as escapism into the only sense of control she can muster, by constructing a fantasy, but evolves into her ability in the real world to take control of the elements of her story that she can morph into hope and reinvest in a future.

~~Black~~ Superheroes

The superhero genre, a constant presence in American popular culture for the past century, has become particularly present in the public consciousness since the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While primarily promoting white male heroes—much like the comic book tradition, in which, as pop culture and race scholar Adilifu Nama points out, "the white protagonist is the normalized referent and oddly colored villains proxy for blacks and other people of color in the real world"—some of the work these films and series have done is to bring lesser known heroes of color into the mainstream consciousness.[60] Joshua Ostroff with *The Huffington Post* notes that "superhero diversity has become a huge priority for Marvel's comic book division," including Sam Wilson's promotion into the role of Captain America, Afro-Latino Spider-Man Miles Morales, Korean-American Hulk, Lady Thor, and Muslim teen Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel.[61] Popular culture scholar Ora C. McWilliams speaks particularly to Miles Morales's displacement of Peter Parker as "the" Spider-Man as an alternative cultural identity seldom addressed in superhero comics:

> As a character, Morales speaks to a different audience and can say different things than Parker can. Morales, as evidenced by the backlash against the change as well as the voices in favor of it, energized an audience and renewed interest in the Ultimate Universe version of the character. For Marvel, this may have simply been all about publicity; however, the change does make a difference. Spider-Man

> has universal appeal, but the race of his secret identity changes the dynamic of the character, leading to new modes of representation and fan consumption.[62]

While few of Marvel's recast characters have made their way to the silver screen as of yet, other characters of color with long but relatively unknown (outside of comic book fandom) histories as superheroes are finding new life in the current racial discourse.

Sam Wilson himself as the Falcon, though filling the role of Captain America's sidekick, was already an iconic figure within the genre as a flying superhero. Nama recounts his childhood captivation with the figure: "With the Falcon I was able to imagine myself as a superhero, rising above my socioeconomic environment, beating the neighborhood bullies, commanding respect from my male peers, and enjoying approval from all the pretty girls that made me feel so nervous."[63] In contrast to the high-flying Falcon, one of the most remarked upon recent comic-to-film incarnations of superhero blackness has been Netflix's Marvel series *Luke Cage*, for its resonance with the Black Lives Matter movement. Including the fact that, as Kate Rose with *Elephant Journal* points out, "the character Luke Cage gained his superpowers of strength and invulnerability while being victimized by the American Correctional system," Cage represents the American prison-industrial complex and its devaluation, criminalization, and commodification of black bodies. Most visually striking is the symbolic embodiment of Cage as "a bulletproof black man in a hoodie," evoking public discourse surrounding the shooting of Trayvon Martin.[64] The most acclaimed black superhero to burst onto the screen, though, is the Afrofuturist Black Panther, both he and his nation of Wakanda as "a high-tech African Shangri-La where African tradition and advanced scientific technology are fused together to create a wonderland of futuristic weapons and flying machines" representing a "stark contrast to the historical and symbolic constructions of Africans as simple tribal people and Africa as

primitive."[65] Starring the late Chadwick Boseman, known for cinematic portrayals of such figures as Jackie Robinson and Thurgood Marshall, the film *The Black Panther* focuses particularly on the dissonances between Afrofuturism and lived black experiences and between African and diasporic black heritage.

Black Panther's recent incarnations in film and comics also represent both the power of restorying and the problematic negotiations black heroes created by white men perform in American culture, as noted by race and culture scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and transliteracy scholar Amy Stornaiuolo that "the modern versions of *Black Panther*—developed by Black creators from Christopher Priest and Reginald Hudlin in the past to Ryan Coogler, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Nnedi Okorafor in the present—are themselves restorying the original Silver Age superhero created by two White men, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee."[66] Flat Joe's appearance in the second act of *BSHMM* as Black ~~Superman~~, in Sabrina's imagination "dressed as closely as possible to resemble Superman... without the playwright getting sued," metatheatrically comments upon this fantastical remixing of pop culture iconography that, in the American mind, necessarily draws attention to re-racialized embodiment[67]:

> MAASAI ANGEL: The hell you supposed to be, Black Superman?
>
> BLACK ~~SUPERMAN~~: Why I gotta be "Black"?
>
> MAASAI ANGEL: Because copyright.
>
> BLACK ~~SUPERMAN~~: Word.[68]

Hall considers the negotiations of remixing and repurposing the culture of colonization as a quintessential foundation of black art and popular culture:

> Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition,

> of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base. Thus, they must always be heard, not simply as the recovery of a lost dialogue bearing clues for the production of new musics (because there is never any going back to the old in a simple way), but as what they are—adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture. [69]

However, while the comic book remixes and film adaptations of these characters have launched fresh discourses on the symbolic power of the superhero figure in American culture, even in scholarship, the focus on the intersection between race and superheroes has almost exclusively been upon the depiction of black masculinity, a gap even more distinct in superhero films than in comics.

Meditations on blackness in the comic book genre tends to revolve almost exclusively around masculinity. All too frequently, depictions of female secondary characters within the stories of black male superheroes perpetuate depictions of objectification and victimization. Gayles stresses that the black masculinity depicted in comic book superheroes and particularly their film adaptations often "comes at the expense of black women."[70] For example, in the movie that Nama credits as the first "film that successfully depicted what a self-consciously serious black superhero should look like," *Blade* starring Wesley Snipes, Gayles demonstrates that the vampire hunter "asserts his physical dominance at the expense of black women" in a disturbing dissection of Blade's violence against and exploitation of the black women featured in the film.[71]

Afrofuturist artist Jewelle Gomez notes, on the conspicuous absence of women of color both as creators and protagonists in the fantastical genres, that though "the list of African warrior

queens makes the comic book Superfriends look like Yale preppies on holiday in Ft. Lauderdale […] when this store of wealth has been exploited, it has generally been by white male writers who bleach the history of Dahomean Amazons and turn them into Wonder Woman and Queen Hera."[72] A few women of color have been featured as supporting characters in franchises such as *Black Panther* and *Luke Cage*. carrington extensively deconstructs the myriad racial and gender negotiations performed by *X-Men*'s Storm, arguing "the character's multiple embodiments over time attest to the internal differentiation within each of the distinct identity formations she represents: Black, female, Black and female, superhero, Black superhero, female superhero, and Black female superhero."[73] Yet while Storm remains consistently one of the most popular characters in the *X-Men* comics and films, her complex fingerprint is overshadowed by the fairly simplistic white masculinity of Wolverine. So far, no superhero women of color have headlined their own theatrically-released film in the MCU.

Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama,* on the other hand, foregrounds not only a black woman's experience but the construction of a formidable black superheroine (see Figure 29):

> (*A burst of LIGHTS and some 70s blaxploitation-style groove MUSIC. The Maasai Angel enters. She strolls around, bad as she wanna be.*)
>
> MAASAI ANGEL: I am the Maasai Angel. Descendant of the warrior tribe. Here to get back what's mine.
>
> (*She wields her blade in exhibition.*)[74]

Jenkins comments that "fantasies about magic or superpowers are ultimately myths about power—who possesses it, who is entitled to it, and who deploys it towards what ends, and on whose behalf."[75] As such, the traditional exclusion of women and people of color from superhero

representation reflected cultural exclusion from power. The Maasai Angel is simultaneously a creation of independent black artists, Tramarion and Flat Joe, and a stand-in for Sabrina's need to take control of a situation in which she feels powerless. Upon Maasai Angel's appearance, the Narrator reminds the audience: "Meanwhile, in an alternate reality, a woman who looks strikingly similar to the Maasai Angel, sits in a boy's room. Unable to handle anything."[76] The parallel between disempowerment and super-empowerment is a key negotiation within superhero stories featuring heroines and heroes of color.

carrington notes the irony of Afrofuturist superhero fantasy, in that "these utopian strategies simultaneously relegate the critical questions these novel representations raise—precisely how to move from marginality to empowerment—to the realm of the impossible."[77] Leaning into discriminatory assumptions, Maasai Angel's villains immediately question her legitimacy as a superhero:

> LADY VULTURE: Reports confirm she's on the hunt for revenge.
>
> HUMAN HYENA: Yes, Lady Vulture. Apparently a loved one was murdered.
>
> (*They laugh and laugh.*)
>
> HUMAN HYENA (CONT'D): Same shit, different day. Uncle Ben dies, you get Spider-Man. Bruce Wayne's folks die in an alley, you get the Batman. Every time a loved-one dies, there's a new superhero.
>
> LADY VULTURE: "Superhero" might be generous. We don't even know yet if she has any real powers.
>
> HUMAN HYENA: Other than possibly being scrumptious.

LADY VULTURE: *(fake concern)* On another note, what's the latest with the rash of bad cops killing citizens? Will the police chief get his boys in blue under control?

HUMAN HYENA: Or will we continue to have a steady stream of tasty morsels to chomp on?

(*They both* mmm *and* ahhh *over the thought.*)[78]

This exchange also underscores *BSHMM*'s meditation on news media's exploitation of tragedy (see Figure 30). Like many comics, such as the *X-Men* franchise, carrington speculates that "if persons with superpowers existed in the context of contemporary American society, they would be stigmatized, exploited, and oppressed in the same ways that people of color have been."[79] Maasai Angel's villains replicate these oppressions in a form that Sabrina, as a superhero, can manage and combat.

Perhaps the most striking and exaggerated figure that Maasai Angel battles is the cop Dave Lester as the supervillain Death Tap:

NARRATOR: Maasai Angel versus Death Tap.

(*DEATH TAP enters. He flings open his cowboy duster coat to reveal a bandolier bullet belt. And lots of guns*) […]

DEATH TAP: You know who I am, don't ya? […] (*One gun out*.) Death... (*Then the other*.) Tap. (*Twirls guns. Holsters them*.) Cuz one little tap's all it takes.[80]

As the Maasai Angel, Sabrina possesses the ultimate ability that real-life mothers lack—the power to protect the innocent from bodily harm and death. With her E-S-P, she "can stop a

bullet."[81] However for Sabrina, even the figure of Dave Lester—despite his crime and legal exoneration—cannot compare to the oppression of her own grief.

Only by accepting that she must "face" and "not fight" the Entity, the grief that focuses solely upon herself and Tramarion—not outside forces—does she choose to move forward, repurposing her love toward nurturing the living boy Flat Joe and the artwork he created with her son, not as a substitute for Tramarion but as a human being in need of a real-world hero:

> MAASAI ANGEL: Everybody wants something from me when they already took everything. I want them to pay. I want to make everybody pay.
>
> BLACK ~~SUPERMAN~~: You're strong here. In this world, you <u>can</u> use your power to hurt 'em all. Believe me, I get it. But that's not who I drew you to be. That's not who I need you to be. And I do need you. So, Ma'am, you can't stay.[82]

Sabrina's refocusing upon human connection and the difference she is empowered to make in the real world, despite physical limitations, enables her own future.

It's a Start…

bell hooks writes to the dilemma that "in the culture of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy […] we are often trapped by language that imprisons us in binaries, either/or options that will not let us claim all the bits and pieces of ourselves, our hearts, especially the pieces that do not fit with neat categories."[83] The erasure not only of color but of intersectionality by cultural mythology constructing fantasies of whiteness politicizes even the mere existence of and participation of FOC in fantastic genres and fandom culture. While many of these fandom spaces can and do serve as creative and communal safe spaces for FOC, the marginalization

these geeks face can still range from well-meaning ignorance to the outright hostile. On the public tumult arising from seemingly any representation of bodies of color—particularly those which do not adhere to stereotyping—within previously whitewashed canons, carrington states that "the problem is that users entrenched in a White supremacist culture are reluctant to concede ground that they never owned. Instead of adapting to the 'social demographics' of a space that has admitted users of color, White users retreat into their socially useful fantasies."[84] The reconstruction of visual representation of these demographics and challenging of identitarian binaries in geek works such as Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* and Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* actively work to expand the spaces of creative expression for geeks and artists of color.

Figure 23: Paco Tolson as Hung Tran in Vampire Cowboys and Incubator Arts's 2011 premiere production of Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

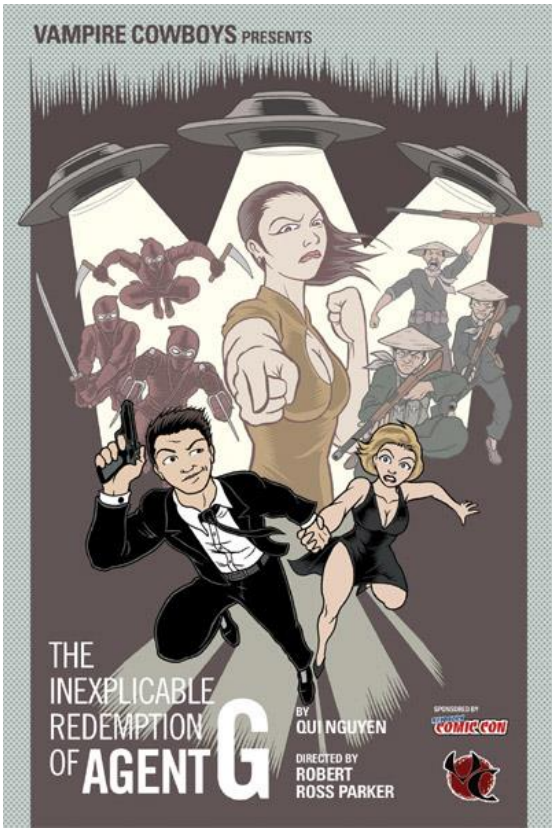

Figure 24: Original poster with art by Jeremy Arambulo for Vampire Cowboys' *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* by Qui Nguyen, directed by Robert Ross Parker; Usage permission by Jeremy Arambulo and Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 25: Paco Tolson, Jon Hoche, and Amy Kim Waschke in Vampire Cowboys and Incubator Arts's 2011 premiere production of Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 26: William Jackson Harper as Qui Nguyen in Vampire Cowboys and Incubator Arts's 2011 premiere production of Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 27: Noah Abbott (Flat Joe) and Cedric Joe (Tramarion) in Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* directed by Robert O'Hara at Geffen Playhouse; Photo credit Jeff Lorch, courtesy of Geffen Playhouse

Figure 28: Daryl C. Brown (Corey), Kimberly Hébert Gregory (Sabrina), and Walter Belenky (Dave) in Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* directed by Robert O'Hara at Geffen Playhouse; Photo credit Jeff Lorch, courtesy of Geffen Playhouse

Figure 29: Kimberly Hébert Gregory (Maasai Angel/Sabrina) in Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* directed by Robert O'Hara at Geffen Playhouse; Photo credit Jeff Lorch, courtesy of Geffen Playhouse

Figure 30: Kevin Douglas (Human Hyena/Tom), Kimberly Hébert Gregory (Maasai Angel/Sabrina), and Cynthia Kaye McWilliams (Narrator/Lena) in Inda Craig-Galván's *Black Super Hero Magic Mama* directed by Robert O'Hara at Geffen Playhouse; Photo credit Jeff Lorch, courtesy of Geffen Playhouse

[1] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 6, 72.
[2] Inda Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama Geffen 3-13-19 Draft Inda Craig-Galván," *New Play Exchange*, 2016. https://newplayexchange.org/plays/50834/black-super-hero-magic-mama.
[3] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 89.
[4] Shawn Taylor, "Decolonizing my Fandom," *Nerds of Color,* 7 Aug 2018. https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2018/08/07/decolonizing-my-fandom/.
[5] Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books*, directed by Jonathan Gayles (2010; United States: California Newsreel), https://uga.kanopy.com/video/white-scripts-and-black-supermen.
[6] Jon Carr, *Black Nerd Script V7*, unpublished manuscript (2018), 17.
[7] Carr, *Black Nerd Script V7*, 10.
[8] I discuss Jon Carr's play *Black Nerd* in detail in my essay "Identity and Narrative Ownership," particularly his examinations of how the introduction of race changes popular narratives and the struggles of expressing third-kind identity between black and geek cultures.
Scout Storey, "Identity and Narrative Ownership in *Black Nerd* and *Wicket: A Parody Musical*," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 36 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1935.
[9] Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 27.
[10] Elyce Rae Helford, "(E)raced Visions: Women of Color and Science Fiction in the United States," *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*, ed. Gary Westfahl and George Slusser (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 137.
[11] andré carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 17, 171.
[12] Henry Jenkins, "Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending," *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018), 387.
[13] Rukmini Pande, "Squee from the Margins: Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity in Global Media Fandom," in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 215.
[14] Kwasu David Tembo, "The Trial of King Killmonger: Theorizing the Rage of a Third Culture Kid as Resistance," *Resist and Persis: Essays on Social Revolution in 21st Century Narratives*, ed. Amanda Firestone and Leisa A. Clark (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020). Kindle.
[15] David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 2001), 19.
[16] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *Feminist Legal Theory: Foundations Vol. 1*, ed. by D. Kelly Weisberg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 383; bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 152.
[17] Tembo, "The Trial of King Killmonger."
[18] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 3-4.
[19] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 4.
[20] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 15-16.
[21] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 18.
[22] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 19.
[23] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 33-5.
[24] For an in-depth critical examination of the cultural application of the phrase "model minority" to and its effects upon Asian Americans, see Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2015).
[25] Tran, "How Mom and Dad Met, with Ninjas."
[26] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 41.
[27] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 45.
[28] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 19.
[29] Jon Carr, interview by Lois Reitzes, *City Lights*, WABE/NPR, 29 November 2017. https://www.wabe.org/dads-garage-improviser-premieres-first-play-black-nerd/.
[30] Quotes from live performances are based on my notes in attendance.
Jon Carr, *Black Nerd*, directed by Tiffany Porter, Dad's Garage, Atlanta, July 2018.

