

CRAFTING FICTIONS AND SUBJECTS:  
EXAMINING THE DISCOURSES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES  
OF ADOLESCENT FANFICTION WRITERS

by

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(Under the Direction of James Marshall)

ABSTRACT

Fanfiction offers participants a medium in which to re-envision existing texts, create and maintain online communities, engage in societal discourses, and continually refine themselves through the process of writing. This poststructural study seeks to better understand ways adolescents navigate the cultural discourses involved in online fanfiction and to consider the implications of fan writing for educators, researchers, and fans themselves. This study draws upon Bakhtin's (1965/1984) notion of Carnival and Foucault's (1985/1988) methodology Care of the Self to examine the motivations and possibilities fanfiction affords adolescent participants. Three rounds of interviews and multiple writing samples with four participants provided much of the data for this project, though notes, personal responses, dreams, and memory were part of the recursive process of data analysis (Lather, 2007; Pillow, 2003). As they craft and publish fanfiction, adolescents

engage in discourses of sexuality, violence, and social justice in ways that are censured elsewhere, and as they critique and deploy these complex discourses, they hone their philosophical views and ethical beliefs as well as their writing. In our increasingly rigid educational era of standards and high-stakes tests, the eagerness of these adolescents to engage in inquiry, interpretation, critique, and discussion stands in stark opposition to much of what they experience in school. To that end, the processes and practices of fanfiction hold crucial implications for educators who, like these fans, want to challenge the status quo of reading and writing instruction.

INDEX WORDS: Fanfiction, Care of the Self, Carnival, Discourses of Risk

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## DEDICATION

"Trust yourself. Create the kind of self that you will be  
happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by  
fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of  
achievement."

-- Golda Meir

*To my parents, who always encouraged me to play, create, explore,  
and craft stories of my own.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
What Exactly is a Fan? .....	4
Fanfiction .....	7
2 EXPLORING THE WAYS FANS USE FANFICTION.....	16
Care of the Self .....	20
Postmodern Research Design .....	21
The Fans who Shape this Study .....	36
Looking Ahead .....	43
3 CARE OF THE SELF AND FANS' MOTIVATIONS, INSPIRATIONS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES .....	45
Components of Care of the Self .....	45
Caring for Themselves through Fanfiction .....	50
Connections.....	72
4 CARE OF THE SELF AND THE PRACTICES AND GOALS OF FANFICTION WRITERS .....	74
Writing and Creation.....	74
Writing Practices.....	75



A Multi-Faceted <i>Telos</i> .....	88
A <i>Telos</i> of Connectivity .....	94
5 EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE OF FAN COMMUNITIES .....	96
Affinity Spaces .....	97
Structures and Discipline .....	106
Tying the Threads Together .....	114
6 PLAYING WITH RISKY DISCOURSES .....	116
Carnival, Play, and Revising Resistance .....	117
Bodies, Gender, and Sexuality .....	120
Violence .....	123
Romance, Sex, and Groping with Words .....	131
How Safe Are These Safe Spaces .....	145
Performing for Others and Self .....	149
7 COMPARING THE DISCOURSES OF FANS AND SCHOOLS.....	151
Mandates and Pressures .....	151
What This Means for Students .....	156
Putting the Pieces Together .....	173
8 IMPLICATIONS .....	175
Troubling Binaries .....	178
Fanfiction as a Point of Entry .....	185
Future Work .....	186
REFERENCES .....	191
APPENDICES	

A	SUNLIGHT FOR MOONLIGHT .....	201
B	BATHROOM CONFESSIONS .....	207
C	FOREVER AND A DAY 500 YEARS AGO .....	212
D	PATH OF JUSTICE: SONG OF SERYN CHAPTER ONE .....	218

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Story. That simple word can conjure up memories of nightlights, lullabies, and snuggling under covers, of crackling campfires where crackles and breezes became the haunted moans of ghosts or monsters, of rainy afternoons curled up with a favorite book. For me, some of my earliest encounters with stories swirl and overlap: my grandfather's gravelly voice as he reminisced about the Great War in the Pacific, the frightening trolls and laughing elves of *The Hobbit*, the evocative musical score of *Star Wars*...all of these tales of courage and grief, of love and pain, somehow made their way into our memories, and feelings, contexts, and relationships linger even after details and precise words escape us.

The complex relationships readers forge with texts and with fellow readers have intrigued teachers and researchers for decades; after all, generations have been drawn together through the shared experience of stories. Communities once gathered around fires to hear the magical tales of the scop and gleeman, and these stories were re-born and re-envisioned as they passed from one generation to the next. Social values, notions of heroism and nobility, ideas of order and purpose are woven in amidst the entertaining adventures of Beowulf, Medea, or Odysseus, and each teller and audience forge communal bonds through the experiences. In some ways, it would seem that not much

has changed—we continue to share and shape stories that resonate.

The manifestation of this experience has taken a different form for some adolescent readers in our own era. Instead of gathering with neighbors to discuss or re-enact popular texts, the internet has made it is possible to join a more nebulous community, an affinity space where those interested in a particular story or genre can engage with texts and perform as writers in a virtual space. At the same time, many of the traditional tensions surrounding stories and storytellers continue to swirl in cyberspace: The lines between affinity spaces and mainstream social discourses can blur, and these spaces can exhibit features of defiance and hegemony, and, online as elsewhere, there is the constant navigation between self and other.

My first lessons regarding online fanfiction came from my high school students. In the spring of 2004, a few of my quiet students, mainly girls, began handing me scraps of paper with web links to their own fictions. As I read their pieces on *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I was reminded of the scripts my friends and I would write during the hot, muggy summers of my girlhood, but several aspects of the phenomenon piqued my interest: While my neighborhood friends simply gathered in somebody's backyard, the organization and development of these cyber communities seemed more complex, and while my writing group had a hierarchy, it was based largely on our relationships outside of writing. Instead, online fanfiction communities and their hierarchies seemed to pivot around notions of texts and writing. As a teacher, I was intrigued by the apparent openness and playful nature of many

fanfiction sites and incorporated some aspects of the genre—alternate endings, plot twists, additional scenes—into creative writing projects. Still, it became increasingly clear that some students felt particularly drawn to writing and developing fanfiction communities online.

Why, though, would adolescents enter this cyber community? Rather than seeking to concretize the phenomenon of fanfiction itself, this project explores ways in which the discourses of fanfiction seek to open up spaces to play, to resist conventional notions of texts, and to foster ever-fleeting glimpses of Carnival (Bakhtin, 1965/1984). Fanfiction sites are far from intellectual or social utopias, however. Instead, they are manifestations of what Foucault (1984/1986) termed heterotopias, spaces that reflect and refract the same tensions and discourses of mainstream society. Although scholars have recently begun to consider the implications of adolescents' participation in fanfiction in terms of literacy and language acquisition, there is more work to be done as educators and educational researchers probe the sorts of discourses that adolescents employ in their out-of-school lives. What possibilities and opportunities do students find online rather in school? Which types of discourses can adolescents embrace within fanfiction communities? How do writers use fanfiction to craft themselves as subjects? How do power-relations ripple through these sites, and how do social and structural hierarchies shape and affect the members, communities and discourses themselves? Scholars and participants hail virtual communities as free, democratic spaces (Jenkins, 2006; Thomas, 2007) but these sites can serve hegemonic, domestic purposes

as well, (Bury, 2005; Scodari, 2003; Stern, 2008) and it is intriguing to consider the motivations, possibilities, tensions, and limitations that some fanfiction writers have encountered.

### **What exactly is a Fan?**

The term “fan” seems so taken-for-granted that it has been normalized and common. For all its prosaity, though, the term brings a series of images to mind: crazy football weekends in college towns, people dressed as their favorite characters as they wait in line for movie premieres, or attend fan conventions...Truth be told, mainstream society isn’t quite sure what to make of fans, and those outside a fan community can adopt attitudes of wry amusement or skepticism and even judgment. After all, it’s one thing to enjoy a movie or a sport, but “those people” can be over-the-top.

We can all think of “those” kinds of fans. Perhaps we identify with such fans ourselves. I think of Scott, one of my early students, who loved *Star Wars* so much that he’d memorized the first three screenplays, read all the novels, and perfected an uncanny Darth Vader impersonation. In the days leading up to the premiere of *The Phantom Menace*, he bristled with excitement, and he was at the opening in full Darth Vader regalia. While many of his peers and teachers looked at Scott with affectionate bemusement, a few of us “got it.” After all, the baseball coach would never dream of missing a home game for our local National League team (and don’t get him started on National vs. American League rules and regulations); one of my colleagues in the English department remains a Tolkien devotee who can regale you with all sorts of arcane,

intriguing details from the books and films. And his classmates? A number of them were caught up in *Harry Potter* fever; they bought all sorts of memorabilia from Gryffindor scarves to books on quidditch.

To identify oneself as a fan is to assert both enthusiasm and expertise. It's intriguing to think that, in an ideal world, English teachers would identify themselves as "fans" of the texts and writing they share with students. One wonders how different many classrooms would be if schools encouraged kids to become engaged, opinionated, and invested fans of literature and of their own writing.

In thinking about bringing some of the dynamic elements of fan culture into conversations about learning, targeting a few areas of potentiality might be helpful. To one extent or another, many of us have had brushes with fandom, so we have some experience, be it firsthand or secondhand, with fans and fan culture. Still, in thinking about the implications of fandom for literacy or education, it's worthwhile to consider how fans describe themselves. Here are the ways the adolescent fans who shaped this study define a "fan."

- "Being a fan means you've found something that strikes a chord, that reflects part of your hopes or beliefs, and you cross a line if you lose your identity to the fandom. You can be a true fan about more than one thing."
- "A real *Harry Potter* fan knows more than the basics you get from just reading it once or watching the movie. You have to absorb so much of the information that you don't even have to think about any of the

questions that come up. What was the first thing Draco said when he saw Hagrid? ‘Look at that giant man.’ And other people are like, oh, that’s right. But fans just *know*.” [Emphasis in original]

- “You don’t have to do cos-play [dress as a character] or go to extremes to be a true fan. But you have to know the characters inside and out. You really care about the story.”
- “At graduation, my friend the valedictorian worked in quotes from Dumbledore and references to *Star Trek* into her speech. Everybody loved it. Fandom is becoming mainstream. More and more people are fans of something. Being a fan isn’t just for Trekkies anymore!”

If we examine various components of these ideas, fans find resonance with something that “reflects” their beliefs. Whether they are drawn to a particular character, an aspect of the struggle of the story, or a specific type of setting, there is something that fans connect to, that they find inspiring and rich. Simultaneously, fans realize that there is the possibility of “losing themselves,” of being so dedicated to a fandom that instead of a story reflecting their ideas or dreams, it can become the primary focus of their energy and time; hence, all of my participants spoke of finding a balance, of incorporating socialization, and engaging in numerous creative endeavors. Fans dedicate their time and attention to acquiring expertise; whether it’s reading lores and novels about their favorite video games, reading books and watching films numerous times, talking with friends on and offline, participating in fan blogs, and designing sound tracks or artwork based on beloved stories or characters. There is also



something inherently pedagogical about fans--they enjoy sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm; this desire to reach out, to explore the stories, trouble their own understandings, and communicate with one another manifests itself in many ways, including fanfiction.

### **Fanfiction**

Simply put, fanfiction is fiction written about characters or set in a world that was previously created by somebody else (Black, 2008; Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Cherland, 2008; Kustritz, 2003; Lawrence & Schraefel, 2006; Thomas, 2007). The relationships between fanfictions and their source texts are anything but simple; they converge, overlap, and contradict one another in vibrant, sometimes contentious ways. Busse & Hellekson (2006) explained that in considering pieces of fanfictions, or fanfics, it is helpful to separate elements of “*canon*, the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters, and *fanon*, the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext” (p.9). In other words, fan communities can develop their own alternate universes which can, in turn, drastically alter the relationships or events that are depicted in the original work. For example, some web communities are built around the notion of a gay Harry Potter or the idea that characters can cross-over from one story to another, so that Gandalf the Grey might help train Buffy the Vampire Slayer. While such obvious examples of fanon might be easily identified, there are often questions of what is canon and what is not.

The tensions between canon and fanon, between literary orthodoxy and

heresy, connect to questions surrounding reading, interpretation, aesthetics, and engagement that resonate throughout all kinds of literacy research.

Fanfiction writers consciously challenge the notion that reading is a passive activity, and they not only choose to interrogate texts but to expand and re-define them. Some fan communities claim that their work, their fanon, is as crucial and relevant as the original source text or Ur-text (Dena, 2006; Viires, 2005). There are other communities that privilege certain mediums of the commercially produced texts, and these complicated views further blur the lines between source texts and reactionary ones.

In terms of fan fiction, then, is the *Star Wars* canon limited to its films, or are the books and comic books that it inspired sacred as well? Peter Jackson's cinematic portrayal of *Lord of the Rings* is intended to be canonical, but many Tolkien fans point out discrepancies between the movies and the original texts. In that sense, many fanfiction writers feel that their contributions are just as authentic and valid as other, more commercial enterprises. As one fan put it, "Spin-offs like comic books or cartoons of our series might be corporate, but they aren't any more legitimate than what we create. It's the same process, really." Scholars agree that active fan participation indicates that fans are not willingly to passively consume texts or media: "the current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 132). Just as people gathered together to can preserves or sing and dance in pubs, the emerging media culture encourages broad participation. Jenkins goes on to clarify that in traditional folk culture

“there is no clear division between producers and consumers. Within convergence culture, everyone’s a participant—although participants have different degrees of status and influence” (p. 132).

Fans use the medium of fanfiction to explore aspects of the stories in numerous ways. One common approach is to delve into plot holes that are left undeveloped in the original text. Consider how one of the study’s participants probed Harry Potter’s response to the loss of his friend during a battle against the evil wizard Voldemort:

*Harry rubbed the scar on his forehead absentmindedly, choosing a circuitous path through the gnome-ridden garden toward the Weasleys’ homemade Quidditch pitch. The presence of this crowd, though chaotic, was actually a good thing, he reminded himself; he was glad the Weasleys had such an outpouring of support on a day like today. He just wished people would stop coming up to him and wanting to shake his hand and hear a firsthand account of how he had “vanquished He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” Why couldn’t they just say “Voldemort?” Wasn’t freedom from that fear what they had all fought to achieve? Wasn’t that why Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had just buried their son?*

In Rowling’s original series, readers never see George’s funeral or any of the characters’ reactions to his death. In this passage, though, the fan touches on Harry’s weariness and exasperation; he is tired of fighting, tired of being labeled a hero, and tired of the fear that had plagued his world for so long.

Fanfiction can offer a space to further develop characters and to consider their motivations and frustrations.

Not all fics focus on filling in gaps. In fact, some fans choose to radically re-envision texts and characters in dramatic ways. For instance, another fan who participated in this study transformed Rowling's Ginny Weasley from a heroine into a seductress. While the canon portrays Ginny as Harry Potter's brave and noble love interest, this writer picked up on fans' dissatisfaction with the match, so he created a scenario in which Harry would end up with someone else. In this sinister opening, Ginny appears as a scheming temptress out to ensnare the young hero:

*Hidden from prying eyes, Ginny opened the package she had received. It wasn't an illegal item, but it was something explicitly reserved for special cases. So reserved, that obtaining the small vial had taken more than one lie and required her to meet a few less-than-honorable people. But in the end it would be worth it. The potion would do its job and in nine months, she and Harry would have a baby.*

While Ginny is portrayed as flirtatious in the canon, this fic takes her character in a completely different direction. If the fanfic writer's aim is to introduce a new romance for Harry, what could be more effective than characterizing Ginny as a vixen who would use a magic potion to seduce the young wizard in order to have his child? Through fanfiction, writers can take ownership of their favorite stories in vivid, creative ways.

Fanfiction is hardly a solitary activity, though. Fans explore their own ideas and interests, but they also choose to publish fics that will please and engage other members of the fandom. In the mind of fans, their communities provide a dynamic, social space for active performance rather than passive acceptance: “Fanfiction, too, is a cultural performance that requires a live audience; fanfiction is not merely a text, it’s an event” (Coppa, 2006, p. 239). This desire to craft rather than simply appreciate fictional worlds is key to fanfiction. At the same time, the complicated nature of targeting specific audiences, particular affinity groups, shapes the sorts of performances that fanfiction offer up and the performers, or writers, themselves.

It is important to note that this kind of performance and engagement has not mysteriously burst forth in the last ten years. Some critics observe that Homer, Shakespeare, Milton and other bulwarks of the traditional literary canon were in dialogue with earlier literary and religious texts. Throughout the Middle Ages, humility required that writers like Chaucer or Mallory draw from and attribute to sources overtly; even as Humanism erupted during the Renaissance, the idea of a writer owning his text was practically unheard of; not only did playwrights happily pillage earlier works, their plays were often in dialogue with one another, as well (Bakhtin 1975/1981; Jenkins, 2006; Pugh, 2005). The emergence of novels did not end the conversation; allusions to other literature and to pop culture are a mainstay of the genre. Novels such as Updike’s *I, Claudius*, Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* have consciously taken up and re-envisioned canonical works. As Pugh

(2005) explained, the lines between fanfiction, which is written by amateurs as a recreational hobby, and profiction, which is published by professional writers can become blurry: While it may “seem ludicrous” to label Self’s *Dorian* or Rhy’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* fanfiction, taking characters into a different time or place or shifting the narrative perspective “are things fanfiction writers do so routinely they have even evolved genres for them” (p. 25).

Despite its recent visibility and popularity, fanfiction is not a new phenomenon, either. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *fandom* was first associated with sports and theatre before it was adopted by science fiction enthusiasts. Coppa (2006) explained that these enthusiasts “developed much of the fannish infrastructure, jargon, and language still in use today” and that science fiction fandom is generally acknowledged to have sprung from the letter pages of Hugo Gernsback’s magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1926 (p. 42). Here, readers discovered a space to discuss and critique the stories with writers, editors, and ultimately, one another. Historically, then, fanfiction was a communal activity rather than a solitary one; readers praised or critiqued one another’s stories. By doing so, they not only expanded or deepened the characterization or plots of existing stories—they also developed certain ideologies and values that became part of fan discourse (Derecho, 2006).