[31] David Gillota, "Black Nerds: New Directions in African American Humor," *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, No. 28 (2013), https://www.jstor.org/stable/23823874: 22, 27.
[32] Stuart Hall, "What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (51-52), Rethinking Race (Spring-Summer 1993), https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735: 112.
[33] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039: 1242.
[34] Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Special Text* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002), https://muse.jhu.edu/article/31927: 52.
[35] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 4.
[36] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 50.
[37] See Lauren Michele Jackson, "Who Really Owns the 'Blaccent'?" *Vulture*, 24 Aug 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/awkwafina-blaccent-cultural-appropriation.html.
[38] See Richard Pérez-Peña, "Black or White? Woman's Story Stirs Up a Furor," *New York Times*, 12 June 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/rachel-dolezal-naacp-president-accused-of-lying-about-her-race.html.
[39] Ijeoma Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black," *The Stranger*, 19 April 2017. https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black.
[40] Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness."
[41] Thomas D. Rowland and Amanda C. Barton, "Outside Oneself in *World of Warcraft*: Gamers' Perception of the Racial Self-Other," in "Race and Ethnicity in Fandom," edited by Robin Anne Reid and Sarah Gatson, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 8. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0258.
[42] Rowland and Barton, "Outside Oneself in *World of Warcraft*."
[43] See Jenkins, "Negotiating Fandom," 383-394; Ellen Kirkpatrick, "On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay," in "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 29 (2019). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1483.
[44] "Ships" refers to fandom desire to see certain characters in a relationship.
Jenkins, "Negotiating Fandom," 388.
[45] Kirkpatrick, "On [Dis]play."
[46] In fact, Abby Marcus (Qui Nguyen's wife) is Jewish. The subject of her race is also discussed in *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*.
Jason Zinoman, "It's All About the Playwright," *The New York Times*, 4 March 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/theater/reviews/the-inexplicable-redemption-of-agent-g-by-qui-nguyen.html.
Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 34.
[47] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 23-4.
[48] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 59.
[49] Nguyen, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, 60.
[50] Ma-Yi Theatre Company, "David Henry Hwang promotes AGENT G! EPISODE 1," *YouTube*, 1 March 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImsCxXB2HQ8&t=2s; Ma-Yi Theatre Company, "David Henry Hwang vs Qui Nguyen: THE FINAL SHOWDOWN," *YouTube*, 9 March 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Cqky0TnIo8.
[51] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: One World, 2015), 71.
[52] See Daryl H. Miller, "She Created a 'Black Super Hero Magic Mama': Inda Craig-Galván on Facing a Parent's Deepest Fear," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2019. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/theater/la-et-cm-inda-craig-galvan-20190313-story.html.
[53] Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 81.
[54] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 84.
[55] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 13-15.
[56] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 28-9.
[57] Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 33.
[58] Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 97.
[59] Craig-Galván, "Black Super Hero Magic Mama," 43-4.
[60] Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 144.
[61] Joshua Ostroff, "Marvel's Luke Cage Is the Bulletproof Black Superhero We Need Right Now," *Huffington Post*, 30 Sept 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/29/marvel-luke-cage_n_12202516.html.

[62] Ora C. McWilliams, “Who Is Afraid of a Black Spider(-Man)?” In "Appropriating, Interpreting, and Transforming Comic Books," edited by Matthew J. Costello, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 13 (2013). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0455.
[63] Nama, *Super Black*, 1-2.
[64] Kate Rose, “Marvel’s Newest Superhero is a Bulletproof Black Man in a Hoodie—‘Nuff Said,” *Elephant Journal*, 6 Oct 2016. https://www.elephantjournal.com/2016/10/marvels-newest-superhero-is-a-bulletproof-black-man-in-a-hoodie-nuff-said/.
[65] Nama, *Super Black*, 43, 42.
[66] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo, "Race, Storying, and Restorying: What Can We Learn from Black Fans?" in "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019). https://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1562.
[67] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 85.
[68] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 86.
[69] Hall, “What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?”: 110.
[70] Jonathan Gayles, “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Redux: Masculinity and Misogyny in *Blade*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 2 (2012): 282.
[71] Nama, *Super Black*, 138; Gayles, “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Redux”: 297.
[72] Jewelle Gomez, “Black Women Heroes: Here’s Reality, Where’s the Fiction?” *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 2 “The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora” (1986), https://www.jstor.org/stable/41067254: 9.
[73] carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 96.
[74] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 56.
[75] Jenkins, “Negotiating Fandom,” 385.
[76] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 56.
[77] carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 92.
[78] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 57-8.
[79] carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 94.
[80] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 78.
[81] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 80.
[82] Craig-Galván, “Black Super Hero Magic Mama,” 88-9.
[83] hooks, *Writing Beyond Race*, 190.
[84] carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 204.

Chapter 4: Infinite Intelligences

Science fiction, like other speculative and fantastical genres, places humanity alongside an array of non-human intelligences and embodiments. In so doing, it spotlights stories of how human beings navigate diversity. Katherine Hayles argues that "nowhere are these questions [about the posthuman] explored more passionately than in contemporary speculative fiction."[1] Characters in these stories—be they human, alien, or inorganic—must negotiate chasms of differences between cultures, species, and lifeforms, and whether this negotiation occurs in friendship or violence is often the primary focus, particularly of space operas. They also explore imaginative terrain, grappling with the rise of technology as an increasingly essential aspect of human existence. Donna Haraway, in her "Cyborg Manifesto," describes the importance of speculative fiction writers as "our story-tellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds," as theorists, in a way, for the posthuman.[2] Science fiction in particular, she subsequently writes, "is generically concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience."[3] This chapter will examine geek theatre's particular spin on the sci fi genre, as it decenters anthropocentric attitudes and presumptions in its posthuman visions of a more diverse future for the universe and the stage.

Karen Barad defines the posthuman as "call[ing] into question the givenness of the differential categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman,' examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized."[4] The examination of humanness in

science fiction depicting artificial and alien intelligences takes two routes: 1) the destabilization of the anthropocentric presumption of human superiority over nature and technology and 2) the metaphorical reflection and critical examination of social practices that deny humanity to populations and individuals of certain embodiments deviating from the hegemonic norm. A part of the futurity envisioned by sci fi geek theatre depends upon taking into account life beyond exclusively human interests and imagining radical expansions of what human thinking and embodiment do and could entail.

Like other geek theatre, the sci fi plays are often produced by small theatres that, rather than spectacle, embrace a campy aesthetic to communicate the epic settings of space and alien worlds. Ralph Willingham laments that "a myth has taken root among science fiction fans that visual science fiction entertainment is inextricable from visual illusion" and "must include special effects," resulting in an assumption that theatre cannot compete with film in this genre—"ironic thinking from a body of writers who rely so heavily on the *audience's* willingness to imagine." He further notes that "long before the motion picture was invented, both narrative literature and theatre shared in common a dependence upon audience imagination." [5] Geek audiences, familiar with the references and tropes of popular science fiction, are primed to connect cues via imagination, often delighting in the comedy of campy supplements over literal spectacle. This phenomenon can be been seen in geek theatrical practice dating from the 1970s—when Moebius Theatre's *Star Wars* parody *Stage Wars: Or Who's Biggs?* paraded actors across the stage carrying "Special Effect" signs—to the present day, as for example in Dad's Garage Theatre Company's use of a paper lantern to signify the Death Star in *Wicket: A Parody Musical*.[6]

The case studies I will examine here are *Fight Girl Battle World* by Qui Nguyen; *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee, with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place; and *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren, translated by Chris Lipscombe, with a partial focus on the EDGE of Orion Theatre's 2018 production. These plays exemplify geek theatre's use of campy aesthetic along with familiar fandom references and tropes to progress sci fi's exploration of posthuman concepts.

I Embody, Ergo Sum

The subject matter directly examined in this chapter is, in a very real sense, materially bound to the human body, as the case studies are conventionally staged theatrical plays. While involving some puppetry, the character subjects in these plays are primarily physicalized by typically-abled human actors. Nonetheless, the material of these plays demonstrates what Marla Carlson calls the posthumanism's "reevaluation of the humanist tradition" in an active pursuit of "displacing the human from the center of the ethical universe."[7] As with performing animal embodiment, which Carlson points out rarely has to do with actual animals, embodying alien and/or machine in science fiction theatre "provides a way out of human norms that have become unduly restrictive."[8] These plays and their characters call into question anthropocentric understandings of normative embodiment by exploring disembodied, cyborg, robotic, alien, and disabled characters' experiences and also by recasting the human subject as a distinctly minority population.

Qui Nguyen's *Fight Girl Battle Word* is a parodic foray into science fiction tropes. The aesthetic takes advantage of brazen camp and imagination to challenge the conventional wisdom that theatre cannot compete with film's realism in manifesting epic space action-adventures. In

this technological and alien future, humans have been hunted to the brink of extinction. Recruited to breed a new human race, E-V and Adon-Ra—the last human female and male—instead embark on a revolutionary crusade to bring down the authoritarian regime responsible for the genocide of their species. The plot defiantly subverts yet ultimately fulfills the Garden of Eden story in a cosmic parody of religious mythology.

In the *Starstruck* play and comics, author Elaine Lee blazes a distinct warp trail into the realm of popular science fiction with the tagline: "STAR TREK and STAR WARS step aside! Women will be in command in this fantastic vision of the future."[9] Tym Stevens's blog *Rock Sex* describes *Starstruck* as "a raucous space opera" in which "galactic gals boot you up the buttside."[10] The play depicts an encounter between two ships captained respectively by feminist heroine Galatia 9 and villainess Verloona, half-sisters both descended from legendary revolutionary Molly Medea but who have dedicated their lives to divergent paths. After many farcical hijinks, the play culminates in the destruction of Verloona's ill-begotten pleasure ship, as she escapes with the vow: "I'll get you, Galatia, and your little droid too!"[11] The characters of *Starstruck* represent an eclectic array of women pursuing their desires unfettered by cultural expectations.

Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren's *A Klingon Christmas Carol*—or *tlhIngan ram nI' bom*—follows the general plotline of Charles Dickens's morality tale, rewritten to reflect the cultural values and traditions of Klingons, an alien race from Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* universe. The play is performed almost entirely in the Klingon language, with English supertitles. Translator Chris Lipscombe refers to the story as "a tale about one warrior's transformation," but also "a chance to truly understand what it means to be Klingon, and to experience a classic tale in its original Klingon."[12] The Feast of the Long Night is a tournament

when past great deeds are celebrated with songs and Klingon warriors may demonstrate their fighting spirit. However, SQuja'—who is a coward and like a Ferengi is interested only in money—does not fight. Through the revelations of the Ghosts of Kahless Past, Present, and Future and, more importantly, the honorable demonstration of courage by tImHom, a sickly boy with a warrior's spirit, SQuja' finds his own courage and gains honor. The play weaves a sense of humor characteristic of fandom into the dramatic tale, while at the same time making an earnest ethnodramaturgical exploration into a deeper understanding of Klingon culture and by extension reexamining human culture.

Geek plays such as these represent a convergence not only of fan culture with live theatre, but also of genre theatre such as sci fi and fantasy with the remix culture of fanfiction, parodying tropes and iconic imagery in the service of the kind of critical cultural commentary at which speculative fiction excels.

I Am Humanity

In Nguyen's superhero play *Men of Steel*, a violent crime-fighting vigilante (à la Batman) speaks the condemning words: "I am humanity and humanity is corrupt."[13] The indictment is repeated in Nguyen's post-apocalyptic Shakespearean play *Living Dead in Denmark*, when the faerie Puck states, "Magic is pure. Humanity is corrupt."[14] The human race occupies a complex position in many of Nguyen's plays, which tend to mash-up genres and depict a host of monstrous, supernatural, and extraterrestrial beings. Often, humanity is depicted as simultaneously the underdog and the original aggressor in an epic or cosmic war, as is the case in his play *Fight Girl Battle World*.

On its surface, the plot is a typical action-adventure sci fi about space battles, alien and AL (Artificial Life) encounters, and saving the future of the human race. It makes a fundamental reversal, however, by placing humans in a position of abjection, hidden and demonized and monstrous. In essence, the human in this universe becomes the alien other (see Figure 31). Science fiction has a mixed history in its use of alien species as metaphors for humanity's hopes and fears. Jenny Wolmark comments that "the science fiction convention of the alien attempts to present otherness in unitary terms, so that 'humanity' is uncomplicated opposed to the 'alien.'"[15] She further observes that "the alien has often been used within science fiction to reproduce, rather than question, those divisions," one reflected in Daniel Leonard Bernardi's analysis of the sci fi's problematic history, particularly in film, of peddling "frightful stories of alien invaders."[16] Bernardi argues that "in this regard the genre has been more reactionary and paranoid than progressive."[17] Furthermore , the aliens encountered by humans are often defined by the proximity to normatively embodied humanness. This issue is arguably compounded by theatre's reliance upon human actors embodying its alien others.

Even in *FGBW* (though humans have in essence taken on the role of "alien other" in a culture populated by nonhuman races) and in *Starstruck*, human characters often react to nonhuman aliens based on their similarity to or distinction from the human body. For instance, when E-V first encounters J'an Jah, Adon-Ra's Ursalean ex-husband, she mistakes him for a human woman in an encounter that echoes Judith Butler's argument that "gender appears to 'qualify' bodies as human bodies"—that is, humanization is culturally granted in the form of gendering.[18]

E-V: But you're human, right?

J'AN JAH: Negative. I'm an Ursalean.

E-V: But you look just like me.

LC-4: There's one small difference.

J'AN JAH: I'm the male of my species. And you're wrong, robot. It's not small.[19]

Notably, promotional images for the play's original production centered around the characters who are human and, in the case of J'an Jah, apparently human in embodiment (see Figure 32). Additionally, many of the unique traits differentiating nonhuman characters are distinctly sexualized, exemplified in *Starstruck* by ex-sexbot Erotica Ann (see Figure 33) and the fishlike Aguatunesian Eeeeeeeeeluh, kept constantly in a state of orgasm by an addictive aphrodisiac periodically pumped into her tank (see Figure 34). This phenomenon is parodied by brawny, freckle-cheeked, actual human Brucilla (see Figure 35) when she disguises herself as a Krabian slave girl "in a silly pink harem costume."[20] The most monster-like character in appearance and comportment, the lumbering lady cyborg Orga, is the only character in the play who is not necessarily sexualized. (I will further discuss sexuality and embodiment in *Starstruck* later in the chapter.)