Even though today’s fans meet in online forums in real time, the notion of sharing thoughts and expanding popular texts, then, is not a recent innovation. Although it might be tempting to claim that today’s fans function

in egalitarian zones free of editors or censorship, each fan community has its own hierarchical structure and rules of acceptable writing and behavior: Members can be barred or sanctioned, awarded or promoted, based on the decision of its managers, or web masters. These structures might create the illusion of control or stability, but Thomas (2007) explained that in fact, members of these communities exercise a tremendous amount of power; if they become dissatisfied by the rules or mores of one community, they can simply migrate to another. It is not accurate to say that editors or site managers strictly control communities or that writers can freely craft their works and their own subjectivities in an idealized environment; instead, various hierarchies and overlap and converge in numerous ways. Foucault (1976/1990) would explain that, online as elsewhere, “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93). One of the intriguing aspects of this study is the chance to explore how these structures impact the writing and socialization and subjectivities of those who choose to participate in fanfiction.

A combination of factors, including adolescents’ increasing access to online fan sites and the recent popularity of books such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, have led to an exponential increase in the number of online fanfiction sites over the last decade (Coppa, 2006). As adolescent writers, especially girls, write and post parodies, romances, comic vignettes, angst, poetry, and driblets based on their favorite stories and characters, they deliberately accept some aspects of those printed worlds and consciously interrogate others (Black,

2008; Collins, 2006; Jenkins, 2006, Thomas, 2007). Fanfiction is a playful space where meanings and understandings can be pressed and re-shaped. Jenkins (2006) explained that this play serves both concrete and intangible purposes; not only does this play serve participants well “during a period of reskilling and reorientation,” (p. 29) it provides a space for fans to explore both texts and their own understandings. As they do so, they join and interrupt numerous discourses, including those of the body, of gender, and of power, and they develop fanfiction communities that actively wield these discourses as they challenge, interrogate, or accept mainstream ideologies and beliefs. As one fan put it, “Fanfiction can be very therapeutic because it gives you a place to work out all kinds of questions and think through what you believe about relationships, or religion, or authority, or how you fit in the world.” The consciousness of many fanfiction writers regarding the potentialities of these discourses is striking and opens up a rich space for researchers and educators alike because, as Bové (1995) pointed out, examining the materiality of discourse enables us to consider “the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought” (pp. 54-55).

While this study explores the way adolescent fans approach and engage in fanfiction, it also highlights ways in which the medium opens up spaces for self-examination and self-creation. As fans re-envision stories and characters, they develop and sharpen their own ideologies, beliefs, and perceptions.



Further, we will see the ways these notions can collide and conflate when fans come together in virtual communities. The next chapter outlines the methodologies employed throughout this project and introduces the participants whose insights and experiences can teach us so much about the roles of reading, writing, and community when education extends far beyond the classroom doors.

## **Chapter 2**

### **EXPLORING THE WAYS FANS USE FANFICTION**

In thinking about the notions of fans, fandom, and fanfiction discussed in the introduction, there are numerous intriguing points of entry for researchers and educators alike. The aim of this study is not to romanticize or generalize one particular medium; instead, it seeks to consider ways the adolescents I spoke with use fanfiction to develop artistic, personal, and social traits they admire.

Each of these participants offered unique points of view, but that's hardly surprising--any teacher can tell you that there really is no such thing as a "typical" student. Kids enter classrooms with unique sets of experiences, goals, interests, gifts, and motivations, and the same is true of cyber-space. Not only do adolescents make their way to different mediums and forums online, there is tremendous diversity within fanfiction communities and in the lives and perceptions of individual writers. Fanfiction writing is not a random or capricious hobby. In speaking with students and the handful of enthusiastic participants who spoke with me throughout this study, it became evident that fanfiction writers take a deliberate, careful approach to the entire process. Indeed, the processes of fanfiction provide a space for these adolescents to nurture and care for themselves intellectually, socially, creatively, and ethically, and the various practices adopted by each writer are

methodical and undertaken with a sense of purpose. The choice of source texts is hardly accidental, of course, but neither are decisions about which kinds of online communities fit writers best or which genres offer the most potential for any given idea.

As young writers gravitate toward fanons as disparate as the wildly popular *Harry Potter*, the offbeat British sci-fi *Dr. Who*, the *Underworld* vampire film trilogy, or *The Elder Scrolls* video games, their choices reflect some of their interests and literacy practices (Black, 2008; Bury 2005; Cherland, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Johnson, 2006; Scodari, 2003, Thomas, 2006). If they join role-playing, or RP, sites, they take on the persona of a particular character and write collaborative pieces with other fans who take up different characters, and they craft cohesive pieces from multiple points of view. Such an emphasis on collaboration calls for site members to commit to distinct rules and discourses adopted by the community (Stern, 2008, Thomas, 2006, Wiltse, 2004). When fanfic writers choose to publish individual pieces, they still balance the expectations and wishes of their communities with their own desires for exploration or creativity. When they decide how much to re-envision characters or how much to tinker with plot lines, fanfiction writers can find themselves teetering along thin lines that separate applause from censure, and they can receive mixed messages from other fans who, in turn, challenge writers' interpretations of characters and texts.

Fanfiction provides an outlet for other explorations, too. Online, writers can detail grisly battle scenes and steamy sexual encounters, or they can

philosophize about social ideals such as romance, courage, loyalty, or faith in frank, personal ways that are often frowned upon in school, where academic, formal writing is valorized.

My views of my personal experiences as a reader and writer and my perceptions of the unique ways my students—and this study’s participants--navigated texts and their discourses shaped the way this study has been structured and its data interpreted. Much of my high school teaching focused on the resonance of texts to students’ lives. While many adults, even some educators, assume that kids are inherently resistant to reading or writing, it seemed to me that kids were eager to use texts to better understand the world and themselves—when texts seem relevant and vital, rather than staid artifacts to be observed and appreciated behind some sort of glass case, reading is not a rote chore. As formulaic writing and high-stakes testing have become ever more central to instruction, though, some kids find themselves looking for different outlets for self-expression and creativity.

Speaking with the four participants who shaped this study showed that—while they each have different motivations and seek a variety of outcomes—fanfiction writing is a conscious, deliberate process that connects to the ways they view themselves. Not only that, through this online writing medium, they seek to push themselves and to meet specific goals: some seek to gain knowledge and expertise about source texts; others might stretch themselves as writers; still others might want to carve out positions of leadership within virtual fan communities.

While fanfiction is often intensely personal, we would be amiss to ignore its social facets. Fan communities form societal microcosms replete with their own mores, expectations, procedures, and hierarchies (Jenkins, 2006; Stern, 2008, Thomas, 2007). Fanfiction pieces often portray scenes of abduction, insurrection, war, rape, and oppression. These are not simply expository tools that move the plot along. Instead, they provide opportunities for writers to think through the implications of social injustice, both for society as a whole and for heroes who would envision and create a better world. Likewise, as some of these participants write or read romantic fanfics, they aren't merely fantasizing about idyllic or breathtaking moments (Coppa, 2006; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Scodari, 2003; Thomas, 2007.) Their decisions to write (or not write) romances incorporate a number of important questions like: What makes relationships work? What would a relationship of equals look like? How comfortable are we, as readers, writers, and people with sexuality?

As fanfiction writers ask these questions of their characters, their audiences, and each other, they not only shape plots and storylines—they shape themselves, too. As they type and revise, research and take notes, comment on and critique others' fics, they take up both concrete tasks and intellectual practices. When they describe chivalry, eroticism, deep friendship and betrayal, consider issues of faith and ethics, fear and courage, fanfiction writers perform in a variety of complex ways.

### Care of the Self

Why are such habits, practices, or performances among fans noteworthy? After all, many of them seem common enough. These conscious practices, these exercises that accompany and shape these fans' experiences as readers, writers, and people, can be viewed as one aspect of what Foucault (2001/2005) termed Care of the Self. This methodology, which Foucault described as an ethical analysis, examines the Classical view that one should engage in relationships and activities that can aid in crafting oneself as a work of art. In introducing the precepts of the tradition, Foucault (2001/2005) explained that *epimelia heautou* (care of oneself) encompasses several key principles: It is a way of acting in the world and developing relationships; it is also a certain mode of being, a consciousness that "implies a certain way of attending to what we think and takes place in our thought" (p. 11). Reflection and reflexivity are key components to the tradition, but Care of the Self is not solely an intellectual pursuit. Instead, it encompasses a series of ongoing exercises that can be undertaken to deliberately craft the subject so that "one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself" (p. 11). In other words, as these adolescents undertake specific practices that relate to their reading, writing, and communities, they deliberately shape and redefine themselves. For Foucault—and these fans—such an undertaking isn't a passive activity. It emphasizes action, interrogation, relationships, and transformation.

Care of the Self provides a useful point of entry into the ways fanfiction writers develop relationships, engage with texts, define reading and writing, push their own thinking, and navigate societal discourses. The concept also

shaped much of my thinking throughout this study, from the questions I asked to the interpretation of data. As we move through various components of this study, we will consider how Care of the Self, and its various components, can help us understand the practices, motivations, and experiences involved in fanfiction.

### **Postmodern Research Design**

The word research might seem formal or academic, but there are ways in which such explorations can be organic, natural processes. Poststructural methods allow researchers to examine the conflation of theoretical understandings, the initial design of a study, the adaptations and evolutions it undergoes, the penning of interview questions, the reactions to questions and responses during the interview itself, the insights and complexities that arise during transcription, and the tangled, labyrinthine process of analysis when researchers write, read, think, speak, interrogate, and even dream about data are all part of data collection and analysis.

The discourses surrounding reading and writing, both in and out of the classroom, are surprisingly contentious, and this tension is crucial to the practices and performances of fanfiction writers. Some influential figures, such as the New Critics, assert the essential, stable nature of texts, but if fans view stories as concrete or finished, there would be no space for tinkering with or re-envisioning the original characters or themes. On the other hand, other literacy scholars such as transactionalists speak of the convergences of cultures, experiences, and texts. In other words, these scholars assert that a

fan's background, values, and inclinations affect which texts she enjoys and how she might interpret them. Poststructuralists accept this premise and move a step further by urging us to deconstruct texts and our experiences with them, to consider how power relations undergird or challenge existing hierarchies. Exploring the historical and cultural sources of societal values and structures and analyzing the impact that these structures wield is a process Derrida termed deconstruction. He defined it this way: "Deconstruction is a critical practice that aims to 'dismantle the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work, not in order to reject or discard them, but to reinscribe them in another way' (Derrida, quoted in Spivak, 1974, p. lxxv). To undertake such an endeavor is to recognize the interplay of tradition, mores, power, and language at work when researchers design articles, students churn out essays, and fans craft fics.

In a world where discourses and power relations are being scrutinized, when the very words we speak can be interrogated in new ways, the roles of poststructural theory in qualitative research or in education warrant consideration. Traditional, humanist scholars continue to look askance at the epistemology since poststructuralists look for nuances, relationships, and complexities instead of offering linear solutions or rational formulas. Unlike critical theorists, who advocate for empowerment and call for an end to oppression, poststructural theorists trouble existing structures and seek to understand how they came to be. They do not sound a clarion call for a single, sweeping revolution. In other words, poststructural scholars are not going to



assert that one dramatic reform or program can be used to fix a complex, tangled issue like education, or even that there's one tidy way to succeed within a niche like writing instruction. Instead, they envision a series of smaller, meaningful shifts in consciousness and society. St. Pierre (2004) wrote: "I know that the more subtle revolutions these scholars describe are possible because I see such freedom practiced every day in women's lives as they find those junctures, those rhizomatic routes, that open up vacant spaces, heightened states of possibility" (p. 330). The subject, whether educator, researcher, or adolescent, is not forced into submission; the potentiality for resistance, for reflection, and for re-creation are always present.

In a world of so many perspectives, language and knowledge cannot be neutral. We each bring our backgrounds and experiences to the Conversation of Ideas, but not everyone is encouraged to join in the dialogue. Different kinds of people and epistemologies have been privileged, and clearly not all "knowledge" has been seen as valuable. The experiences of women, of minorities, and of children have traditionally been marginalized, and but privilege can be withheld or made manifest in many ways.

One way students can be relegated to the background is in the treatment of their writing itself. For example, high-stakes testing leads to an emphasis on persuasive, formulaic writing as opposed to memoirs or fiction, so students write analyses or compositions—not literature. Even if there is a space for independent reading in schools, some texts are seen as more "literary" than others, and certain kinds of readers and writers are either lauded or sanctioned

within classrooms. But those realities and structures are not concretized, and some adolescents can and do resist them. Indeed, as soon as one logs on to blogs or fan sites, a very different system of privileges and expectations emerge. In other words, the potential for transformation ripples across and through the tangles of power relations that support and construct them.

While subjects respond to the discourses and contexts around them, this call for conscious, moral behavior has important implications for the concept of the subject. Caring for oneself by investing time and energy in order to sharpen one's thinking through reading and writing, to consider and enact ethical behavior, to contribute to a community is no easy task. Considering one's role as an individual and as a member of society is both liberating and weighty. As Foucault explained (1984/1997): "Liberation paves the way for new power relations, which must be controlled by practices of freedom" (p. 284). Each choice, each context, leads to new power relations which in turn inform the subject and offer up a new terrain of power to be navigated. In other words, I found myself wondering how adolescents navigate the power relations and discourses that are part of their online lives and what the implications of such navigations might be for educators.

### **Research Questions**

In a conventional qualitative study, this would be the point at which research questions would be clearly articulated. One such question might address how fanfiction writers discover their voices through this creative

writing process. Another might focus on clear, practical ways teachers could incorporate elements of fanfiction into their classrooms.

After research questions were set forth, it would be appropriate to discuss issues of coding and a linear process of data analysis. It would also prove necessary to outline my own subjectivities and discuss ways in which I would bracket them in order to avoid the contamination of my data or findings.

Since poststructural notions such as deconstruction (Derrida, 1966/1978) and the social construction of discourse (Bové, 1995) and the subject (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1984/1997), shaped this study, it seems imperative to state from the outset that it was not linear or simple. This does not imply that the research or writing will seem chaotic or unstructured. Instead, one of my aims has been to interrogate society's assumptions about adolescents and their writing, the possibilities and limitations of online communities, and the nature of fandom as we explore how these elements function within the context of fanfiction.

Examining the ways different participants experience and practice fanfiction and online fan communities has led me to conclude that fanfiction writers use this medium and the conventions that surround it to craft and nurture themselves. The overarching question that guides this study is this:

*How does Foucault's ethical analysis, Care of the Self, speak to the ways fanfiction participants use fanfiction and fan communities to create and reinvent themselves?*

The processes, practices, and aims that Foucault explored in his study of Athenian culture describe the way individuals' readings, writings, health regimens, work, and personal relationships allow them to craft themselves as works of art, to develop virtues and traits that they admire, and to become sage leaders within their communities. In order to lead others, it was believed that one had to develop discipline and self-control, and deliberate, thoughtful choices could allow one to become a better, nobler person. In thinking about ways fanfiction writers implicitly use the techniques of Care of the Self, a series of sub-questions emerged:

*How do fanfiction writers differentiate their online literacies from school-based ones?* This question, of course, is anything but simple: embedded in it are ways certain readers in particular contexts privilege and define texts and engagement. If adolescents have little choice over the texts they are assigned in school, and if school writing seems formulaic or rote, it would make sense that they would describe fanfiction, with its variety of genres and reliance on resonant, self-selected texts, as freer and more rewarding. To establish a clear binary between fanfiction and academic writing would be too simple, though. Fans and fan communities still wrestle with issues like authorial intent and freedom of interpretation. Just like classrooms often privilege canonical texts or interpretations, different fan sites laud particular interpretations and scorn others. Research, expertise, style, grammar, revision, collaboration are words that echoed across interviews, transcripts, and correspondence to describe writing across the board. According to these fans, it's not the nuts and bolts of

writing that differ dramatically in classrooms and virtual communities. Instead, the purposes of writing, reading, and collaboration are seen as divergent. School, in the minds of these participants, requires correct answers, but fanfiction allows them to pose and ponder their own questions.

*How do the play and creativity of fanfiction writing allow participants to question, strengthen, or shift their thinking about texts, relationships, and social issues?* Part of Care of the Self relates to how individuals use reading, writing, and contemplation to hone themselves and to rehearse and prepare for life's challenges. In that vein, when fanfiction writers pen romances they aren't just fantasizing or daydreaming. Instead, they consider what they value in a partner, and they probe their own beliefs, fears, and expectations. From sexuality to political oppression, fanfic writers take up issues of vital importance to a democratic society. Many adults, both within and apart from education, assume that adolescents are fundamentally resistant to reading or writing, or that—at best—they only seek a superficial kind of pleasure in fandom. But speaking with the participants in this study revealed the complexity of their writing and thought processes—these fans are conscious of the political, religious, and ethical stances they take as writers, and they deliberately use this medium to develop, critique, and explore their stances, beliefs, and responsibilities.

*What are the structures, practices, and hierarchies that shape the way these subjects craft themselves within their online communities?* After all, Bové (1995), reminded us that some speak while others are spoken, so what

mechanisms serve to perpetuate or undergird the online powers-that-be? Virtual fan communities are hardly free-for-alls. Administrators maintain and govern communities; betas, or editors, review pieces for style and content (Black, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Thomas, 2007). There are rules about which genres are allowed on particular sites, and often there are specific guidelines about how explicit fics can, or in some cases, must be. The kinds of communities where writers feel comfortable reveal a great deal about their aims, both as writers and community members. When fanfiction writers accept, negotiate or resist the mores of their fan communities, they examine and enact the delicate relationships between individuals and society.

In designing and embarking upon this study, it was not my aim to discover “the Truth” about fanfiction communities or practices or to seek to concretize or distil a complex phenomenon; I make no claims of objectivity or omniscience. Since this study is not constrained by Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and universal interpretation, there can be a sense of play surrounding the tangle of experiences, theories, and perceptions of data. As Richardson (2005) explained: “Poststructuralism links language, subjectivity, social organization, and power” (p. 961). Just as none of these elements can be studied in isolation, the process of postmodern research is interwoven with each of these components. Even—perhaps especially—the question of what counts as data complicates and enriches the field of poststructural research. Instead of the traditional, tidy categories of interviews, documents, or field notes serving as detached, factual pieces that reveal clear, unambiguous

findings, poststructural researchers explore how their own theories, beliefs, questions, interpretations, moods, reactions, and even dreams affect their analysis and portrayal of findings. In other words, my experiences writing scripts with friends during my girlhood and my relationships with students who were devoted fanfiction writers affect the questions I can ask, the answers I can hear, and the data I can perceive and interrogate.