The alien in futuristic speculative fiction has inherited the cultural legacy of the monster in literature. Rosi Braidotti defines the monster as "the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm; it is a deviant, an a-nomaly; it is abnormal," and further as ambivalence incarnate, "horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration."[21] This mixture of fear and fascination reflects science fiction's interest in the alien, the terror of invasion or violation alongside the desire to "explore strange new worlds." Indeed, even *Star Trek*, for all its progressive intentions, is frequently criticized for its reproduction of problematic racial and patriarchal—not to mention anthropocentric—biases in depicting human-alien relations. Anthony Lioi pointedly observes that the utopian vision of the diverse Federation is "blind to the

way it offers friendship and equality to humanoid species, while still encountering nonhumanoids as uncanny monsters or mindless machines."[22] He poignantly contrasts the magnanimity and respect with which the sociopathic, genetically-augmented human Khan is treated against initial responses of horror and violence toward radically alien life forms and the dismissal of nonhuman intelligent species on Earth.[23] Rowland and Barton, in their survey-based analysis of gamers' attitudes toward race in *World of Warcraft*, note that the races that appear more human tend to align with characteristics and narratives typically attributed to Western cultures, whereas the more "monstrous" the race—i.e. the further from human in appearance—the more real-world racialized language and stereotypes are deployed against them. They observe, additionally, the difference in the ways specific behaviors are interpreted by players, based on the race/species of the character, for instance that "while the aggressive tendencies of humans tend to be viewed as righteous or honorable, similar tendencies in nonhuman races are described by one player as 'genocidal.'"[24] For its part, the alien culture of Nguyen's play turns the "genocidal" descriptor back upon humanity while at the same enacting a genocide upon the human race.

FGBW destabilizes the human as the norm, as the default "good guy" in interstellar politics, and as the central figure in the future of life in the universe. Feared as a violent species, the human race has been hunted nearly to extinction. *FGBW* fully realizes existential threat to humanity while also reversing the trope by recasting the human as the threatening alien other, mindlessly violent beasts. In a striking reversal of fortune, "the last human"—a singular representative of the once-subject of liberal humanism—is exhibited as a specimen in a zoo, a spectacle that echoes the exploitation of not only animals but also humans who deviate from normative embodiment in circuses, freak shows, and the history of scientific categorization.

Sunaura Taylor explicates upon the historical correlation between animals, disability, and the oppressions of racism and sexism, along with its accompanying voyeurism, via the commodification of "living curiosities." She illustrates how "categories of race, sex, disability, and species have been managed and secured through naming and display," causing cultural "blurring of or enhancing of categories of difference."[25] In *FGBW,* humanity itself is animalized, labeled monstrous and freakish, and put on display in a way that would seem to "*de*-naturalize both the animal and the human," as Carlson refers to certain performances of animality that strive not to represent animals but to collapse, comment upon, and even commodify standards of normativity.[26]

The treatment of animals as spectacles for human entertainment is critiqued by dehumanizing E-V, much like marginalized human cultures and embodiments have been dehumanized. Carlson notes the history of shared abjection between animals and oppressed minorities, as "human oppression so often operates by animalizing particular sorts of people."[27] Cary Wolfe likewise argues that "the discourse of animality has historically served as a crucial strategy in the oppression of *humans* by other humans—a strategy whose legitimacy and force depend, however, on the prior taking for granted of the traditional ontological distinction, and consequent ethical divide, between human and nonhuman animals."[28] In the case of *FGBW,* the human literally becomes the animal, a beast in a zoo, and normative human embodiment, instead of carrying privilege as the presumed liberal humanist subject, is an abject existence. Exploitation and genocide are justified by fearmongering and stereotyping within the cultural consciousness and history.

> ZOO-KEEPER: Adult humans can and will bite. And not only can a human harm you, but they can also harm your children. Humans are also notorious

baby eaters. They will sneak into your nests, steal your eggs, and, without a second thought, eat your unborn babies for breakfast.

(Projection: A plate of scrambled eggs and bacon)

ZOO-KEEPER: So, please, if you know of anyone in possession of a human, for their safety and the safety of the public—report them immediately to your local UGC agency. Remember, only you can prevent humanity.[29]

In addition to the prevalent presumption that all humans are baby-eaters, the zoo-keeper emphasizes humans' irrationality, destructiveness, and above all violence.

The satire of these stereotypes is double-edged. On the one hand, it places the human race—usually the subject in science fiction—in the position of the stereotyped minority. In so doing, it makes a point of the trauma of internalization. Adon-Ra echoes the common sci fi trope that all humans are helplessly ruled by emotion: "Sorry, I'm human. We don't look at things logically."[30] This internalization is exemplified, however, through E-V's sensitivity at even being called a human. Instead, she masquerades as a Smordak shapeshifter, reacting hostilely to reminders or even insinuations of her true species. The humor of the text also emphasizes the reductive nature of stereotyping, via its absurdity: for instance, accusations of being cannibals and pet rapists or the dressing of E-V as a '50s housewife to reproduce her native habitat.[31]

On the other hand, Nguyen's choice of creating stereotypes that reduce humans to a penchant for violence also offers a sharp commentary on real-world human culture. Notably, humanity is represented in its entirety in *FGBW* by a cage fighter (E-V) and a terrorist (Adon-Ra). The play's structure as an allegory for the Judeo-Christian creation myth only emphasizes this theme of violence. In Nguyen's plays, new worlds tend to be forged in blood, and particularly his religious references are laden with the traumas of violence and bodily violation,

as in *The Beginner's Guide to Decide*, in which God begets creation by raping Lucifer and ripping the universe from her womb. Such depictions, like that of Adon-Ra as a terrorist who slaughters citizens in his crusade against an oppressive government regime, undermine messages of faith in saviors or heroes. General Dan'h's appeal to E-V to "prove the universe wrong" by "show[ing] them a human can do more than just kill" reads as an imploration to humankind on the whole, future and present.[32]

tlhIngan maH![33]

Critique of present-day culture is, of course, not limited to human characters and cultures in science fiction or theatre. Commentary on human culture is often a primary intention in the creation of sci fi alien races, cultures, and politics. Elaine L. Graham illustrates the power of the alien in speculative fiction and its value to posthumanist theory:

> Fantastic, utopian and speculative forms of fiction—epitomized by science fiction—shock our assumptions and incite our critical faculties. As refractions of the same, as evidence for the ascribed and not essential nature of human nature, monsters, aliens and others provide clues for the moral economy or "ontological hygiene" by which future categories of the human/posthuman/non-human might be decided.[34]

Even humans depicted are often hybrids, cyborgs, or superhuman in some way. As Haraway notes, "in a fiction where no character is 'simply' human, human status is highly problematic," and the category of "human" is innately destabilized by fictionalized future space's resident humans, aliens, machines, and variations thereupon.[35] When alien figure step onto the stage, they invite the audience to contemplate and call into question the nature of human culture.

In a move relatively rare even among science fiction and fantasy, Kidder-Mostrom and Warren's *Star Trek*/Dickensian mashup *A Klingon Christmas Carol* removes Earth and the human race—that is, the presumption of humanity—entirely from its narrative. Its only reference to Terran culture is in its frame as an interplanetary literary conference presented by the Vulcan Institute of Cultural Anthropology: as" the third in a series of informative lectures on the literature of classical Terran writers and their Klingon counterparts," preceded by two works of Shakespeare in both languages, the Vulcan Narrator explains that Charles Dickens's source material, *tlhIngan ram nI' bom*, is to be presented in its original Klingon (see Figure 36).[36] The play does not, however, cease to comment upon the culture of its present-day human audience. Jen Gunnels observes that *Trek* "fandom has long centered on the human aspects of the *Star Trek* universe with ancillary interest in the aliens populating it." She does, however, note that the "Klingons in particular have their own fandom" and "interest in Klingons has tended toward the performative."[37] Gunnels engages with the opera *U*, which for her represents a leap forward in ethnodramaturgical exploration of Klingon culture, as a drama that is not directly derivative of preestablished human cultural artefacts. By contrast, I have chosen *KCC* in part for its ability to transform familiar material into a commentary that has the capacity to translate to both geek and mundane audiences.

The play was first conceived not as a *Star Trek* fan work but as a translation project, with the intention of producing a holiday show with a story familiar enough to audiences that its telling would not be affected by an audience unfamiliar with the language of the dialogue. Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* was chosen before the language had been settled upon. Kidder-Mostrom recounts that "the board member who suggested that we treat the work to a Klingon translation 'thought that it was a joke that would last exactly 30 seconds'. It has gone on

far longer than that. And, it is not a joke."[38] While not originating as a fan work, the script's dedication reads "For the Fans," alongside an in memoriam for Charles Dickens and Gene Roddenberry: "two men who challenged us all to be better and to make the world a better place."[39] In that spirit, *KCC* has retained much of the same optimism as its source texts.

The reframing of the tale within an understanding of Klingon culture by extension reevaluates the human values imbedded in the familiar story of Scrooge, who must learn human decency to live a good life. Kidder-Mostrom, for instance, discusses his own adaptation of Dickens's cultural commentary (see Figure 37):

> The first portion that [Dickens] wrote was about the children/creatures under the robes of Christmas Present. "Ignorance" and "Want" were his social commentary on what might bring down the British Empire. In *KCC*, those characters are "Corruption" and "Apathy". One might argue that the playwright of that scene was commenting on the American condition, as he is an American playwright.[40]

Klingon culture has, of course, always been a commentary on human politics since its inception, as a metaphor for foreign communist superpowers at the height of the Cold War. Bernardi's *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* offers an in-depth analysis of the international and racial sociopolitics at work in the depiction of Klingons from the original *Star Trek* series in the 1960s to the *Next Generation* era in the 1980s and '90s.[41]

Furthermore, the evolution of the Klingon culture over the course of multiple *Trek* series and fandom's increasing interest has resulted in arguably the most fully realized alien culture in science fictional history. Gunnels illustrates:

> Not only does Klingon fandom and fan production develop in inverse proportion to the demise of its Cold War origins, but the choices in both the canonical work

> involving Klingons and non-canonical work […] illustrate a growing interest in understanding elements of the culture that may have led to the conflicts to begin with. The warrior mentality, which once served to represent the animalistic nature of the Klingons, has become lauded as a noble mirror of a *bushido*-like philosophy.[42]

The nobility of the Klingon fighting spirit, a particular focus of *KCC*, resonates in EDGE of Orion's specialization in stage combat. The premise undergirding the play's morality tale was made possible by the introduction of the character Worf, played by Michael Dorn, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, who almost single-handedly rehabilitated the representation of Klingons into a species whose values revolve around honor and courage. This transformation is also reflected physically, as the gold-shirted, orientalized Klingon of the original series, referenced in the depiction of the Ghost of Kahless Past (see Figure 38), acquires the iconic ridged foreheads, armored fashion, and fangs of Klingons in the *Star Trek* motion pictures and *The Next Generation* era series.

Gunnels makes a particular point of the contribution made by the development of *tlhIngan Hol* (the Klingon language), an essential and unique aspect of Klingon fandom and theatrical performances such as *KCC*. She notes that "the guttural syllables grant the culture its own language for the first time" in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, "but it lacks a definitive structure, grammar, and vocabulary—all of which would be needed to construct and support a clearly conceived and more nuanced culture beyond a continuation of reductive stereotype." As linguist Mark Okrand developed the language, the complexities of Klingon culture and characters evolved alongside it.[43] In fact, the Klingon language is given special cultural significance in the *Trek* canon. Despite the ubiquitous use of universal translators throughout

Trek, the Klingon language is often spoken without translation. Klingons are repeatedly depicted as proud of their cultural identity and heritage, clearly reflected in *KCC*'s replacement of Tiny Tim's iconic line "God bless us, every one" with:

> NARRATOR: And so, as tImHom observed:
>
> TIMHOM: tlhIngan maH! (We are Klingons!)[44]

This sense of pride, along with the Klingon sense of honor, is among the most appealing aspects of Klingon culture to fans, and battle is in many ways the essence of Klingon culture and history.

The association of violence as a key aspect of Klingon culture does not carry the same connotation as with humanity in Nguyen's *FGBW*. To be sure, the problematic aspects of Klingon culture are not fully lost from the play. An example is SQuja's suggestion that, rather than donating to their care, the orphaned children of fallen warriors should be sent to Rura Penthe, a Klingon penal colony notorious throughout the *Star Trek* universe for its hard labor, abysmal living conditions, and the one-year life expectancy of its prisoners.[45] The horrified response that he receives for his callous attitude—"Rura Penthe is for captured enemies of the Empire, not for Klingons!"—only serves to remind fans in the audience of one of the more disturbingly brutal aspects of an alien culture originally intended to be unequivocal bad guys.[46] Altogether, however, *KCC*'s focus is upon the ideals of honor and courage.

The cowardice of SQuja' is emphasized from the first scene, when he is seen shuddering as QachIt sharpens a kut'luch, presumably for use in the upcoming Feast of the Long Night tournament.[47] His behavior is constantly—often comedically—contrasted with that of an average Klingon, as when his doorknocker transforms into the face of marlI': "a typical Klingon would surely react with a swift disruptor shot to the hallucination's face. SQuja', in contrast, drew back in fear."[48] His fear of fighting, pain, and death earn him insults such as "beardless" and "son of a

tribble," and his love of money is frequently compared to a Ferengi.[49] He is baffled by the festivities of his fellow Klingons:

> SQUJA': Why do they fight each other?
>
> PRESENT: For the same reason as the rest. We fight to enrich the spirit.[50]

His revelation leads him to the understanding that the glory of battle is neither in victory nor in death. Rather, for Klingons, invigoration comes from meeting battle with nobility and joy, as he finally does in his first fight during the Feast of the Long Night: "SQuja' lost terribly. However, he fought valiantly until his defeat, rising again and again after many blows, and the entire party cheered at his courage."[51] The full circle of his journey, over the course of the story, from cowardice to honor is marked when—in addition to making his first blood oath, learning to laugh, and "crossing the River of Blood" to become a warrior alongside tImHom—he stops at the door knocker, to growl at it.[52]

The show's aesthetic takes on a campy, self-aware sense of humor often characteristic of fandom. The opening line of the story directly engages with one of the longest running jokes among *Star Trek* fans: "marlI' was dead: to begin with […] as dead as a *HIpDoq'*," translation "redshirt."[53] In popular culture, the term "redshirt"—referring to the uniform worn by Starfleet security personnel in the original series—has been used to refer to expendable characters, usually nameless, who are fodder to be killed on dangerous away missions.[54] While humorous, however, the material is ultimately approached with respect for Klingon culture and fandom. It remains, on many levels, a dramatic tale, as perhaps best evidenced by the mourning of tImHom's death. The script implies that he would not—and has not—survived his coming-of-age ritual to "cross the River of Blood" and become a warrior. His parents mourn him not with tears but with the Klingon death howl, a ritual meant to warn the dead that a warrior "is about to arrive" (see

Figure 39).[55] The raw, pained howl is a particularly affective experience to witness on a live stage. As Gunnels argues, with Klingon theatre, the "live approach […] offers a uniquely unmediated experience" to a fandom and fictional culture that, in film, is "always already mediated—a limitation not shared by live performance."[56] As an audience member, the experiential difference—between the death howls of tImHom's parents and both the ritual of the death howl on film and the traditional scene in *A Christmas Carol*—is striking.

The moralistic message of *KCC*, much like in Dickens's version, revolves around tImHom. His attitude represents the inverse of SQuja' perhaps even more starkly than Tiny Tim did for Scrooge, given the heightened significance of physical ability in a culture based upon virility in battle. Though he has very little stage time, tImHom's "heart of a warrior" is the focus of much dialogue, versus able-bodied SQuja's cowardly and devious way of thinking.

> PRESENT: He would make a worthy warrior.
>
> SQUJA': But he's a cripple. He'll never be able to fight as a warrior […]
>
> PRESENT: Klingons far worse off than he have navigated ships into glorious battle. Real power is in the heart.[57]

The respect that tImHom receives in recognition for his honorable spirit and courage deserves some skepticism. His depiction in *KCC* deals with disability in a culture in which very little beyond physical prowess is celebrated. As the Narrator observes, however, "one often finds such generic optimism in folk legends of this type, and thus, the story goes."[58] Taking the values of the morality tale at face value, SQuja's presumption that tImHom cannot fight as a warrior highlights his fundamental misunderstanding of Klingon honor.

tImHom's medical condition is never explicitly specified, merely that he has a weak constitution and is quickly exhausted. According the script, tImHom has traditionally been

portrayed by a puppet, rather than embodied by an actor.[59] In EDGE of Orion's production, however, tImHom is played by junior ensemble member Liam Walsh. Though the cast of this show did not feature any actors with physical or cognitive disabilities, the EDGE of Orion—which stands for "Esteem Development through Greater Expectations"—runs an education program that focuses on "students who are disabled, have intellectual disabilities, or from marginalized communities."[60] The theatre's Constellation Project's fan films *No Easy Target* (featured in sixteen film festivals and winner of five awards) and *Gem Seeker*, which are respectively set in the *Star Wars* and Tolkien universes, prominently feature heroes with Down syndrome.[61] The website's description of Constellation Project's work includes the statement: "Most people who are differently-abled are sidelined and rarely given screen time that isn't focused solely on their 'disability'."[62] EDGE of Orion's mission as an organization revolves around effecting change in theatre, film, and genre storytelling's artistic opportunities and representation, particularly in neurodiversity.[63]

tImHom, as presented within a culture that would appear to worship physical ability, can be seen as embodying Taylor's argument that dependence is an aspect of everyday life for everyone, regardless of physical or cognitive ability:

> The difference between the way many disabled people see dependence and how much of the rest of society views it lies in the emphasis placed on individual physical autonomy. In many ways independence is more about individuals being in control of their own services (be they electrical, medical, educational, or personal) than it is about individuals being completely self-sufficient; this is true not only for the disabled population but for everyone.[64]

The concept of ableism, therefore, relies not on self-sufficiency at all but on personal self-determination. tImHom's ability to comport himself as a warrior has nothing to do with his ability to do so alone. In fact, support is implied in his—and all Klingons'—need for proper training to achieve glory as warrior, as well as in the Ghost of Kahless Present's assertion that he could very well fly a ship into battle or command troops. Brute strength in hand-to-hand combat is not the sole—or even primary, as honor would dictate—measure of a warrior.

andré carrington writes, on the subject of speculative fiction's interest in the superhuman, that "the implications of being disabled in particular ways are socially constructed, primarily by the able-bodied, but vulnerability to certain embodied conditions of disempowerment and disadvantage is universal."[65] This vulnerability, feared by SQuja' and defied by tImHom, is the crux of this Klingon morality tale. It is a theme shared by much of sci fi geek theatre's explorations into artificially constructed and/or technologically enhanced embodiments and consciousnesses.

Byli Jsme Stroje[66]

In Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*, the play that created the cultural notion of the "robot" as an artificially constructed life form, a nameless robot describes its transition from an automaton to a self-aware being:

> Robot 3: We were machines, sir; but out of terror and pain we became—
>
> Alquist: What?
>
> Robot 3: We have become souls.[67]

This notion of sentience associates embodied suffering and fear—often specifically fear of death—with its definition of *life*. Ironically, humanoid machines in science fiction are often seen

as truly possessing "souls" when they self-sacrificially choose to embrace death, as for example in the cases of the protector terminator of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and Data in *Star Trek*. In essence, the stories we tell about sentient machines drive toward a need to see them as mortal and as vulnerable to the human fear of death. In the action of embracing death to save the life of a human friend, they simultaneously earn human respect by embodying the human ideal of love yet remain subservient to humanity by subjecting their bodies to harm and destruction in fulfillment of the humans-first spirit of Asimov's laws of robotics.

LC-4 in Nguyen's *Fight Girl Battle World* (see Figure 40) follows this sacrificial trope, though he ultimately evades death when he is rebuilt into a robot snake with his consciousness intact, just in time to present an apple to E-V and Adon-Ra in a Edenic tableau. All considered, his temporary death may have much more to do with this visually symbolic reconstruction—and also perhaps his campy and spectacular destruction on stage in the epic final battle scene—than it has to do with commenting upon his character as a robot. This commentary instead comes in the form of LC-4's emphatic busting of robot myths, starting with his very first scene in the zoo with E-V:

> E-V: Why are you here? You're a robot. Can't they just, ya know, make more of you?
>
> LC-4: Can't they just make more of you?
>
> E-V: I hate to tell ya this, robot, but it takes two to tango to make more humans. It's not as simple.
>
> LC-4: And it takes a facility of the universe's most brilliant engineers to build even the most rudimentary versions of me. I do not see your point.
>
> E-V: I'm alive.

> LC-4: There are over three million different species in the universe and not any two are composed of the same genetic compounds, yet no one argues against any one of their statures for being living sentient creatures. However, because robots are partially made with non-organic materials such as metal and steel, somehow you believe I'm less than alive.[68]

The irritability with which he responds to stereotypes evokes Ian Thomas Malone's concern "for the nature of technology to obscure the lines of human civility and whether or not it is really necessary to treat something that looks human as human." Malone concludes that, in these speculative depictions of AL civil rights debates, meaningful answers on personhood are elided, secondary to the ethical question of "whether or not someone could get away with denying it."[69] These questions of personhood and oppression are directly linked to humanity's reliance on subservience. For his part, LC-4 also takes issue with the assumption that robots must be designed to serve a specific function—when asked "what kind" of robot he is, he replies, "I'm a robot robot"—and, by extension, that robots can be reprogrammed at will:

> LC-4: Do organics really believe that a fully sentient android like myself can simply be rewired to "be evil"? That is quite naive. I have a mainframe that stores more than fifty google milibreks of independent memory which runs at least eight thousand different simultaneous processors and program—
>
> GENERAL DAN'H: Okay, okay, LC-4! We get it! You're complex![70]

Ironically, his physical reconstruction, mind intact, also fulfills a second science fiction trope that the essential self exists in the form of disembodied information that can achieve immortality, detached from a physical form vulnerable to death.

Erotica Ann in Lee's *Starstruck*, in contrast, is very much a robot whose existence is shaped by her material form. She shows her first sign of sentience by choosing to walk away from death, to choose survival and self-interest.

> EROTICA ANN: We existed solely to serve the young Kalif's depraved desires, until one fateful malton unit, he discovered that we did not feel… that our responses had been programmed in. He flew into a rage. He ordered that we all be melted down. I stood at the end of a long line and watched my sisters march one by one into a vat of acid. […] Then something off happened…
>
> *(Pinspot on Erotica Ann)*
>
> EROTICA ANN: I started to tingle. My head started spinning. I had my first independent thought! I thought, "If I stay in this line, I will be melted down in a vat of acid!" I got the hell out.
>
> GALATIA 9: Good thinking. How'd you manage your escape?
>
> EROTICA ANN: No one was watching. We weren't programmed to think for ourselves. We were programmed for submission. He knew if he ordered us to march into the acid, we would. I thought. And I walked away.[71]

Erotica Ann also morphs the concept of autonomy away from mortality and instead toward her capacity to withhold or to give sexual consent. Haraway describes her metaphorical cyborg as a "figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy."[72] Android Erotica Ann embodies this principle literally, in exercising her ability to choose.

Stevens notes that the "theme of women as a fetish object or empty vessel of another's ego runs through pop culture. It takes forms in stories about mannequins, toy dolls, androids, sex

dolls, and emotional puppets. In STARSTRUCK, all of these are combined in Erotica Ann." Her body is literally made to be a sex object for male pleasure. Inspired by Barbie dolls, she constantly camps the idealized woman's body through the male gaze. "Erotica Ann is in permanent cheesecake mode, striking 'come hither' postures."[73] Her design is what Jennifer González would call "typical of contemporary (mostly male-produced) cyborg fantasies: a powerful, yet vulnerable, combination of sex toy and techno-sophisticate."[74] Her reprograming into a science officer typecasts her, as an android, into a token Spock or Data type figure, but her physicality parodies an Orion slave girl or Stepford wife archetype.

> ANNOUNCER: Ironically, Erotica's body, built for sex, did not change with the new program.
>
> EROTICA ANN: The cellular organization of the aforementioned body is a monument to modern cybernetic engineering.[75]

Her comfort in and articulation of her bombshell body, combined with her exercise of sexual autonomy, both camp and comment upon another sci fi trope: the monstrous and/or mechanical seductress.

Graham observes that traditionally in the genre, "the female robot engenders only irrationality and chaos, hinting at the unreliability of women who, like machines, rob 'us' (coded as male […]) of 'our' humanity (constituted as sexual control, reason, labour and freedom)."[76] Sue-Ellen Case similarly compares the female monster in horror to the depiction of "machines as both seductive and threatening […] in films like *Metropolis*, or *The Stepford Wives*, which narrativized how her seductive qualities still required disciplining by the men she would serve."[77] Seduction is built and programmed into these figures, as feminine objects, yet their potential personhood—their womanhood—threatens the male creators who play God. In her first

expression of emotion, Erotica Ann steps into the role of seductress/monster, rejecting male control and embracing feminist anger:

> EROTICA ANN: I have returned to you, Master! And I feel… I feel!
>
> KALIF: Feel?
>
> EROTICA ANN: I feel for you, Master… all for you. […]
>
> *(Erotica Ann holds out her arms. Kalif walks into them. She embraces him.)*
>
> KALIF: Bliss!
>
> EROTICA ANN: *(An edge in her voice)* I *feel* now, Kalif!
>
> *(Erotica Ann hugs Kalif harder.)*
>
> KALIF: That's a little…
>
> EROTICA ANN: *(With much emotion)* I FEEL!
>
> KALIF: Wait! You're crushing meeeiiiiggghhhhhhhhhh! […]
>
> EROTICA ANN: I feel ANGER! *(Hits him)* I FEEL HATRED! *(Hits him)* I FEEL RA-A-A-AGE! *(Flattens him)* I feel a very strong need for revenge![78]

Erotica Ann's discovery of emotions do not culminate in rage, however, but rather in learning to laugh. As with the comedic explorations of other robot, cyborg, and alien characters into human interaction, she also discovers the irony of the human emphasis on feeling:

> GALATIA 9: Better learn to control those new feelings, Ann. […]
>
> EROTICA ANN: You mean once you have them, you have to control them?
>
> BRONWYN: Either that or seek employment outside the inhabited Multiverse.

EROTICA ANN: *(Laughs)* Confusing. *(Laughs)* Oh… *(Laughs)* Oh! Feels good! *(Laughs)* No! It hurts![79]

The confusing sensation of her first laughter oddly invokes the statement in *R.U.R.* that robots achieve souls through pain. Moreover, despite her initial urge toward revenge, her newfound feelings ultimately do not focus upon her male oppressor, and her rejection of her role as a sex object is not a rejection of her sexuality.

Erotica Ann's big sex scene in the play, humorously, is with a disembodied artificial intelligence: Norm, *The Siren 3*'s computer. Norm, for his part, represents the contradictions inherent in fantasies of transcending embodiment. In his final line before his countdown to self-destruct, Norm quotes: "'Good night… good night… parting is such sweet sorrow! That I shall say good night till it be…' Can anyone tell me what night is?"[80] It is a comedic yet melancholy reminder that the computer has no experience of embodiment. To him—a disembodied brain who lives in space, where day and night are meaningless—simple, seemingly obvious concepts for humans are entirely foreign. In discussing science fiction literature exploring the concept of disembodied AI, Hayles notes that "human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines," to the point that "bodily sensations [are] encoded in human language."[81] On the subject of language, Graham points out that, even in seemingly disembodied human interaction over digital technology, the use of emoticons shows that "formal signs or representations of physical presence are still regarded as integral to proper communication."[82] Norm, like Erotica Ann, serves as a commentary on masculine fantasies of embodiment and disembodiment—fantasies that, as Hayles argues, "because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body. Central to this argument is a conceptualization that

sees information and materiality as distinct entities. This separation allows the construction of a hierarchy in which information is given the dominant position and materiality runs a distant second."[83] This hierarchy manifests in a distinctly gendered way, in which the liberal humanist subject (coded white, cis-male, heterosexual, and able-bodied) which claims neutral egalitarian values is essentialized in the form of a pure intelligence, whereas the female body—as with Erotica Ann—is portrayed as an entirely physical figure.

In contrast to the sci fi trope of materiality as a mere step on the way to ascension, Alison Adam argues that the "masculine attempts to transcend the 'meat'" in cyberculture "holds little obvious appeal for feminists," as "some of us may not wish to lose the pleasures of the meat."[84] These pleasures transfer to Norm through Erotica Ann, as she chooses to express her sexuality in a uniquely cybernetic way. Norm's language on the subject is configured into cyber/sexual innuendo: "Why this sudden urge to have INTERFACE?"[85] Although presumably lacking in any genital stimulation, as Norm has none, their merging is expressed as an overtly sexual encounter:

> *(On the screens, we see Erotica Ann merging with a huge brain [representing Norm]).*
>
> NORM: *(Mechanical)* SYSTEMS MERGE! *(Orgasmic)* AHHHHHHHH… AHHHHHHHHH… AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH![86]

Lee's characters resist these tropes and the patriarchal way of thinking that engenders them by spoofing their assumptions and reversing their results, bringing Norm's detached, disembodied plotline to climax in a sexual orgasm and depicting Erotica Ann's evolution from sex toy to autonomy, from intellectual science officer to full array of emotions, and perhaps most importantly to a kind of transcendence—but a fully embodied one—as she emerges literally glowingly from her encounter with Norm's artificial brain, surrounded by suggestively "tentacle-

like nerve ganglia."[87] This comedic sequence returns the concept of cybersex to material embodiment and solidifies the point that Erotica Ann can embrace her sexuality while defying sexual objectification. Moreover, it portrays her as ultimately irreducible to her cybernetic construction, while fully integrating that artificial embodiment into her unique identity.

Malone observes that "humanity has demonstrated a limited capacity for giving Artificial Intelligence the spotlight in its narratives. When the desires of machines are allowed to take the lead, the story often ends up in a *Terminator-like* apocalyptic disaster, reflecting the inherent differences in self-interests between humanity and technology."[88] The characters in *Starstruck* who crew *The Harpy* demonstrate the opposite: that different beings, whether machine, alien, or human, can maintain individuality while sharing communal interests.

We Are Borg

Haraway writes that her "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."[89] She further defines "cyborgs" as "chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism."[90] Hayles similarly defines the posthuman subject as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogenous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction."[91] The cyborg as a patchwork of modified and blurred boundaries between flesh and technology is a phantasmic figure in science fiction fantasy. Yet, in the vein of Haraway's argument that the human race has already crossed the technological threshold into becoming cyborgs, David Z. Saltz notes:

> The notion of the 'cyborg' has gained currency in cultural theory, not because it represents a radically new phenomenon, but on the contrary because it provides a

> powerful metaphor for the reconceptualization of our relation to our own bodies and challenging purported biological imperatives. The science fiction fantasy of the cyborg is important precisely because it directs our attention to a possibility that had passed beneath our cognitive radar: that we are all cyborgs already. The uncanny image of machine and flesh merging into a single organism provokes us to see quotidian objects such as eyeglasses and automobiles in a new light, not merely as our tools or possessions, but as cyborg extensions of ourselves.[92]

This cyborg existence is particularly relevant for people such as myself, having undergone body modification by modern medical technologies in the process of physical and social gender transition.