Once teachers and researchers understand that neither we nor the texts, structures, and hierarchies that surround us are essentialized, we understand that attempts to quantify or categorize learning will inevitably lead to misunderstandings and oversimplifications. It is not simply a matter of declaring fanfiction writing “good” and school writing “bad.” Rather than making judgments about a complex phenomenon, it is my hope to examine how its discourses function and why some participants find it useful. Instead of rushing to answer questions, those of us who seek to deconstruct, to become intellectual archaeologists, focus instead on developing apt questions, on understanding the tangle of histories, beliefs, values, and traditions that have converged to create the world we can experience it. Only when we begin to understand can we begin to re-create and re-envision the world instead of simply repeating what has come before.

### **Nuts, Bolts, and Methods**

Once again, a conventional study that is designed to find a Truth that can be universally recognized and applied would describe a concrete, linear method which would guarantee—at least in the clear and unbiased eyes of the

researcher--validity and accuracy. While my methods and research practices involve no less rigor, it is necessary that they reflect the fluidity and texture of this study (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007; Lather, 2007), which examines ways in which the practices of writing fanfiction and participating in online fan communities shape and affect adolescents' subjectivities.

The key issues of this study are the ways fanfiction writers engage with and respond to numerous discourses as they craft themselves and are crafted by their online communities. I obtained a list of current fanfiction writers through purposeful snowballing sampling and interviewed four fanfiction writers three times regarding their practices as readers and writers and their experiences within online affinity spaces. These open-ended interviews, while quite rich, were not be the only source of concrete data. Each participant provided samples of their fanfiction writing and an example of fanfiction from their favorite fanfiction site. These, along with interview transcripts, reviews and commentaries posted on fanfiction sites, and the types of stories promoted or de-valued on these sites were key as I considered ways in which discourses of risk that refer to gender roles, sexuality, or issues of social justice are deployed or obstructed.

Whereas conventional qualitative approaches would define data as the actual words on the transcript, postmodern approaches offer richer, more complicated perspectives. At the same time, postmodern researchers recognize that they cannot fully capture their participants' voices and that they cannot



remove themselves from the collection, interpretation, or analysis of data. As MacLure (2003) explained: “Even in the most simple, innocent, uncontentionally descriptive passages, there is *writing*” (p. 88). In other words, the researcher will always interpret and shape data, its collection, and its analysis.

There is much to be troubled about the collection and analysis of data. Postmodern researchers are keenly aware of the power dynamic and the hierarchies within the research relationship, and the desire to avoid the exploitation of participants whose experiences cannot be simply distilled or captured, but the nature of postmodern data collection demands that data does not begin or end with the interview, the transcript, or the analysis of documents; each article and book that is read, each section of notes and responses in a researcher’s journal, each conversation, conundrum, epiphany, or dream becomes data to be troubled, deconstructed, and theorized. For me, I found myself thinking back to the ways I approached writing with sophomores and seniors as the participants juxtaposed writing in schools and online, and I found myself questioning the focus on the safe, often impersonal writing so many kids encounter in the classroom. At the same time, I became increasingly aware that fanfiction isn’t some utopian enterprise—just like in “real” life, adolescents encounter hierarchies, expectations, and peer pressure online. The motivations and navigations of these fans challenged me to think more deeply about how the interplay of reading, writing, socialization, can shape and change us.

### *Data management and analysis*

In an attempt to manage data efficiently, I reviewed, mapped, and analyzed each interview transcript, fanfiction, and online document—including blogs and reviews through my own writing and journaling processes. These interviews, observations, and writings offered opportunities for constant comparison and analysis. Narrative and thematic analysis proved invaluable to identifying and interpreting patterns that occur across the interviews and writings (Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2003; Burr, 2003). As stated earlier, I continue to be particularly intrigued by adolescents' engagement with mainstream societal discourses. Do they resist hegemonic notions of gender roles, sexual norms, and class? Do they comply with these metanarratives? Or do they navigate borderlands between absolute compliance and absolute defiance? What effects do these navigations and practices shape participants' perceptions of themselves and their communities?

My aim is to engage in a Foucauldian ethical analysis, which is a subjective, interpretative one (Burr, 2003). While there is no clear or rigid formula, such a perspective considers the interwoven relationship between subjects and society; further, Foucault (1994/1997) was particularly intrigued by the role of writing in the development of the subject. Each of the participants who shared their views and writing with me described a variety of goals, practices, ideologies, and complex notions of reading, writing, and community—both on and offline. These adolescents set about defining their beliefs about themselves and the world, and they recognized the muddy,

conflicted nature of situating themselves, their actions, and their work within a problematic—and problematized—society. While these elements are entangled and interwoven (Burr, 2003), they guide this study and my own analysis.

### *Assessing data quality*

While this study does not seek to be exhaustive and “subjectivity, interpretation, and context are inevitably interwoven into every research project,” it is important to ensure that this study and its findings are as trustworthy as possible (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 77). To that end, in an effort to earn credibility, the data have been interpreted through my poststructural epistemology in addition to a methodological triangulation in which different interviews, fanfictions, and analytical journal entries have been juxtaposed (Berg, 2004; Freeman et al., 2007). To work toward dependability, not only were my own thoughts and experiences disclosed as in other reflexive research (Lather, 1993; Pillow, 2003), but I invited participants to review transcripts and pertinent findings so that they, and I, could be sure that their words and experiences are considered contextually.

Throughout the design, data collection, and analysis, reflexivity, or “the application of the theory back onto itself and its practices” was a recursive process (Burr, 2003, p. 204). Lather (1991) explained that perspectives shift through and during inquiry and that the researcher cannot capture or concretize everything. I recognize that my work cannot tell the whole story of these fanfiction writers or their communities. Their experiences and contributions are crucial, and not every facet will be mine to tell.

## **Unanticipated Tensions and Echoes**

Throughout the processes of planning, conducting, and analyzing—which often looped and overlapped, my years in the high school classroom kept washing over me. In considering the kinds of reading and writing we advocate and perpetuate in schools, a whole series of ideological issues arises: How do we know ourselves or our world? Or, to put it differently, what world does society try to pass on to its children? As a high school teacher, I was constantly struck by the formulas thrown at students: even in English classes, the idea of the detached five paragraph essay or the pat process of writing and revision seemed to teach that creativity, thought, and art could be broken down into neat, clean steps. Textbooks enshrined knowledge and ripped stories and narratives from their contexts. My students and I had to make the effort to recover stories themselves, to think about what we took from them, and to attempt to write our own.

For me, poststructuralism offers a language that helps me express the ways we have always perceived the world. Others may not have considered the possibilities that such an epistemology offers. One of my aims is to encourage educators to interrogate curricula, policies, and practices, and to understand that the very process of questioning is a positive, creative act that can lead to richer understanding and subtle change. If teachers can in turn encourage dialogue, advocate and incorporate the messy, seemingly chaotic aspects of learning, if students can see reading and writing as organic and vital instead of formulaic, then the tone of discourse itself shifts. Once we understand that

neither we, nor the texts, structures, or hierarchies that surround us, are essentialized, we understand that attempts to quantify or categorize learning will inevitably lead to misunderstandings and oversimplifications. Instead of rushing to answer questions, those of us who seek to deconstruct, to become intellectual archaeologists, focus instead on developing apt questions, on understanding the tangle of histories, beliefs, values, and traditions that have converged to create the world we can experience it. Only when we begin to understand can we begin to re-create and re-envision the world instead of simply repeating what has come before.

As I began to design this study, it seemed simple. Looking back, that was the first sign of trouble. While the question of how people become readers and writers is not new, and I realized that there is no pat formula for the becoming, the tensions, dissonances, and contradictions that erupted during my conversations with fans about their views of texts, their thoughts about reading, their notions of literature, and their crafting of writing personas led to a strange journey. If there had been a naïve hope for epiphanic revelations that would serve as clear sign posts for my future work as a teacher educator, those were complicated not only by the visions of different participants or even by the layered, blurring, contradictory thoughts that presented themselves in the words and pauses of each speaker, but my reactions were far stronger and more varied than I would have imagined. As I listened to their experiences of reading, writing, and school, I was powerfully reminded of my own, and my

experiences began to enter into this study in a conscious, albeit uncomfortable way. St. Pierre (1997) elaborated:

I believed, since I had such difficulty separating myself from my participants, that I was working within a fold and that that fold was constructing a subjectivity, my own, that enabled me to think differently. Like a fold, my subjectivity had no inside or outside; the boundary, the division, the violent binary partition was not there (p. 178).

Snapshots—some welcome, others less so—of my life as a student, of my work teaching high school, of colleagues and former teachers have flitted through my mind, the words of mentors, be they friends, guides, or theorists, have whispered in my ears, and throughout the transcribing, writing, thinking, and even dreaming that have accompanied this study, the disruptions that complicate taken for granted concepts like reading and teaching have not given me a clear bullet list of what students need. Instead, they have led to a new set of questions: What do adolescents *do* as they grapple with their ideals, beliefs, and selves? How do they—and the peers and teachers around them—approach this becoming, and how does such crafting converge with the many, sometimes conflicting roles of “the writer,” who seeks to explore and expand the linkage between their favorite stories and their emerging notions of self?

### **The Fans Who Shaped The Study**

To that end, the fanfiction writers who spoke with me and shared some of their writing do not claim to represent their respective fandoms, or fan

communities, nor do they purport to embody the experiences of every fanfiction writer. Instead, they are each fascinating young writers who display a degree of consciousness about texts, writing, schools, and their own processes of becoming that is both illuminating and provocative.