The trans body is also particularly relevant to feminist cyborg theory, in that it exemplifies the technologized crossing of boundaries and collapsing of a traditional binary understanding of gender. Case writes that "the new transgendered body imploded the social codes of sex and gender into its very hormonal structure. Performance resides in the testosterone-induced growing the beard, or estrogen-induced growing of the breasts. The body performs itself, its capacities in its tissues."[93] Trans scholar Susan Stryker compares the trans body to the atomic bomb, arguing that "like the bomb, the transsexual body is both a literal artifact and a powerful technocultural fantasy."[94] The gendered body is a site of much negotiation and interest for science fiction writers and scholars. While transgender characters rarely find representation even in science fiction—at least in the form of non-metaphoric transgender humans—geek theatre, as a common site of queer imagining (as discussed in Chapter 2), is a natural ground-zero for such explosive exploration. J'an Jah's embodiment, for example, resembles trans women, while his social interactions with E-V, as a cis human unfamiliar with Ursalean physiology, resemble lived

experiences of trans men. He identifies as male yet is physically read as female, and his relationship with Adon-Ra can be read through both a hetero- and homosexual lens. Nguyen's play *Revenge Song* engages with trans identity directly, when the protagonist Julie d'Aubigny, confronted with her occasional choice to dress as a man, suggests, "Maybe I am."[95] Set in the seventeenth century and adapted from the life of an historical person, the character does not undergo any sort of medical transition. Overall, her gender and sexuality are nebulous. Geek plays typically engage in the queering of embodied gender over any declaration of discrete gender identities. Stryker emphasizes that the ramifications of trans embodiment reach far beyond the interests of transgender individuals, altogether shattering easy definitions of the natural body, gender difference, and of course gender roles. Lee's heroine Galatia 9 is a figure who violates conventional standards of femininity on many levels, most particularly in a surgical modification that is relevant to the gendered body as well as cultural standards of beauty: she is missing her right breast.

In addition to Galatia 9's Amazonian body modification, Elaine Lee—who originated the role on stage and on whose likeness Michael Kaluta based the design of the comic book character—describes her creation of the character (see Figure 41): "I wrote Galatia 9 for myself because […] I'm small and blond, and I was getting all the wimpy dumb blond parts. So I wanted to be a tough starship captain. I said, why do all Amazons have to be really tall and buxom?"[96] Erotica Ann, the artificial embodiment of male sexual fantasy, illustrates Galatia 9's disjuncture from this embodiment when the captain proposes going undercover as a Krabian sex slave:

> I am obliged to point out that certain of your physical idiosyncracies such as a) missing right breast, b) facial scar, c) unusually slight build, would seem to disqualify you for a mission, the success of which depends upon the ability to

> pass yourself off as one bred to exhibit only those qualities dictated by humanoid male fantasy.[97]

Carlson comments that "modified bodies perform an implicit critique by virtue of their marginality," and Galatia 9's physically modified form performs just such a critique.[98] In the play *Starstruck*, Galatia 9 rarely interacts with men, as her ship is entirely crewed by women, but in one such interaction, she is confronted with male rage at her flagrant violation of gender expectations:

> KALIF: You'll regret this you lopsided half-woman!
>
> GALATIA 9: This may come as a big surprise to you, Jack, but that is not the worst thing you could have said to me.
>
> *(Pinspot on Galatia 9)*
>
> GALATIA 9: The female psyche can't absorb
>
> The male fixation with the orb.
>
> It's only men who lose their wits,
>
> And live… and breathe… and *die* for tits![99]

Braidotti argues that, in the cultural consciousness, "the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of *fascination and horror*."[100] Kalif in particular, acting as the embodiment of heterosexual male desire in *Starstruck*, exemplifies this sense of fascination, fetishization, and fear, as well as—whenever a woman fails to satisfy his standards—rage and violence.

Galatia 9, Brucilla, Eeeeeeeeeluh, and Erotica Ann—while behaving in defiance of and spoofing the male gaze—each, in some way, encounters male sexual fantasy and expectations as part of the social minefield she must navigate and, more significantly, as a part of establishing

her own identity. In this vein, González contradicts Haraway's contention "that cyborgs have no natural history," arguing in fact the cyborg in culture must define herself in relation to her social and historical context, one that continues to carry gendering biases: "Until the desire to define identities and the power to do so is lost or relinquished, even the most spontaneous cyborgs cannot float above the lingering, clinging past of differences, histories, stories, bodies, places."[101] Even in the fantastic future, female physiology remains a site of peril, political contestation, and violently policed boundaries. In the original *Star Trek* series, women are barred from holding command positions in the supposedly egalitarian Starfleet, justified on account of their "hysterical" temperaments.[102] Meanwhile, a fan theory posits that tragedy of the entire *Star Wars* saga can be boiled down to horrifically negligent women's healthcare, even at the height of a technologically advanced civilization.[103] In her close examination of cultural depictions of women in space, both in reality and fiction, Constance Penley contends:

> If we accept that "space" remains one of the major sites of utopian thinking and that "going into space" is still one of the most important ways we represent our relation to science, technology, and the future, we need to examine the stories we tell ourselves about space and about women in space.[104]

Starstruck offers an alternative vision of the future in which women are the heroes (or supervillains) in their own action-adventure narratives. Galatia 9, in a parody of the ease with which women are often dismissed in space opera and the real-world history of organizations such as NASA, even scoffs at the notion of integrating men into her crew: "Shave-tail, neuter-booton' short-stakers! Wear their brain between their legs, the lot of 'em!"[105] Indeed, the men in the story appear impotent and even effeminate next to such commanding female figures (see Figure 42).

Verloona, evil mastermind and Galatia 9's nemesis, serves as an interesting counterexample to the heroine's nobility. In fact, the two sisters define their identities in opposition to each other, as Verloona directly states: "That brown-nosing, apple-polishing pipsqueak was forever running on about truth-and-justice, truth-and-justice! It made me nauseous. I decided to love a life totally dedicated to self. And who deserves it more than I?"[106] The villainess exemplifies Katharina Vester's observation of the often thin line between superheroes and supervillains in comics:

> The hero is differentiated from the villain quite commonly only by their putting the super-body at the service of their community, while the villain is motivated by greed and selfishness. Often the hero feels burdened by the responsibilities the superpowers bring with them. Conversely, the villain seems to enjoy them without guilt.[107]

Wolmark argues that "the expression of female desire is a central feature of feminist science fiction," an expressiveness embraced wholeheartedly by the characters in *Starstruck*.[108] In discussing Verloona's appeal, Stevens remarks that "the bad girls are secretly admired because they don't apologize for their desires. Even if they are in the wrong, that attitude is rather liberating, even if experienced only vicariously."[109] Verloona takes her personal liberation very seriously, without regard for external consequences.

The universe of the play also recognizes that, as Wolmark adds, "that desire is marked by its own historical suppression"—in essence, the fantastical exploration of female agency remains bound by an awareness of and need to confront the cultural conditions that have plagued women throughout history.[110] As satire, *Starstruck* takes both agency and gender-based oppression to extremes, the latter evidenced by the sexual enslavement apparent in subplots and character

backstories, an exploitation in which Verloona fully and unapologetically participates. Verloona's villainy and dedication to self-serving desire knows no common sisterhood with other women, as perhaps most viscerally displayed by her "beauty secret": "She injects herself with living fluid, distilled from the tiny pink glands of fledgling [Galactic] Girl Guides."[111] Stevens further notes that as "an avowed feminist, Elaine Lee disregards broad slogans or absolutism, preferring to chase after picaresque characters with flaws and wills of their own."[112] None of the characters, heroes or villains, are depicted as purely righteous, and even their tendencies toward nobility are highly satirized. More importantly, all are seen to be actively pursuing their personal passions and desires, from Sister Bronwyn's broken vows in pursuit of adventure to Galatia 9's hotheaded tendency to charge in valiantly to save the day.

Penley argues that, perhaps more than the futuristic technologies depicted in fantasies of space, the science of the body and its desires are of particular interest to women in science fiction media fandom, that fanfiction writers in particular have eschewed male fans' focus on gadgets and instead "defined *technology* in a way that includes the technologies of the body, the mind, and everyday life."[113] Haraway, similarly, emphasizes a focus on the body's role in our culture's increasing technologization and in "space stories," suggesting that by remembering embodiment as the nature/culture divide becomes ever blurrier, "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools and ourselves."[114] Frequently, however, depictions of cyborgs in science fiction have done just the opposite, pushing fetishized embodiment to extremes rather than collapsing the gender binary. Claudia Springer observes the irony that, even as concepts of transcending the body saturate science fiction philosophy, "instead of representing cyborgs as intellectual wizards whose bodies have withered away and been replaced by computer terminals, popular culture gives us muscular hulks

distinguished by their superior fighting skills."[115] While super-buff male cyborgs tend to be macho killing machines, females tend to be portrayed as both designed for and dangerous to men, sexually. Springer observes that with fictional "cyberbodies," we tend to "find giant pumped-up pectoral muscles on the males and enormous breasts on the females."[116] This extreme difference in the portrayal of male (as idealized hypermasculinity) and female (as idealized sexual objects) cyborgs in popular culture speaks to the inherent pitfalls in Western liberal humanist philosophy, which runs like a current through the genre of science fiction.

Women in space, much like the threat the descendants of Molly Medea pose to Kalif Bajar's sense of entitlement as the descendant of the Dread Dictator, are often a source of horror in sci fi, an assault on the integrity of the male human subject. Jennifer Parker-Starbuck argues that within science and sci fi, including fantasies of cyborgs, "the creation of new technologies has been driven by liberal humanism's technological determinism, which felt that bodies could co-exist with technology as long as the (male) body remained in control."[117] Graham, observing that within this representational paradigm "women, racial and sexual minorities, political radicals or those with physical or mental impairments are designated inhuman by virtue of their non-identity to the white, male reasoning able-bodied subject," specifically draws a comparison between the metaphor as of the cyborg, the horror of Borg assimilation in *Star Trek*, and the liberal humanist values of Western culture: "the Borg/cyborg body, in its mutability and hideous visibility, is effectively a feminized body, and thus anathema to a set of values which still privileges mind, reason and the transcendence of contingency."[118] Notably, however, Parker-Starbuck also remarks upon her own discovery of feminism in cyborg imagery as a teenager, watching *The Bionic Woman*: "Although I knew little of technology then, I recognized its (theatrical) potential for change. Jaime Sommers could leap tall buildings *and* choose a career

path."[119] As Adam points out, "the cyborg is not a feminist invention, indeed in its manifestation in films such as *Terminator* and *Robocop* it is the epitome of masculine destruction, yet it has been appropriated as a feminist icon."[120] Lee's *Starstruck* even goes so far as to completely reverse the gendered cyborg trope of pop culture: the violent, muscle-machine depiction of the male cyborg is reflected in the female Orga, whose "Orga smash!" references the hyper-masculine Hulk.

Starstruck's camp aesthetic further suggests that gender barriers might be breached through a barrage of irreverence. The story overflows, as Stevens describes, with "much drinking, explosions, polymorphous polyamory, slapstick chaos, some songs, and vicious satire."[121] Its heroines and villains alike are parodies of themselves, layered in pop culture references and imagery. Lee recounts that *Starstruck* "got quite a reaction to the fact that there were so many female characters in the story. (Is the writer lesbian? Does she have a political agenda? Is the artist gay? Do they both hate men?)" Factoring in outrage over the skimpy costumes, she remarks, "We couldn't win! We managed to piss off the feminists and the macho guys. And both groups missed that we were joking about everything."[122] As divisive as interpretations may have been amongst audiences, however, the show's ultimate message is one of strength in unity.

In the *Star Trek* universe, both Seven of Nine and Hugh—the main representatives of Borg identity who are reintegrated into human culture—use plural personal pronouns ("we") even after severed from the collective. As each individually insists, "We are Borg."[123] After transitioning to singular personal pronouns ("I") upon gradually discovering a sense of individuality, both characters' values remain forever geared toward collective well-being. This mentality of collective rather than individual interest is apparently shared among the crew of *The*

Harpy, in stark contrast to the self-interested, backstabbing villains of Verloona's *Siren 3*. The heroines of *Starstruck* represent, on many levels, Haraway's suggestion that cyborg mentality has the potential to break through the divisive effect of identity politics via "another response through coalition—affinity, not identity."[124] Aside from gender, *The Harpy*'s crew is a diverse batch of strong personalities who frequently clash in opinion, yet their dedication both to each other and to the greater good is never in question.

Terran Teratology

In an iconic exchange, Captain James T. Kirk once stated, "Everybody's human," to which Spock famously replied: "I find that remark… insulting."[125] For sci fi geek theatre, the posthuman means a redefinition of humanity and its philosophies about the universe, life, and itself. As Hayles explicates, "the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice."[126] When expanding our understanding of what constitutes life and sentience, agency and autonomy lie at the heart of the matter. Humanity is undergoing radical redefinition, and our relationships both to nonhumans and populations who have been dehumanized must necessarily shift. By deconstructing the human subject and replacing it with a diverse and intersectional universe, full of unique embodiments—races, sexualities, genders, and variations thereupon—geek theatre calls on its present audience to question humanity's assumptions about ourselves and our place in the universe.

Figure 31: Melissa Paladino as E-V and Kelly Rae O'Donnell & Andrea Marie Smith as Zimlek in the original Vampire Cowboys production of *Fight Girl Battle World* by Qui Nguyen; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 32: Noshir Dalal as Adon-Ra, Maureen Sebastian as J'an Jah, and Melissa Paladino as E-V in the original Vampire Cowboys production of *Fight Girl Battle World* by Qui Nguyen; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 33: Karen Bebb as Erotica Ann in the original Off-Off Broadway production of *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place in 1980; Photo by and used with permission of Sean S. Smith, https://www.motorgrafix.com

Figure 34: Lauri Gittleman as Eeeeeeeeeluh in the original Off-Off Broadway production of *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place in 1980; Photo by and used with permission of Sean S. Smith, https://www.motorgrafix.com

Figure 35: Susan Norfleet Lee as Brucilla in the original Off-Off Broadway production of *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place in 1980; Photo by and used with permission of Sean S. Smith, https://www.motorgrafix.com

Figure 36: Elise Soeder as the Narrator in EDGE of Orion's 2018 production of *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren; Photo by Scout Story, used with permission of EDGE of Orion

Figure 37: Liam Walsh as puppeteer and Rhys Read as the Ghost of Kahless Present in EDGE of Orion's 2018 production of *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren; Photo by Scout Storey, used with permission of EDGE of Orion

Figure 38: Tony Bunnell as SQuja' and Ann-Claude Rakotoniaina as the Ghost of Kahless Past in EDGE of Orion's 2018 production of *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren; Photo by Scout Storey, used with permission of EDGE of Orion

Figure 39: Julia Williams as ’emlI’ in EDGE of Orion’s 2018 production of *A Klingon Christmas Carol* by Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren; Photo by Scout Storey, used with permission of EDGE of Orion

Figure 40: Paco Tolson as LC-4 and Temar Underwood as General Dan’h in the original Vampire Cowboys production of *Fight Girl Battle World* by Qui Nguyen; Usage permission by Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company

Figure 41: Elaine Lee as Galatia 9 in the original Off-Off Broadway production of *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place in 1980; Photo by and used with permission of Sean S. Smith, https://www.motorgrafix.com

Figure 42: Paul Ratkevich as Kalif Bajar, Sandra Spurney as Verloona, and Neal Ashmun as Rah El Rex in the original Off-Off Broadway production of *Starstruck* by Elaine Lee with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place in 1980; Photo by and used with permission of Sean S. Smith, https://www.motorgrafix.com

[1] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 247.
[2] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 310.
[3] Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
[4] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 124, 126.
[5] Ralph Willingham, *Science Fiction and the Theatre* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 37-8.
[6] For more on Moebius Theatre, see Jane Bloomquist and William McMillan, "Science Fiction Theater the Moebius Way," *Patterns of the Fantastic*, ed. Donald M. Hassler (Chicago: Starmont House, 1983), 81-90.
I further discuss Dad's Garage Theatre's world premiere of Travis Sharp and Haddon Kime's *Wicket* in my essay "Identity and Narrative Ownership in *Black Nerd* and *Wicket: A Parody Musical*."
[7] Marla Carlson, *Affect, Animals, and Autists: Feeling around the Edges of the Human in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 6.
[8] Marla Carlson, "Furry Cartography: Performing Species," *Theatre Journal* 63 no. 2 (2011): 195. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2011.0038.
[9] "Other," *Elaine Lee Online*, accessed 11 Nov 2020, https://elaineleeonline.com/other-work/.
[10] Tym Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK: The Roots and Branches of Elaine Lee & Michael Kaluta's Space Opera," *Rock Sex*, 8 Oct 2009, https://tymstevens.blogspot.com/2009/10/big-bang-of-starstruck-roots-and_08.html.
[11] Elaine Lee, with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place, *Starstruck* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1985), 8-9, 32-4, 5-7, 16-17, 20-1, 17, 107.
[12] Christopher Kidder-Mostrom and Sasha Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, trans. Chris Lipscombe, original trans. Laura Thurston, Bill Hedrick, and Christopher Kidder-Mostrom (Chicago: Commedia Beauregard, 2007), 118.
[13] Qui Nguyen, *Men of Steel* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2007), 91.
[14] Qui Nguyen, *Living Dead in Denmark* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2008), 30.
[15] Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* (New York: University of Humberside, 1994), 46.
[16] Wolmark, *Aliens and Others*, 27; Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 81.
[17] Bernardi, *Star Trek and History*, 81.
[18] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.
[19] Qui Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2008), 29-30.
[20] Lee, *Starstruck*, 35.
[21] Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 62.
[22] Anthony Lioi, *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 84.
[23] Lioi offers as examples the silicon-based Horta trying to protect her young in the original series episode "Devil in the Dark" and the humpback whales in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*.
Lioi, *Nerd Ecology*.
[24] Rowland and Barton, "Outside Oneself in *World of Warcraft*."
[25] Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2016).
[26] Carlson, "Furry Cartography": 198.
[27] Carlson, *Affect, Animals, and Autists*, 2.
[28] Cary Wolfe, Introduction to *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xx.
[29] Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 47-8.
[30] His language, in its reference to logic, particularly echoes interspecies tensions between humans and Vulcans in *Star Trek*, a tension constantly played out in the original series by Spock's interactions with the human crew of the *Enterprise*.
Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 55.
[31] Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 9, 19.
[32] Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 13.

[33] Translation: "We are Klingons!"
Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*.
[34] Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 13.
[35] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 314.
[36] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 12, 121.
[37] Jen Gunnels, "'Ta'mey Dun, Bommey Dun' (Great Deeds, Great Songs): The Klingon Opera *U* as Ethnodramaturgical Performance," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 1 (2012): 61.
[38] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 7.
[39]Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 5.
[40] Christopher Kidder-Mostrom, email message to author, 30 July 2020.
[41] See Bernardi, *Star Trek and History*.
[42] Gunnels, "'Ta'mey Dun, Bommey Dun' (Great Deeds, Great Songs)": 78.
[43] Gunnels, "'Ta'mey Dun, Bommey Dun' (Great Deeds, Great Songs)": 75.
[44] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 110-111.
[45] "Rura Penthe," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 8 December 2020 https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Rura_Penthe.
[46] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 20.
[47] A kut'luch is a Klingon knife designed to inflict as much as pain as possible. Its uses include a ritual bloodletting, in preparation of becoming a warrior.
See "Kut'luch," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Kut%27luch.
Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 14.
[48] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 24.
[49] In the *Star Trek* universe, the Ferengi are a race of aliens whose culture values profit, greed, and exploitation. They are considered particularly dishonorable by Klingons.
See "Ferengi," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Ferengi.
Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 72, 48.
[50] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 74.
[51] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 102.
[52] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 96-108.
[53] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 12, 121.
[54] See "Redshirt," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Redshirt.
[55] See "Klingon Death Ritual," *Memory Alpha*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Klingon_death_ritual; *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 1, episode 20, "Heart of Glory," directed by Rob Bowman, written by Maurice Hurley, Herbert Wright, and D.C. Fontana, aired 21 March 1988, Paramount.
[56] Gunnels, "'Ta'mey Dun, Bommey Dun' (Great Deeds, Great Songs)": 61-2.
[57] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 66-8.
[58] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 110.
[59] Kidder-Mostrom and Warren, *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, 121.
[60] "About Us," *EDGE of Orion*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://edgeoforion.com/aboutus.
[61] "No Easy Target," *EDGE of Orion*, accessed 1 October 2019, https://edgeoforion.com/no-easy-target; "Gem Seeker," *EDGE of Orion*, accessed 1 October 2019, https://edgeoforion.com/gem-seeker.
[62] "About Us," *EDGE of Orion*, accessed 9 December 2020, https://edgeoforion.com/aboutus.
[63] I personally inquired into why *KCC* had been fully cast with normate actors, given EDGE of Orion's community and mission statement. Orion Couling expressed regret on this point, stating, "We had built a very exciting plan to create more opportunities for our community bridging the needs of the show with an individualized support plan to bring in company members who have Down Syndrome but realiz[ed] we couldn't financially make the show work." This point highlights a struggle faced by many small theatres, limited by funding, in balancing production budgeting with social goals and ideals.
Orion Couling (founder and artistic director of EDGE of Orion), email interview with the author, 3 December 2020.
[64] Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*.
[65] carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 113.
[66] Translation: "We were machines."
Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.*, *Project Gutenberg*, 2 Aug 2004, accessed 12 Sept 2020, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13083/13083-h/13083-h.htm.

[67] Čapek, *R.U.R.*
[68] Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 23-4.
[69] Ian Thomas Malone, "Please State the Nature of Your Humanity: The Doctor and the Quest to Find Personality in Technology," *Exploring Star Trek: Voyager: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert L. Lively (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 180, 182.
[70] Nguyen, *Fight Girl Battle World*, 24, 62.
[71] Lee, *Starstruck*, 44-5.
[72] Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 139.
[73] Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK."
[74] Jennifer González, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden (London: Routledge, 2000), 70.
[75] Lee, *Starstruck*, 6.
[76] Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 181.
[77] Sue-Ellen Case, "Dracula's Daughters: In-Corporating Avatars in Cyberspace," *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 171.
[78] Lee, *Starstruck*, 94-5.
[79] Lee, *Starstruck*, 102.
[80] Lee, *Starstruck*, 96.
[81] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 283-4, 265.
[82] Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 189.
[83] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 12.
[84] Alison Adam, "Feminist AI Projects and Cyberfutures," *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden, (London: Routledge, 2000), 282.
[85] Lee, *Starstruck*, 68.
[86] Lee, *Starstruck*, 91.
[87] Lee, *Starstruck*, 93.
[88] Malone, "Please State the Nature of Your Humanity," 185.
[89] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 295.
[90] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 292.
[91] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.
[92] David Z. Saltz, "The Collaborative Subject: Telerobotic Performance and Identity," *Performance Research* 6, no. 3 (2001): 81.
[93] Sue-Ellen Case, "Performing the Cyberbody on the Transnational Stage," *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 153.
[94] Susan Stryker, "Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb: Transsexuality and the Emergence of Postmodernity," *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, and Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Susan Squier (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 165.
[95] *Revenge Song*, written by Qui Nguyen, dir. Robert Ross Parker, Geffen Playhouse, Los Angeles, CA, 6 March 2020.
[96] Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK."
[97] Lee, *Starstruck*, 31.
[98] Carlson, "Furry Cartography": 199.
[99] Lee, *Starstruck*, 103.
[100] Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," 65.
[101] González, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies," 63-4.
[102] *Star Trek*, season 3, episode 24, "Turnabout Intruder," directed by Herb Wallerstein, written by Arthur Singer and Gene Roddenberry, aired 3 June 1969, Paramount.
[103] Sarah Jeong, "Did Inadequate Women's Healthcare Destroy *Star Wars*' Old Republic?" *Vice*, 3 Jan 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/53d4db/womens-healthcare-star-wars.
[104] Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997), 22.
[105] Lee, *Starstruck*, 99-100.
[106] Lee, *Starstruck*, 34.

[107] Katharina Vester, "POISE, Miss Lane! Super Femininity in U.S. Comic Books in the 1940s and 1950s," *Bodies in Flux: Embodiments at the End of Anthropocentricism*, edited by Hanan Muzaffar and Barbara Braid (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2019), 117.
[108] Wolmark, *Aliens and Others*, 89.
[109] Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK."
[110] Wolmark, *Aliens and Others*, 89.
[111] Lee, *Starstruck*, 71.
[112] Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK."
[113] Penley, *NASA/TREK*, 118.
[114] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 316.
[115] Claudia Springer, "The Pleasure of the Interface," *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 47.
[116] Springer, "The Pleasure of the Interface," 41.
[117] Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance*, (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 21-2.
[118] Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 53, 147.
[119] Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre*, xii.
[120] Adam, "Feminist AI Projects and Cyberfutures," 283.
[121] Tym Stevens, "A History of Starstruck," *StarstruckComics.com!* accessed 10 Nov 2020, https://starstruckcomics.com/a-history-of-starstruck/.
[122] Stevens, "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK."
[123] See *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 23, "I Borg," directed by Robert Lederman, written by René Echevarria, aired 11 May 1992, Paramount; *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 4, episode 2, "The Gift," directed by Joe Menosky, written by Anson Williams, aired 10 September 1997, Paramount.
[124] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 296.
[125] *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, written by Leonard Nimoy, Lawrence Konner, Mark Rosenthal, Nicholas Meyer, and Denny Martin Flinn (1991; Hollywood, CA).
[126] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 286.

Conclusion: Infinite Identities

The stages on which geek theatre is produced—like the fan clubs and conventions at which I first began to discover communities of "my people"—are a shared space for creators and fans. As these plays are usually performed in small and minimalistic theatres, I have on countless occasions taken my seat with my feet on the very stage the characters tread across. Such intimate spaces engender not only an affective live experience but physical interaction with the performance world. I have been spattered with fake blood and glitter; showered with costume pieces; given props, lap dances, food and drink; and been directly addressed by actors, many of whom I got to know over repeated attendances. While I have of course frequently contacted creators of geek theatre to discuss their work, often actors and writers have approached me first to voice appreciation after shows for my expression of fandom and enter a discourse with me on the production or performance group.

Perhaps the most important identifying feature of the art form is that it is *of* the geek culture it engages. While firmly in the business of "making fun" out of its source texts, unlike contemporary geek chic which continues to "laugh at," geek theatre "laughs with" geek fandom. It directly engages media fandom's belief, in the words of Anthony Lioi, "that styrofoam rocks and bad special effects are a gateway to eternal verities. This is the crux of the matter, the place where the ridiculous fosters the sublime." In this way, the campiness of geek theatre as well as its reliance on pop culture references lean into, as Lioi describes, "the possibility that cheap materials are capable of shouldering the heavy burdens of meaning."[1] This possibility is

distinctly utopian, both in its apparent naivete and its willingness to reshape reality: abandoning real*ism* in search of meaning, hope, futurity, and—on many levels—queerness.

Just as fandom's source texts reshape reality, so do fandom's creative works—geek theatre included—reshape these texts to continue the pursuit of utopian visions. Abigail De Kosnik observes that fan culture will constantly "reperform" or "play back, with a difference, what they have stored in their memories" from the study of and discourse over source texts' universes.[2] This "difference" enacted upon texts revolves around the diverse differences among geeks.

In this dissertation, I have argued that geek theatre is democratizing theatre through diversifying practices by staging fandom, along with established fan creative practices interested in making space for marginalized identities; implementing methods of queering canonical content and foregrounding queer narratives; casting ethnically diverse characters and foregrounding intersectional racial narratives; and decentering Western, patriarchal, and anthropocentric attitudes in exploring the boundaries and potentiality of personhood. I have, in the process, excluded many subjects addressed by or relating to geek theatre that are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

For instance, I have not explored geek theatre's roots in earlier theatrical traditions such as burlesque, as a form both highly referential as well as simultaneously critical and celebratory of pop culture texts.[3] Geek adaptations of Shakespeare provide an excellent comparison particularly with Shakespearean burlesque. Qui Nguyen's *Living Dead in Denmark* mashes up various Shakespeare plotlines, set against the background of a zombie apocalypse that reshapes the plays' fixation upon death, violence, and monstrosity. Stupid Shakespeare has produced multiple geek adaptations at Otherworld Theatre, including *Super Richard World 3*, which

recasts historical figures obscure to most American audiences as Nintendo characters, and *Picklerickicles,* which archetypes characters from the cartoon *Rick and Morty* to emphasize original play's class system.[4] These plays, in the tradition of Shakespearean burlesque, are prime examples of what Frances Teague identifies as "comedy of imitation."[5] The referential humor relies on audience familiarity, yet it also returns the Shakespearean texts from the realm of high culture to entertainment for the masses.[6]

In focusing exclusively on scripted plays, I did not examine other modes of staged geek performance such as nerdlesque or improv. Cosplay performances such as those produced by nerdlesques, which are striptease-style performances based around fandom references and characters, as well as other styles—including, as examples, Raks Geek's belldancing and firespinning or GeekHaus's drag extravaganzas—often promote body positivity in addition to transformative adaptations of visual cultural signs. While there is a strong tradition to cosplay "to type"—that is, choosing a character on the basis of one's body type—an increasing number of cosplayers are choosing either to disregard or to purposely cosplay against the grain of canonical representation. This resistant form of cosplay can occur across many physical attributes, including gender (known as crossplay), race, size, age, and ability. While authenticity in the form of aesthetic accuracy will always be celebrated, cosplayers and cosplay-based performances often respond to inadequate self-representation in media by appropriating idealized characters and reperforming them on their own terms (see Figure 43).[7]

Since I primarily emphasized geek aesthetic in relation to fan culture and camp, I did not explore geek theatre's creative implementation of digital media in live performance. Often parodying media fandoms' source texts, many geek theatres have employed projections when resources allow. Vampire Cowboys plays tend to incorporate projections in some capacity into

all of their plays, a technique deployed with other staging tactics to "frame" live content in ways that reference film or comic book visual tropes. The combination of such techniques with digital media culminated Qui Nguyen's Vampire Cowboys production *Revenge Song* at Geffen Playhouse when action hero Julie D'Abigny is followed by a camera as she dashes about the stage against comically two-dimensional set pieces in full view of the live audience, while a cinematic parody of superspy heist sequence is projected behind her (see Figure 44).

Additionally, as theatre were shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic, geek theatre groups quickly embraced and adapted to virtual formats, due perhaps in part to a cultural overlap with online gaming platforms. Nguyen released a "Virtual Realms Edition" of *She Kills Monsters* in the spring of 2020.[8] Dad's Garage kicked off its "Social Distancing Spectacular" on Twitch within a week of WHO declaring a global pandemic, including multiple geek improv series such as *Improvisors in Dungeons Getting Dragons*, a hybrid of their staged *Improvised Dungeons & Dragons* and an actual *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign (see Figure 45), and *Scandal: League of Supervillains*, an improvised soap opera about a league of supervillains who cannot yet afford their own evil island lair and thus have been forced to work remotely.[9] Team Starkid has for many years made a point using YouTube to expand accessibility to theatre, as a result cultivating a national audience.[10]

While focusing on transformative impulses of fandom, I have not delved into the often-gendered cultural tensions between transformative versus affirmational fan behaviors—that is, transformational adaptation and creation of fan canon versus the collection and celebration of producers' official products and canon—nor fandom's establishment of the term "transformative" in resistance to the derogatory label of "derivative."[11] Neither have I directly engaged with issues of toxic masculinity in geek culture, such as the #GamerGate controversy

and broader symptoms of gender discrimination or harassment.[12] I have touched on the subject of representations of masculinity and femininity in geek genres and some fandom source texts, but the relationship between these representations, their marketing, and toxic masculinity in aspects of geek culture merits closer examination. Geek theatre provides particularly discursive terrain in comic book genre plays such as Qui Nguyen's *Men of Steel*, which explores manifestations of masculinity in relation to various worldviews, and Kelly Jean Fitzsimmons's *All I Want Is One More Meanwhile…*, which explores motherhood and gender politics through the lens of cultural expectations regarding superheroes (see Figure 46).