Instead of expressing one unified notion of literature, each participant spoke of contradictions, of public and private texts, of personal meanings and universal truths, of blurred genres and vague aesthetics. The ability to capture or understand the complex and contradictory voices into a tidy analysis proves elusive. Heeding Lather's (1991) challenge to "write science differently," I want my participants to speak to one another, to speak to the larger scholarly community, not just to me (p. 123). Each participant offered definitions of texts and of literature; in fact, disparate views often presented themselves from the same speaker, and these responses speak to one another in provocative ways. Drawing from Richardson (2005), I sought to apply her proposal for a new paradigm of research and representation. Instead of a flat, fixed, linear shape, she described research as a crystal, "which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach" (p. 963). Like learning itself, crystals grow, expand, and reveal new facets with each examination.

With such a metaphor in mind, whenever possible, my participants' words and writings will be used to explore the discourses and worlds of fans—I cannot pretend to capture or concretize their full experiences. After all, As

MacLure (2003) explained: “Even in the most simple, innocent, uncontentionally descriptive passages, there is *writing*” (p. 88).

Simultaneously, the way I hear their words is shaped by my own experiences as a fan, a teacher, a writer; theorists like Bakhtin, Foucault, and Derrida speak alongside them. Each reader, too, will interpret and respond to their words—and mine—a bit differently. That, my participants agree, is part of the fun of fanfiction—understandings and words are porous, fluid, and always up for grabs. At times, they will even speak to one another (and to me as a writer, and you as a reader) from their transcripts and fictions as they question and describe notions of texts, writing, and community. Before we plunge into their notions of literacies, fandoms, and their own development as writers and people, let me give you a little background on the structure of the study and share some experiences with each of these intriguing participants.

Over about six months, I spoke with each of the four fanfiction writers numerous times; some of these conversations happened face-to-face; others took place via Skype. In addition to speaking about their experiences with fanfiction, they each shared some of their writing. Some of these fics were completed, others were works-in-progress, and they spanned genres from romance to adventure. In addition to pieces of their own writing, they provided the web addresses of their favorite fanfiction sites. Here, I was able to see the rules each community established and observe how community members responded to one another. These writers described themselves differently, so a brief profile of each gives a useful—albeit incomplete—point of entry.



All of these writers are incredibly conscious—both on and offline—of being performers. In their writing and conversations, they will challenge and complicate our understandings of fans, literature, and writing; they will talk about ways virtual worlds are—and aren’t---“safe” spaces to wield discourses of romance, sex, and violence. In other words, we will explore their performances and the ways they write and interpret themselves through fanfiction, consider these introductions as the character synopses encountered at the beginning of a play. While I, through necessity, serve as a kind of playwright and chorus myself, they each read and had a hand these opening remarks.

### **Anne**

Anne\*(all names are pseudonyms) was a high school junior when the study began, and she describes herself as a performer, a successful student, and a disciplined, serious woman. A somewhat reluctant reader of conventional texts, she enjoys movies, zines, and comic books, and her fandoms primarily relate to television and film. Anne had established her first role-playing fanfiction site over four years earlier, and unlike the other participants who wrote their fanfictions individually, she played a series of characters as she—along with others in her R-P (or role-playing) virtual communities. Each member was assigned a character, and the community worked together to fuse their characters’ stories into a coherent piece. Since this space focused on role-playing as well as writing, there were strict rules about respecting the sovereignty of other characters and adhering to the original *Underworld* trilogy. For Anne, fanfiction was a way of exploring her

character, Selene and “figuring out what she would do” if the story continued to unfold. This co-constructive, communal writing process brought the elements of peer review, cooperation, and interaction into sharp relief. Anne defined herself not only as a writer but as a leader: “It was important for me to start a site where I could be a major character, where I could get things rolling...You know what I learned in RP’s? It’s just like anywhere else. Being a minor character, there’s very little you can do.”

### **Thomas**

Thomas, a high school sophomore, is a self-described gamer, honor student, and jock. As if these apparent contradictions weren’t enough, he refuses to read “teen fiction” and prefers history, mysteries, and other “things that matter.” While many of his friends are also gamers, few participate in fanfiction. Thomas explains that he began reading the fics to better understand the worlds of the games, and writing is a process that allows him to read the lores and novels associated with the games and to “fill in plot holes and doughnuts and put pieces together...for yourself and the other gamers.” In many ways, Thomas seems himself as passing on his own learning and expertise. At the same time, he enjoys playing with character archetypes, describing chivalric quests, and playing with his readers’ expectations because “the best stories make you think without thinking you’re thinking.” While he openly critiques the writing he does in his Honors English classes as “mindless and pointless because it’s all about boring prompts and formulas,” writing online allows for chances to pursue research topics and ideas that interest

him. For Thomas, posting fictions is one way of contributing to the experience and knowledge of other gamers, and this contribution can have both tangible rewards like information that allows players to advance the game itself and intangible results like deeper understandings of complicated values such as honor, courage, love, and sacrifice.

### **Hayden**

Hayden, a high school senior, enjoys reading fanfictions more than publishing his own. For him, the lines between canon and fanon, gender and romance, tend to blur and shift. Writing and reading are introspective processes: “When I write, I do it for entertainment, I suppose. And mostly for myself, actually—not for other people. I want to be able to look back one day and think, ‘I really want to read a story like this, and thank goodness, here it is!’” As he engages in slash, a genre that (re) envisions characters as homosexual, Hayden questions what is involved when a fic writer challenges an author’s characterization and society’s ideas about what “normal” relationships look like: “The idea of two guys, like Draco and Harry Potter, in love brings up all kinds of obstacles, you know? There are always obstacles in love. Everybody can relate to that. But when you have two guys, you have to ask how that would be taken in their world...it’s so traditional and elitist. But you can’t think about that without thinking about how they’d be viewed in ours, too.” Hayden thinks deeply about issues of privacy and community, and he wonders what would happen if his family or the kids at school knew about his writing: “There are things I only share with my close friends, with people who

won't judge me. That's one of the great things about writing online—you control what people see." For Hayden, romance, sexuality, and power aren't just ideological concepts; the pieces of himself that he shares with different people or in different contexts are deliberate and meaningful.

### **Jane**

Finally, Jane, who graduated early and is already a college student, is a published author who sees fanfiction as a chance to play with other people's characters. In fact, she compared herself to a mischievous Puck: "'With fanfiction, you manipulate characters to get them where you want them, and then you sit back, enjoy the show—meddling every so often—and smirk, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be.'" For Jane, though, there are limits to such play; authorial intent should be honored, even if fans question or push those boundaries: "Even if you feel a particular story or character speaks to you, you have to remember that you're working with someone else's creation. You have to keep that in mind." In terms of the discourses of fanfiction itself, she chooses to self-censor her reading and writing to exclude sexually charged pieces that violate the teachings of her Christian faith. She explains, "I want to read—and certainly I want to share—pieces that reflect my own hopes, my ideals, my beliefs...what would be the point of spending hours reading or writing something for fun if it doesn't show something of who I am?" This move to seek out and to craft fictions that reflect her faith illustrates her conviction—one that is shared among the other participants—that reading, writing, and participating in fandom shapes and reflects her own personal development.

### Looking Ahead

This study is organized around the manifestations of Care of the Self within adolescents' experiences with fanfiction. The next chapter will explore fans' motivations and modes of subjection, the one following will consider concrete practices and fans' *telos*, or their goals for their art through their writing processes. After considering each of these components in light of reading and writing, I will move to an examination of the ways adolescents draw from Care of the Self as they create, regulate, and maintain online fan communities. Finally, I will discuss the differences these adolescents experience writing in and out of school. Not only do these disparities speak to their engagement with fanfiction as a way to take care of themselves, they have important implications for educators, researchers, and policymakers who seek to promote authentic, meaningful reading, writing, and intellectual exploration in school.

In tracing the ways fans deploy elements of Care of the Self, here are some of the questions that this study seeks to explore: How do fans approach reading and writing? What opportunities do fanfiction writers carve out as they take up texts—and political, ethical, and ideological concepts—in different ways? What are the possibilities and limitations of writing within fan communities? Inevitably, each question raises numerous others, and each of the participants in this study experienced both writing and fan communities differently as they grappled with online power relations and discourses; their perceptions—and this study—are characterized by overlaps, convergences, and

tangles rather than clear lines of thought.

By examining how fans view reading, writing, and the roles of their affinity spaces, we can consider the discourses and practices of online fanfiction; this, in turn opens a space for teachers, researchers, and policymakers to consider ways fanfiction simultaneously embraces and interrogates our notions of texts, literacy, creativity, and learning.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **CARE OF THE SELF AND FANS'**

##### **MOTIVATIONS, INSPIRATIONS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

All too often, reading, writing, and socialization are viewed as discrete, separate entities. Not only do those areas overlap and inform one another, they serve to shape the way we view ourselves and one another. In that sense, these components tie into the practices surrounding Care of the Self, a methodology that explores the way practitioners hone their potential and carry out their responsibilities as citizens and leaders (Foucault 1985/1988). This chapter offers an elaboration of Care of the Self and discusses ways in which fans' motivations and modes of subjection shape their experiences with reading generally and fanfiction in particular.

##### **Components of Care of the Self**

How does this methodology or "ethical analysis," which emphasizes personal accountability and development (Foucault 1984/1997), relate to fans' reading, writing, and communities? To better consider that question, it is worthwhile to describe the methodology of Care of the Self. St. Pierre (2004) pointed out that Care of the Self contains four key components: the ethical substance; the mode of subjection; the self-forming activity; and the *telos*, or goal of the exercise (p. 339). While these various aspects entwine and overlap, ethical substance considers how ethical decisions are tied to emotions, actions, intentions, and desires (Davidson, 1986).