Despite touching on the subject, I have not examined geek chic's effects upon mainstream theatre. These subjects merit closer consideration, whereas my purpose in this dissertation has been to illustrate the relationship between geek theatre and diversity in staging and storytelling. In addition to geek theatre's ability to usher in new audiences to the theatre from media fandom culture, I believe theatre has a whole can learn much from geek theatre's focus upon commonality between creators and audience and upon cultivating a fandom community.

I have emphasized the utopian aspects of the fandom community and geek theatre as "safe spaces." While many fandoms and geek theatre companies strive toward this ideal, I have noted flaws and points of failure, and I do not wish to imply that any such ideal has been achieved without serious errors and shortcomings. For example, the controversy over accusations against Otherworld Theatre Company provides an example of failure to maintain a safe space for all its artists.[13] I have excluded work by multiple other theatre companies producing successful geek plays on the basis that these plays and representation within these organizations are

problematic or because they simply fall short of pushing boundaries in ways I have come to expect within geek theatre.

Though I have organized the chapters of this dissertation to approach case studies from more or less one identarian viewpoint at a time, these plays typically tackle multiple overlapping social issues without the need to separate them into discrete or isolated subject positions. In multiple cases, I chose to restrict play analysis to one chapter, though several plays examined are could have been examined through multiple lenses. For instance, *She Kills Monsters*, which I chose to discuss in Chapter 2 in order to highly its focus on queer experience, was also a prime candidate for Chapter 1's discussion of geek identity. *Kapow-i Gogo*, also a Chapter 2 case study, would have fit very well in Chapter 4's discussion of variant embodiment, given that multiple characters are cyborgs and non-human species. Such plays exemplify the "infinite" aspect of identity and personhood.

Geek theatre occupies a space in which identities simultaneously are of most critical significance and yet cease to hold meaning in the sense of identity politics. Lines between multitudes of Others—not only geek and queer, but women, ethnic minorities, disabled, neurodivergent, and all those who do not occupy the privileged space of "normal"—intersect and underscore similarities as well as distinctions. These usually unheard Others become members in a collective of individual identities. Otherness becomes the norm, and normativity itself comes under the criticism of actively voiced diversity, while inclusivity need not water down the distinctions of identity.

The intersectionality of identity in geek theatre is perhaps best illustrated by a comical exchange in Qui Nguyen's Vampire Cowboys play *Six Rounds of Vengeance*:

LUCKY: So you're a gay black English samurai cowboy?

MALCOLM: Yeah.

LUCKY: That's a lot of labels to wear.

MALCOLM: It is.[14]

Notably, all of Malcolm's identity labels play a role in his interactions, yet none of them define his character. Both the comedic playfulness of the dialogue and the direct engagement with complex intersectional identity are, as I have argued in this dissertation, hallmarks of much of geek theatre. This particular exchange evokes the potential for multiplicity within identity, beautifully described in a metaphor for queerness, cited by Robert H. Moser, Alberto Tibaji, George Contini, as "identity as a constellation, that is, an assemblage of celestial *bodies* (and sources of light) in constant motion, but also forming an imaginary, yet recognizable, whole."[15] Similarly, in Matt Cox's geek play *Puffs*, Helga—the founder of the Puffs house at "a certain school of magic and magic"—counters criticism over her rejection of identarian categorization by asking: "Why be one thing when you can be… *everything else*?"[16] While the school's other three founders/houses essentialize their identities around being "brave," "smart," or elitist, her acceptance of all students willing to learn expresses ideals of inclusivity as well as intersectionality. Likewise, geek theatre creates a space for inclusivity, for learning through discourse, and above all for expressing "infinite diversity in infinite combinations."

In spite of its plotlines of world-saving and soul-finding, geek theatre rarely professes a desire to revolutionize the sociopolitical sphere or trailblaze a utopian world order. In general, its writers and audiences are in it to have fun and fly their personal freak flags without normative judgment. Yet the trail is blazed and the example is set. Partially because geek artists do not always view their plays as important theatre, their unapologetic engagement with significant

social issues regarding equality is all the more significant. Without reducing or separating aspects of their creators' or subjects' identities, geek theatre stages fandom and personal politics alongside each other in one culturally critical and celebratory work of entertainment.

Figure 43: Connor Konz, Fox E. Kim, and Jo MaMa in GeekHaus at Berlin Nightclub in Chicago; Photo by and used with permission of Erik M. Kommer

Figure 44: Noshir Dalal, Tom Myers, Margaret Odette, and Beth Hawkes in *Revenge Song: A Vampire Cowboys Creation at Geffen Playhouse by Qui Nguyen*, directed by Robert Ross Parker; Photo by Jeff Lorch, courtesy of Geffen Playhouse

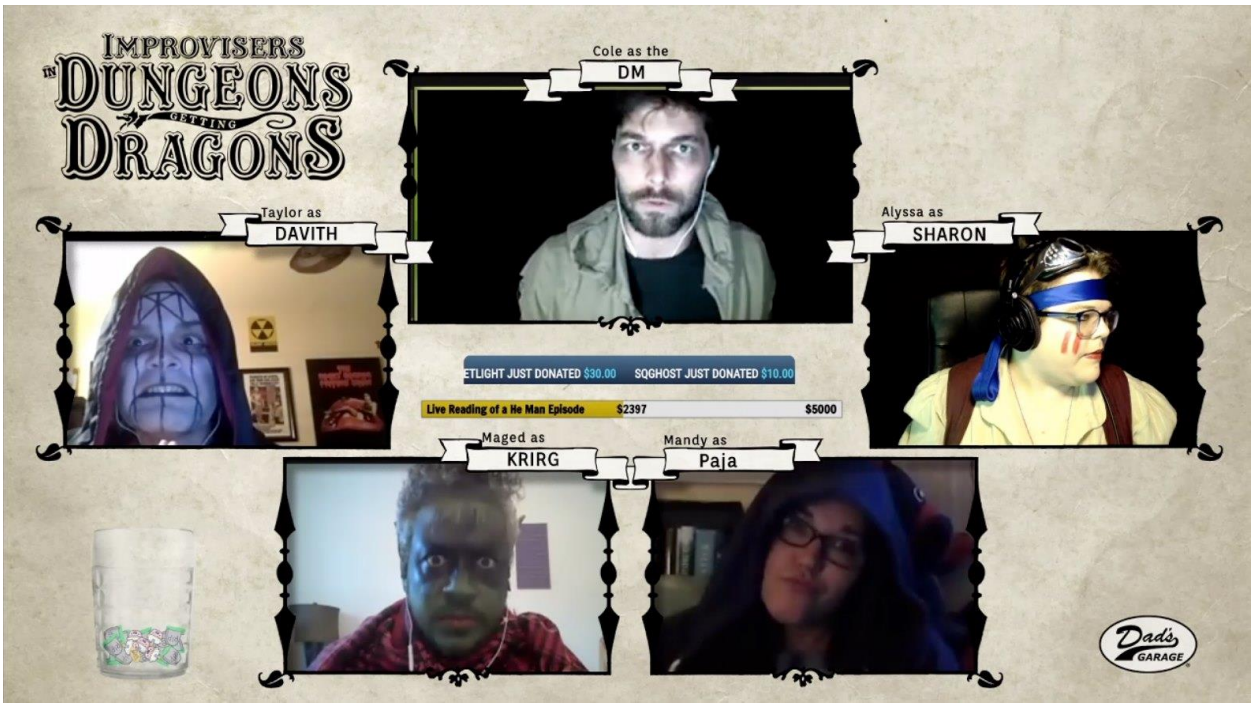

Figure 45: Cole Wadsworth, Taylor Roy, Alyssa Brosy, Maged Roushdi, and Mandy Butler in *Improvisers in Dungeons Getting Dragons*, part of Dad's Garage Theatre Company's Social Distancing Extravaganza; Graphic design by Travis Sharp; Usage permission by Dad's Garage

Figure 46: Kelly Jean Fitzsimmons's *All I Want Is One More Meanwhile…* at Otherworld Theatre; Usage permission granted by photographer, with a request to remain uncredited

[1] Lioi, *Nerd Ecology*, 3.
[2] De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 7.
[3] Though I briefly touch on this argument in my essay "Identity and Narrative Ownership in *Black Nerd* and *Wicket: A Parody Musical*," it is a subject that merits deeper exploration.
[4] Otherworld Theatre, "Stupid Shakespeare's Super Richard World III," *YouTube*, 15 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgors5fb2h8; Otherworld Theatre, "PICKLERICKICLES: Stupid Shakespeare," *YouTube*, 20 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5f2twz1ope.
[5] Frances Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[6] For more on burlesque adaptations of Shakespeare, see Lawrence Levine, "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (1984).
[7] For an introduction to nerdlesque, see Weiser, "Forget Fan Fiction. In Nerdlesque, the Garters Come Off."
[8] Logan Culwell-Block, "New Adaptation of Qui Nguyen's *She Kills Monsters* Released Specifically for Virtual Productions," *Playbill*, 5 May 2020, https://www.playbill.com/article/new-adaptation-of-qui-nguyens-she-kill-monsters-released-specifically-for-virtual-productions.
[9] "Dad's Garage Social Distancing Spectacular," *Dad's Garage*, 15 March 2020, https://dadsgarage.com/dads-garage-social-distancing-spectacular/; "dadsgarageatl," *Twitch*, https://www.twitch.tv/dadsgarageatl.
[10] A mission statement regarding worldwide accessibility to theatre via the internet has been removed from Team StarKid's website. It is quoted in the Fanlore wiki.
"StarKid Productions," *Fanlore*, accessed 12 April 2021, https://fanlore.org/wiki/starkid_productions#cite_note-2.
[11] See Suzanne Scott, "A Fangirl's Place Is in the Resistance," *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: New York University, 2019).
[12] For more on women and video gaming, see Shira Chess, *Play Like a Feminist* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020); Amanda C. Cole, *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).
[13] Kerry Reid, "Otherworld Theatre Faces Social Media Onslaught," *Chicago Reader*, 25 November 2020, https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/otherworld-theatre-faces-social-media-onslaught/.
[14] Qui Nguyen, *Six Rounds of Vengeance* (New York: Playscripts, 2016), 27.
[15] Moser, Tibaji, and Contini, "*Always (K)new*": 74.
[16] Matt Cox, *Puffs, Or: Seven Increasingly Eventful Years at a Certain School of Magic and Magic* (New York: A Certain Publisher, 2018), 80.

Bibliography

"About GLAAD." *GLAAD Media Awards*. Accessed March 14, 2017. http://www.glaad.org/about.

"About Us." *EDGE of Orion*. Accessed 9 December 2020. https://edgeoforion.com/aboutus.

Adam, Alison. "Feminist AI Projects and Cyberfutures." In *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Edited by Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden, 276-290. London: Routledge, 2000.

Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." In *Material Feminisms*. Edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 120-154. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Bernardi, Daniel Leonard. *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Bloomquist, Jane and William McMillan. "Science Fiction Theater the Moebius Way." In *Patterns of the Fantastic*. Edited by Donald M. Hassler, 81-90. Chicago: Starmont House, 1983.

Booth, Mark. "*Campe-Toi!* On the Origins and Definitions of Camp." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*. Edited by Fabio Cleto, 66-79. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Braidotti, Rosi. “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines.” In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury, 59-79. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Bray, John Patrick. “‘There’s Too Many of Them!’: Off-Off Broadway’s Performance of Geek Culture.” *Theatre Symposium* Vol. 22, no. 1 (2014): 121-133.

Breckman, Andy, A. Whitney Brown, E. Jean Carroll, Tom Davis, James Downey, Al Franken, Eddie Gorodetsky, Jack Handey, Phil Hartman, George Meyer, Lorne Michaels, Kevin Nealon, Herbert Sargent, Marc Shaiman, Rosie Shuster, Robert Smigel, Bonnie Turner, Terry Turner, Jon Vitti, and Christine Zander, writers. *Saturday Night Live*. Season 12, episode 8, “William Shatner/Lone Justice.” Directed by Paul Miller. Aired 20 December 1986. NBC Studios.

Busse, Kristina and Karen Hellekson. “Introduction: Work in Progress.” In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th Anniversary Edition. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Čapek, Karel. *R.U.R.: Rossume’s Universal Robots*. *Project Gutenberg*. 2 Aug 2004. Accessed 12 Sept 2020. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13083/13083-h/13083-h.htm.

Cardiel, Christopher Louis Beauprey. “Are We Cool Yet?: A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Nerd and Geek Representation in Popular Television.” Master’s thesis, Portland State University, 2012.

Carlson, Marla. *Affect, Animals, and Autists: Feeling around the Edges of the Human in Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

Carlson, Marla. “Furry Cartography: Performing Species.” *Theatre Journal* 63 no. 2 (2011): 191-208. https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2011.0038.

Carr, Jon. *Black Nerd*. Directed by Tiffany Porter. Dad’s Garage, Atlanta, July 2018.

Carr, Jon. *Black Nerd Script V7*. Unpublished manuscript, 2018.

Carr, Jon. *City Lights*. By Lois Reitzes. WABE/NPR, 29 November 2017. https://www.wabe.org/dads-garage-improviser-premieres-first-play-black-nerd/.

Carr, Jon. *The Wrath of Con*. Directed by Scott Warren, Dad’s Garage, Atlanta, 18 July 2019.

Carr, Jon. *The Wrath of Con*. Unpublished manuscript, 2012.

Carr, Jon. *The Wrath of Con 2: Into Dorkness*. Unpublished manuscript, 2019.

carrington, andré. *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Chou, Rosalind S. and Joe R. Feagin. *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2015.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: One World, 2015.

Coppa, Francesca. “A Brief History of Media Fandom.” In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006.

Coppa, Francesca. “Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance.” In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 218-237. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Core, Philip. “From *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth*.” In *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*. Edited by Fabio Cleto, 80-86. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Couling, Orion (founder and artistic director of EDGE of Orion), email interview with the author, 3 December 2020.

Cox, Matt. *Kapow-i GoGo*. Unpublished manuscript, 2015.

Cox, Matt. *Puffs, Or: Seven Increasingly Eventful Years at a Certain School of Magic and Magic*. New York: A Certain Publisher, 2018.

Craig-Galván, Inda. “Black Super Hero Magic Mama Geffen 3-13-19 Draft Inda Craig-Galván.” *New Play Exchange*, 2016. https://newplayexchange.org/plays/50834/black-super-hero-magic-mama.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” In *Feminist Legal Theory: Foundations Vol. 1*. Edited by by D. Kelly Weisberg, 383-395. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43., no. 6 (1991). https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039: 1241-1299.

Cross, Gary. *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

“Cut Scene.” *The RuneScape, Fandom Wiki*. Accessed 12 November 2019. https://runescape.fandom.com/wiki/Cutscene.

De Kosnik, Abigail. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

Derecho, Abigail, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction." In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chigago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Dillon, Barbra. "Fanbase Press Interviews Graydon Schlichter on the Upcoming Production of 'Crabbe and Goyle are Dead'(Hollywood Fringe Festival 2019)." *Fanbase Press*, 6 June 2019. Accessed 5 November 2019. http://www.fanbasepress.com/index.php/press/interviews/theatre/item/10015-fanbase-press-interviews-graydon-schlichter-on-the-upcoming-production-crabbe-and-goyle-are-dead-hollywood-fringe-festival-2019.

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Echevarria, René, writer. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Season 5, episode 23, "I Borg." Directed by Robert Lederman. Aired 11 May 1992. Paramount.

Eglash, Ron. "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." *Special Text* 20, no. 2 (2002). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/31927: 49-64.

"Ferengi." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 9 December 2020. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Ferengi.

Fielder, Leslie. “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” In *The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Works*. Edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, 225-233. New York: Library of America, 2010.

Fielder, Leslie. “Home as Heaven, Home as Hell.” In *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society*, 145-167. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984.

Gayles, Jonathan. “Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Redux: Masculinity and Misogyny in *Blade*.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 2 (2012): 284-300.

Gayles, Jonathan. *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comic Books*. Directed by Jonathan Gayles (2010; United States: California Newsreel). https://uga.kanopy.com/video/white-scripts-and-black-supermen.

“Gem Seeker.” *EDGE of Orion*. Accessed 1 October 2019. https://edgeoforion.com/gem-seeker.

Gillota, David. “Black Nerds: New Directions in African American Humor.” *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, No. 28 (2013). https://www.jstor.org/stable/23823874: 17-30.

Gomez, Jewelle. “Black Women Heroes: Here’s Reality, Where’s the Fiction?” *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 2 “The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora” (1986). https://www.jstor.org/stable/41067254: 8-13.

González, Jennifer. “Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research.” In *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*. Edited by Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kathryn Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden, 58-73. London: Routledge, 2000.

Graham, Elaine L. *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Gunnels, Jen and Carrie J. Cole. “Culturally Mapping Universes: Fan Production as Ethnographic Fragments.” *Transformative Worlds and Cultures* 7 (2011). https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/241/220.

Gunnels, Jen. “‘Ta’mey Dun, Bommey Dun’ (Great Deeds, Great Songs): The Klingon Opera *U* as Ethnodramaturgical Performance.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 1 (2012): 60-81.

Gygax, Gary. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition: Player’s Handbook*. Lake Geneva: TSR Inc, 1989.

Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.” In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, 128-138. London: Hutchinson, 1980.

Hall, Stuart. “What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (51-52), Rethinking Race (1993). https://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735: 104-114.

Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *The Cybercultures Reader*. Edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, 291-324. London: Routledge, 2000.

Haraway, Donna. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Haraway, Donna. “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.” In *The Monster Theory Reader*. Edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

Hayles, Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Helford, Elyce Rae. "(E)raced Visions: Women of Color and Science Fiction in the United States." *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy*. Edited by Gary Westfahl and George Slusser, 127-138. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Hiyashi, Aya Esther. "Musicking Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media Fandom." doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2018.

hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hurley, Maurice, Herbert Wright, and D.C. Fontana, writers. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Season 1, episode 20, "Heart of Glory." Directed by Rob Bowman. Aired 21 March 1988. Paramount.

"IDIC." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 25 November 2018. http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/IDIC.

Isherwood, Christopher. *The World in the Evening*. 1954. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. "Who Really Owns the 'Blaccent'?" *Vulture*, 24 Aug 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/awkwafina-blaccent-cultural-appropriation.html.

Jenkins, Henry. "Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. Edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, 383-394. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Jenkins, Henry. "*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching." In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Jeong, Sarah. “Did Inadequate Women’s Healthcare Destroy *Star Wars*’ Old Republic?” *Vice*. 3 Jan 2017. https://www.vice.com/en/article/53d4db/womens-healthcare-star-wars.

Johnson, Derek, “Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom.” In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 285-300. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

Jones, Sara Gwenllian. “The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters.” In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 116-130. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Kahler, Eric. “‘Tell Me, Where Am I From?’: A Study Of The Performance Of Geek Identity At Comic Book Conventions.” Master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2015.

Keim, Kitty. *Crabbe and Goyle Are Dead*. Unpublished manuscript, 2019.

Kidder-Mostrom, Christopher and Sasha Warren. *A Klingon Christmas Carol*. Translated by Chris Lipscombe. Original translation by Laura Thurston, Bill Hedrick, and Christopher Kidder-Mostrom. Chicago: Commedia Beauregard, 2007.

Kirkpatrick, Ellen. “On [Dis]play: Outlier Resistance and the Matter of Racebending Superhero Cosplay.” In “Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color,” edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1483.

“Klingon Death Ritual.” *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 9 December 2020. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Klingon_death_ritual.

Koenig, Walter, writer. *Star Trek*. Season 1, episode 7, “The Infinite Vulcan.” Directed by Hal Sutherland. Aired 20 October 1973. NBC.

Kluber, Warren. "Character-World Dialectics on the Contemporary American Stage: Gaming, Role-Playing, and Wrestling with Idioculture." *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 2 (2018): 209-227. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2018.0028.

"Kut'luch." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 9 December 2020. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Kut%27luch.

Lamb, Patricia Frazer and Diana L. Veith. "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines." In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Lee, Elaine with Susan Norfleet Lee and Dale Place. *Starstruck*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 1985.

Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008.

Lioi, Anthony. *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Malone, Ian Thomas. "Please State the Nature of Your Humanity: The Doctor and the Quest to Find Personality in Technology." In *Exploring Star Trek: Voyager: Critical Essays*. Edited by Robert L. Lively, 179-193. Jefferson: McFarland, 2020.

"Marriott Carpet Pattern." *Dragon Con Eternal Members*. Accessed 13 November 2019. https://dragonconeternalmembers.com/marriott-carpet-pattern/.

"Marriott Chariot, The." *Volpin Props*. Accessed 19 August 2020. http://www.volpinprops.com/the-marriott-chariot/?fbclid=IwAR20YTKYhozYmcfNJr6lPumASR5LoCWI4xs0UC1-vIo-YBjmVSKTQdOw-b4.

Ma-Yi Theatre Company. “David Henry Hwang promotes AGENT G! EPISODE 1.” *YouTube*, 1 March 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImsCxXB2HQ8&t=2s.

Ma-Yi Theatre Company. “David Henry Hwang vs Qui Nguyen: THE FINAL SHOWDOWN.” *YouTube*, 9 March 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Cqky0TnIo8.

McWilliams, Ora C. “Who Is Afraid of a Black Spider(-Man)?” In “Appropriating, Interpreting, and Transforming Comic Books,” edited by Matthew J. Costello, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 13 (2013). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0455.

Menosky, Joe and Philip LaZebnik, writers. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, episode 101, “Darmok.” Directed by Winrich Kolbe. Aired 30 September 1991. Paramount.

Meyer, Nicholas, dir. *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Written by Leonard Nimoy, Lawrence Konner, Mark Rosenthal, Nicholas Meyer, and Denny Martin Flinn. 1991; Hollywood, CA.

Miller, Daryl H. “She Created a ‘Black Super Hero Magic Mama’: Inda Craig-Galván on Facing a Parent’s Deepest Fear.” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 2019. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/theater/la-et-cm-inda-craig-galvan-20190313-story.html.

Moon, Dawn Xiana, “A Work of Art is a Refuge and a Resistance.” *Uncanny Magazine*. Accessed 1 October 2019. https://uncannymagazine.com/article/work-art-refuge-resistance/.

Moon, Dawn Xiana. “Meet Dawn Xiana Moon of Raks Geek in Andersonville and Uptown.” *Voyage Chicago*, 18 December 2017. Accessed 1 October 2019. http://voyagechicago.com/interview/meet-dawn-xiana-moon-raks-geek-andersonville-uptown/.

Moon, Dawn Xiana. "Of Asian-Americans and Belly-Dancing Wookiees." *Jim C. Hines*, 20 June 2017. Accessed 1 October 2019. http://www.jimchines.com/2017/06/asian-americans-and-bellydancing-wookiees/.

Moser, Robert H., Alberto Tibaji, and George Contini. "*Always (K)new*: Recombining Identities and Queering Narratives through a Transcultural Theatre Project." *Latin American Theatre Review* 52, no. 2 (2019): 55-79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0003.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Nguyen, Qui. *Fight Girl Battle World*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2008.

Nguyen, Qui. *Living Dead in Denmark*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2008.

Nguyen, Qui. *Men of Steel*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2007.

Nguyen, Qui. *Revenge Song*. Directed by Robert Ross Parker. 6 March 2020. Geffen Playhouse, Los Angeles, CA.

Nguyen, Qui. *She Kills Monsters*. Unpublished manuscript, 2011.

Nguyen, Qui. *Six Rounds of Vengeance*. New York: Playscripts, 2016.

Nguyen, Qui. *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2012.

"No Easy Target." *EDGE of Orion*. Accessed 1 October 2019. https://edgeoforion.com/no-easy-target.

Oluo, Ijeoma. "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman Who Identifies as Black." *The Stranger*, 19 April 2017. https://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black.

Ostroff, Joshua. "Marvel's Luke Cage Is the Bulletproof Black Superhero We Need Right Now." *Huffington Post*, 30 Sept 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/29/marvel-luke-cage_n_12202516.html.

"Other." *Elaine Lee Online*. Accessed 11 Nov 2020. https://elaineleeonline.com/other-work/.

Otherworld Theatre. https://www.otherworldtheatre.org/.

Pande, Rukmini. "Squee from the Margins: Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity in Global Media Fandom." In *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*. Edited by Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, 209-220. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Parker-Starbuck, Jennifer. *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance*. New York: Palgrave, 2011.

Penley, Constance. "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture." In *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation*. Edited by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey, 302-324. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Penley, Constance. *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*. London: Verso, 1997.

Pérez-Peña, Richard. "Black or White? Woman's Story Stirs Up a Furor." *New York Times*, 12 June 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/rachel-dolezal-naacp-president-accused-of-lying-about-her-race.html.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993.

Pollock, David C. and Ruth E. Van Reken. *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 2001.

Poynton, Michelle, "Science Fiction Theatre as an Aspect of Digital Participatory Culture." Master's thesis, SUNY Buffalo, 2016.

"Puffs." *Matt Cox Land*. Accessed 9 February 2020. http://www.mattcoxland.com/puffs-1.

"Redshirt." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 9 December 2020. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Redshirt.

Reid, Kerry. "Otherworld Theatre Faces Social Media Onslaught." *Chicago Reader*, 25 November 2020. https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/otherworld-theatre-faces-social-media-onslaught/.

Robbins, Margaret Ann, "Confessions of a Fangirl: Interactions with Affinity Spaces and Multimodal, Multicultural Texts at Book Clubs and Fandom Events." Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 2017.

Robertson, Pamela. "What Makes the Feminist Camp?" In *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*. Edited by Fabio Cleto, 266-282. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Rose, Kate. "Marvel's Newest Superhero is a Bulletproof Black Man in a Hoodie—'Nuff Said." *Elephant Journal*, 6 Oct 2016. https://www.elephantjournal.com/2016/10/marvels-newest-superhero-is-a-bulletproof-black-man-in-a-hoodie-nuff-said/.

Rowland, Thomas D. and Amanda C. Barton. "Outside Oneself in *World of Warcraft*: Gamers' Perception of the Racial Self-Other." In "Race and Ethnicity in Fandom," edited by Robin Anne Reid and Sarah Gatson, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0258.

"Rura Penthe." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 8 December 2020. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Rura_Penthe.

Russ, Joanna. "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love." In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Saltz, David Z. "The Collaborative Subject: Telerobotic Performance and Identity." *Performance Research* 6, no. 3 (2001): 70-83.

Savran, David. *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Scott, Suzanne. "A Fangirl's Place is in the Resistance." In *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*. New York: New York University, 2019.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1990.

Shugart, Helene A. and Catherine Egley Waggoner. *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008.

Singer, Arthur and Gene Roddenberry, writers. *Star Trek*. Season 3, episode 24, "Turnabout Intruder." Directed by Herb Wallerstein. Aired 3 June 1969. Paramount.

Skillman, Crystal. "Geek!" In *Geek Theater: 15 Plays by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers*. Edited by Jen Gunnels and Erin Underwood. Marblehead: Underwords Press, 2014. Kindle.

Solórzano, Daniel G. and Tara J. Yosso. "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 23-44.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp.'" In *Camp: Queer Aesthetic and the Performing Subject*. Edited by Fabio Cleto, 53-65. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Springer, Claudia. "The Pleasure of the Interface." In *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Edited by Jenny Wolmark, 34-54. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Stevens, Tym. "A History of Starstruck." *StarstruckComics.com!* Accessed 10 Nov 2020. https://starstruckcomics.com/a-history-of-starstruck/.

Stevens, Tym. "The Big Bang of STARSTRUCK: The Roots and Branches of Elaine Lee & Michael Kaluta's Space Opera." *Rock Sex*, 8 Oct 2009. https://tymstevens.blogspot.com/2009/10/big-bang-of-starstruck-roots-and_08.html.

Storey, Scout. "Identity and Narrative Ownership in *Black Nerd* and *Wicket: A Parody Musical*." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 36 (2021). https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.1935.

Stryker, Susan. "Christine Jorgensen's Atom Bomb: Transsexuality and the Emergence of Postmodernity." In *Playing Dolly: Technocultural Formations, Fantasies, and Fictions of Assisted Reproduction*. Edited by E. Ann Kaplan and Susan Squier, 157-171. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Szymkowicz, Adam. "I Interview Playwrights Part 812: Matt Cox." 21 January 2016. accessed 4 December 2016. http://aszym.blogspot.com/2016/01/i-interview-playwrights-part-812-matt.html.

"Tamarian Language." *Memory Alpha*. Accessed 13 December 2019. https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Tamarian_language.

Taylor, Shawn. "Decolonizing my Fandom." *Nerds of Color*, 7 Aug 2018. https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2018/08/07/decolonizing-my-fandom/.

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: The New Press, 2016.

Tembo, Kwasu David. "The Trial of King Killmonger: Theorizing the Rage of a Third Culture Kid as Resistance." In *Resist and Persis: Essays on Social Revolution in 21st Century Narratives*. Edited by Amanda Firestone and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson: McFarland, 2020. Kindle.

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth and Amy Stornaiuolo. "Race, Storying, and Restorying: What Can We Learn from Black Fans?" In "Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color," edited by Abigail De Kosnik and andré carrington, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 29 (2019). https://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1562.

Tocci, Jason. "Geek Cultures: Media and Identity in the Internet Age." Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009.

Tran, Diep. "How Mom and Dad Met, With Ninjas," *New York Times*, 5 October 2016. Accessed 14 March 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/theater/vietgone-qui-nguyen-manhattan-theater-club.html?_r=0.

Tseng, Jason. "Interview: Qui Nguyen of Vampire Cowboys." *Scarlet Betch!*, 26 February 2010. Accessed 30 September 2019. http://scarletbetch.blogspot.com/2010/02/interview-qui-nguyen-of-vampire-cowboys.html.

Underwood, Erin and Jen Gunnels. Introduction to *Geek Theater: 15 Plays by Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers*. Edited by Erin Underwood and Jen Gunnels. Marblehead: Underwords Press, 2014.

Vester, Katharina. “POISE, Miss Lane! Super Femininity in U.S. Comic Books in the 1940s and 1950s.” In *Bodies in Flux: Embodiments at the End of Anthropocentricism*. Edited by Hanan Muzaffar and Barbara Braid, 117-130. Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2019.

Weiser, Sonia. “Forget Fan Fiction. In Nerdlesque, the Garters Come Off.” *The New York Times*, 20 September 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/theater/nerdlesque-burlesque-nyc.html?_r=0.

Williams, Anson, writer. *Star Trek: Voyager*. Season 4, episode 2, “The Gift.” Directed by Joe Menosky. Aired 10 September 1997. Paramount.

Willingham, Ralph. *Science Fiction and the Theatre*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994.

Willis, Ika. “Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts.” In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson: MacFarland, 2006.

Wolfe, Cary. Introduction to *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Edited by Cary Wolfe, ix-xxiii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Wolmark, Jenny. *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism*. New York: University of Humberside, 1994.

Zinoman, Jason. “It’s All About the Playwright.” *The New York Times*, 4 March 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/22/theater/reviews/the-inexplicable-redemption-of-agent-g-by-qui-nguyen.html.