## **Ethical Substance and Fans**

In this context, what are the ethical motivations, intentions, and responsibilities these fans sense surrounding fanfiction? In various and nuanced ways, the study's participants expressed a need to respond to texts through question and emotional responses, but they carry this interpretive process further. As they write to explore the worlds of these texts, they express a variety of desires: Thomas wants to "bring flat characters to life" and share arcane aspects of the game's mythology with other players; Hayden is trying to understand "what romantic relationships should look like;" Anne views fanfiction as something to share "with friends who are committed to keep the story going," so it serves a social purpose. None of the fans limit themselves to one motivation, and nothing about their aims is one-dimensional. Thomas writes to create and to teach; gender, sexuality, and power all play a part in Hayden's fics, and Anne has emerged as an expert and leader within her fan community, so their motivations are multiple, complex, and powerful. In fact, they openly interrogated the implications of their participation—when Jane asked, "Is it ridiculous that I have to write to feel catharsis?" she questioned her own emotions and processes, the ways texts intersect with readers, and she highlighted the amount of energy and effort aesthetic experiences demand. The varying aims these fans articulate can give us insights on the truths they perceive and the selves they seek to become.

## **Mode of Subjection**

The second important aspect of Care of the Self is the mode of subjection. This component relates to the way people are encouraged or



obligated to recognize moral obligations (Foucault 1985/1988). Religious and legal prohibitions or demands can be a method of subjection, but personal relationships and cultural understandings fulfill an important role as well. Foucault (2001/2005) explained that a subject's mode of subjection are the structures that are navigated and that undergird "the subject's singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to other people whom he has a relationship, to his body itself, and finally to himself" (pp. 56-57). In other words, modes of subjection connect the moral code to the self: Enthusiastic or heated conversations about characters or narratives tie readers both to the texts and one another and "may be imposed as a requirement of reason or as a consequence of a certain aesthetics of existence" (Davidson, 1986, p. 229). We can witness the singularity of responses as Jane explains that she will not read or write sexually explicit fanfictions: "I would feel convicted and self-indulgent" because of her religious beliefs and Hayden freely uses religious figures in his slash writing because "no one group of people has the right to speak for the whole Church." Act of self-control or social protest make individuals' ethical grapplings evident.

### **Techniques and Practices**

The techniques or practices that make up the third aspect of Care of the Self extend Foucault's thinking about the subject's engagement with various technologies (1985/1988). His earlier archaeologies and genealogies had explored the relationship of truth and power, which respectively "permit us to

use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification” and “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject,” and he had discussed technologies of production, “which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things (Foucault, 1982/1988, p. 18, quoted in St. Pierre, 2004). As he undertook his new analysis of ethics, he emphasizes technologies of the self, which allow individuals to shape and transform their lives. While there are many technologies of the self that shape subjects, observation, reading, contemplation, listening, and writing come together to shape and refine self-understanding. Taking care of oneself is not supposed to be a tranquil, restful activity. Instead, it is full of tangible exercises, tasks, and activities. Foucault (1986/1988) elaborated that it was understood that those pursuing self-development would meditate, take notes on books they had read, consider conversations they had heard, and write down truths that they knew but needed to apply to their lives more fully. Though he has never heard of Foucault, Thomas takes this advice when he works with crafty, clever characters to develop his own ability to “come up with creative ways to solve problems, to get ahead.” There were also conversations with friends and mentors, correspondence that allowed a writer to reveal “the state of one’s own soul, solicits advice, gives advice to anyone who needs it—which for that matter constitutes a beneficial exercise for the giver, who is called the preceptor, because he thereby reactualizes it for himself” (p. 51). In other words, caring for oneself and communicating with others are inseparably linked, so activities such as discussing books and penning or publishing pieces

of fanfiction and discussing writing with mentors and peers allows participants to interrogate their motivations and ideologies.

### **Aims and Purposes**

The final component of Care of the Self relates to *telos*, or overall purpose. What are the aims of these self-forming activities? Is the purpose of this methodology to create a stable society or to foster selflessness? Foucault (2001/2005) explained that in Classical cultures “the self appears both as the object one cares for, the thing one should be concerned about, and also, crucially, as the end one has in view when one cares for the self” (p. 83). In short, the subject’s aim is to craft itself, not the state, as a work of art. While these fans expressed a desire to contribute to society, they are quick to describe reading and fanfiction as deeply personal or as Hayden put it, “This is my space to muck around in and play with ideas; then, I carry what I’ve learned with me.” This reverberates with Butler’s notion that, through performativity, we explore and perform specific pieces of our selves as we navigate different spaces.

Jane goes further as she describes herself as both actor and writer: “For me, fanfiction is more like acting than simple writing. The original texts are like...well, they’re like scripts. Fanfiction don’t create characters, we perform them; we interpret the existing characters, sometimes in radically different ways than an author might intend, but they’re trying to bring them to life, like an actor does on stage.” In other words, not only do fans have the freedom to interpret, re-envision, and play with texts or characters for their own

enjoyment and that of their audience, but this work extends beyond mere role-play. Jane continued, “You pick which pieces of yourself or the people you love you want to project into the story; you can actually tinker with yourself right along with your story.”

Hayden put it a different way, “When I write fanfiction, I get to pick which self I want to be. I choose which parts of myself to put out there, what to hold back, and I get to decide how people will perceive me on a whole different level than you can offline. On sites, I can write slash. I can think about what it means for two men to be together. I can put myself in that place. But I can also use a female pen name. I can protect my anonymity. That could never happen in the real world.”

The question of how individual fanfiction perceive the *telos* of their work is of vital interest. As we consider their writing and communities, the following questions reverberate: Does fanfiction function as a social outlet? An artistic one? What do these fans gain—or lose—through this practice? It will be intriguing to see the patterns and disruptions that participants express as to the function of fanfiction itself.

### **Caring for Themselves through Fanfiction**

For those who practiced Care of the Self in Ancient Greece, reading and internalizing texts was seen as an important way of developing the intellect and promoting self-control (Foucault 1985/1988). Just as wealthy Athenians selected texts, mulled over them, discussed their contents, and sought to apply their lessons, fans in the twenty-first century work to find stories that they can

make their own. This process of seeking out texts and experiences is a multifaceted one that manifests itself in a variety of ways.

Many of us are conscious of the rituals that surround our various reading experiences. Some of us play music, and others prefer silence. Some readers devour anything, and others stick to a particular genre. To better understand the ways these fans view reading and experience texts, we spoke about their favorite stories, their reading habits, and their experiences as readers. As we spoke, these adolescents delved into their out-of-school reading lives, especially those associated with their fandoms.

As we—along with the fans who shared their work and thoughts—begin to weigh what counts as reading or writing, it may be helpful to consider how these fans define and experience texts, how they view reading and writing as spaces for play and exploration and the ways in which they describe aesthetic experiences that bridge the visceral and intellectual.

### **Texts and Fans' Motivations**

In thinking about why these adolescents participate in fandoms and fanfiction, one starting point is to examine the types of texts these fans select as part of this process of self-formation and the kinds of experiences do they seek out. Some fans look for role models in their reading while others are drawn to particular themes or issues, but they all work to develop personal connections to texts. As the following passages illustrate, fans don't just want to passively take in these readings—instead, they want to find works that they can somehow apply to their personal development. Whether they delve into

texts that focus on the complexities of relationships or seek out stories that inspire their own creativity, fans aim to use texts to help accomplish specific goals. In tangible ways, then, reading serves as a vehicle for nurturing the Self.

As the participants and I spoke about how their reading practices tie into their personal lives and aims, many of our conversations considered the private and social aspects of reading, fans' searches for emotive experiences, their strategies for exploring and troubling some of their favorite texts, and the ways in which particular stories have inspired and shaped them. But, as we'll see, their reading interests vary dramatically. While some of these participants' interests overlap, none of them share a primary fandom. According to the popular site [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net), hundreds of different books, comic books, mangas, animes, television shows, and movies have inspired active fandoms. Even after reading about fanfiction and writing some myself, the variety of reading interests among these four participants came as a surprise.

Jane, a whimsical, precocious girl who graduated early and is already teaching classes on C.S. Lewis and seeking publication for her first novel, described herself as "a voracious reader who'll pick up the phonebook if there's nothing else around" and is the most apt of the four to pick up a novel. Jane Austen, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien are her favorite novelists because "they all show potentiality and that struggles have a purpose." But she's not limited to the canon; not only did she grow up with *Harry Potter*, many of her fanfictions revolve around Lupin and Tonks, minor characters in that popular series. She's always on the lookout for something new. When we spoke a

couple of months before the publication of *Mockingjay*, the conclusion of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, she exclaimed: I'm completely into *The Hunger Games* nowadays, and it's like I've trusted a piece of myself to Suzanne Collins, and I desperately hope it works out!" Like all of the other fans, she considers films and tv shows to be texts, too, and the BBC's long-running *Dr. Who* is another inspiration for her fandom. In her large, boisterous family, reading was anything but solitary: "Stories were something we all did together. Sometimes, my dad even assigned us names based on our favorite characters: my brother was Bilbo, my oldest sister was Alice...to this day, whenever I get worried or upset, he'll sigh and call me his little Piglet." Simultaneously, the stories and characters are not mere abstractions in her mind: "Tolkien had it right. Remembering stories and the trials and joys your characters face can make you better and braver. Characters aren't squiggles on a page, they're friends you can laugh and cry with."

In one of her fanfictions, "Ginny Alone," Jane wrote from the perspective of Ginny Weasley during her year-long separation from her love interest, Harry Potter. Not only does Jane draw on the stubbornness and strength of Ginny's character, she emphasizes her vulnerability and femininity:

*Ginny Weasley was getting thoroughly sick of herself...*

*She sat in the common room, watching the fire get lower and fighting an ever-losing battle in her mind with the thoughts that relentlessly assaulted the battlements of her serenity. Some may say it was a*

*lost cause, in these days – serenity – but Ginny Weasley was determined to prove them wrong.*

*She had always been quite a practical person. Fred and George had often said she was “as good as a bloke” when it came to high-pressure situations. She prided herself on her ability to keep a level head and simply do whatever was required of her, rather than being overcome by the emotional implications thereof. In fact, she knew that was one of the qualities Harry had always admired the most in her – while she, in turn, marveled at his courage, having such a deep understanding of the personal consequences of disastrous events, and striding forward to stand in the gap anyway, already having suffered so much . . .*

*Almost too late, she recognized this as one of the treacherous thought-trains she was fighting so determinedly to avoid, and she pulled hard on the reins of her emotions, checking them before they could overwhelm her. It wasn’t smart to think about Harry much these days.*

While this might seem to be a simple, if intriguing character study, Jane explained that she wrote it to help work through some of her own dilemmas: “I’d just gone through a break-up and was spending all my time wallowing in self-pity. Then, I started thinking about characters who’d been through worse,



who I could learn from.” Showing Ginny’s inner conflict and vulnerability—traits that aren’t emphasized in the original text--allowed Jane a chance to work through her own questions about courage and strength. This desire to learn from stories, to somehow claim them and make them her own, is one of the primary motives of Jane’s participation and a way she seeks to improve herself.

Examining some of Jane’s favorite fandoms and recognizing her fondness for writing fantasy inspired fanfictions raises some important ideas and motivations. By viewing characters as models who reflect her ideals and by applying their challenges to her life, Jane inherently acknowledges the transactive component of reading, the connection between readers and stories that can be especially liberating fans who consciously re-envision texts (Coppa, 2006; Pugh, 2005; Thomas, 2006).

As we see through the ways Jane and the other participants are drawn to a variety of texts and mediums, such textual connections are made manifest in a variety of genres. In thinking about ways notions of literacy continue to expand, Johnson (2006) has investigated ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> century television shows and films such as *Lost* or *Inception*, which developed thriving fandoms, complicate linear notions of storytelling and push viewers to recall minute details from previous episodes and seasons as various plotlines interweave and overlap; in other words, while television was once seen as the downfall of reading and literacy, scholars are beginning to realize that some formats not only allow for active participation and engagement but require it if a viewer is

to fully understand a show's content. In other words, complex, non-linear texts from television to novels, invite fans to step in and tinker in more playful ways.

Given the role of play fans like Jane seek out, it's no accident that fantasy and science fiction seem to be among the most popular sources of fanfiction (Black, 2008; Robb, 2010; Thomas, 2007). There are a number of reasons for this. The radically different worlds of wizards, vampires, or aliens where time travel, enchanted weapons, or near immortality are possible beckon readers to lean forward, to explore, and to speculate about such possibilities. As Jane explained:

*Dr. Who* has been around for decades, and the Doctor has been everywhere from Ancient Egypt to the French Revolution to alien planets. It makes sense that different viewers are curious or drawn into different parts of the series, so here's no way that one small group of writers could satisfy the curiosity of every fan.

When you're dealing with a series that sweeps across space and time, you're going to want to poke around yourself.

As she expresses this sense of iterability, or the multi-faceted nature of texts, Jane suggests that her motivations for reading are not limited to the mere acquisition of concrete knowledge; instead, reading relates to visceral connections and pleasure, and there is a conscious desire for an aesthetic experience that both reflects and shapes readers' ideologies and emotions.

Hayden explained that reading has always centered on imagination and play, "Well, I just kind of became addicted to reading. I'm the youngest of 3,

and my brother and sister weren't always there, so it was like, handle it...play by yourself, so reading was the obvious solution." Even though reading began as a solitary activity, it didn't remain one: "I forced myself to pick up reading so I wouldn't just sit on the couch and watch TV. TV doesn't engage your imagination the way a book does, and I'm learning new words, thinking." This element of conscious intellectual development merged into friendships and socialization, as well: "Some of my friends have already started college, but when we were all together, they were so smart. I wanted to get to their higher level, so I threw myself into it. It didn't force me to read, but their interests melded with my own." His friends led him to *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, and he also enjoys anime and a number of games; still, his favorite stories have elements of fantasy: "Sometimes it's magic, sometimes vampires, sometimes magical creatures, but with fantasy, it gives you an escape from yourself. You can forget about things for awhile, let the story take your breath away, and just lose yourself." Though he was nervous about admitting it, Hayden loves reading romances, including romantic fanfictions, even though he doesn't want the guys at school to find out.

Partly because he hesitates to share much of his own writing and artwork with peers, many of Hayden's fics revolve around secrecy and issues of trust. Consider this excerpt where Harry Potter overhears his rival Draco Malfoy describing both his isolation and the object of his affection to a ghost, Moaning Myrtle:

*'I need someone I can trust in this school.'* Draco uttered in a clipped tone.

*'You can trust me,'* Myrtle smiled, blinking flirtatiously. *'Do you want to talk to me again?'* she asked with a syrupy sweetness.

*'I do.'* Draco replied, sitting down on the tiled floor of the bathroom.

*'Can we talk about him?'*

Hayden explained that he, like Draco, feels as though he has to keep parts of himself secret and out of sight, so he writes to work through his own anxieties.

From reading the same books as his friends to worrying about how others would respond to his penchant for slash, or fics that re-envision characters as homosexual, Hayden is intensely aware of the ways reading and "real life" converge and overlap. Because so much of his reading relates to social interaction with his friends and a critical examination of friendships and romances within the original texts themselves, it makes sense that he's constantly on the lookout for connections between stories and between texts and his own life. For example, consider how texts from vastly different genres and eras converged for Hayden: "After seeing Richard Harris in *Camelot* and *Harry Potter*, I kept imagining that Arthur was Dumbledore and Guenevere was McGonagall because those couples love each other, but it's not romantic love. I've read so much and played with writing so much fanfiction that it's altered my perceptiveness about things. If I relate things, they superimpose on each other." Platonic and romantic love, shifting characters, and porous characters and themes...these are part of the legacy of interpretation, and forging these linkages is one of Hayden's motivations as a reader and fan.

He's not alone, either. Jenkins (2006) spoke of a "convergence culture" where traditional literacies and new ones, where fans and the media industry collide and create messier, more interactive ways of engaging with texts "the Web has become a site of consumer participation that includes many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content" (p. 133). Whether they are blogging, filming videos, or writing fanfiction, this sense of ownership allows fans to meld established stories together and to connect them to fans' interests. In other words, it shifts their experiences as readers.

Anne, who came into our interviews with her own pages of notes, is focused and serious. With a hectic schedule of drama, fanfiction clubs, and community service, she views reading as a source of relaxation. Some of Anne's favorite stories are animated films of her childhood; she goes far enough to describe herself as a "big Disney nerd." Unlike the other participants, Anne isn't particularly fond of print text at all. Instead, her reading practices center on graphic arts or film, and she initially seemed apologetic: "I don't do much reading. I like graphic arts things: mangas, zines, comics. I'm really all about movies...anything along the lines of fantasy with mythical creatures or superheroes is the kind of thing I really care for. If it's not something like that or a really good chick flick, I probably won't watch it." One reason Anne prefers visual literacies is because she sees them as more active and intensely social: "The best times are when you're watching a movie or IMing with friends over zines. That way, you get to talk about what resonates between you and the story right then while it's fresh."

While Anne and her friends help to sharpen one another's ideas and she—like Jane and Hayden-- seeks to make connections between her life and characters in her favorite texts, there are specific elements that arrest this focused fan's attention and certain kinds of characters that intrigue her: "I want to be a leader, so that's the kind of heroine I look for; take Selene from *Underworld*. She's loyal, outspoken, creative, and serious. She has a dry, British kind of humor, but she gets down to business. She's someone I can learn from watching. There are these vibrations between us somehow. Talking about her and writing about her give me a chance to think through my own reactions." One instance in which Anne used Selene to explore her own responses can be seen in her fic, "Forever and a Day 500 Years Ago," when Selene returns to the place that had been her home before she became a vampire:

*She was at the place she called home for all of her human years where she would watch the sun rise in the morning and set at night while ending the day in the home. A threat from within the house brought her back. A threat came once and eliminated everything. All that meant something to Selene died that night except for the home, wounded in combat. The damage to the doors and blood on the walls flashed in her head...*

In the films, Selene does not mention returning to her home, but in Anne's mind, it would be an important step toward closure: "She's such a brave, focused character. She'd want to go back and face her fears so she could move

ahead.” In this passage, we see Selene mourning the loss of her family, of everything she loved—even daylight itself. Anne creates a fic that showcases the heroine Selene coming to terms with grief and loss. One of Anne’s motivations for writing fanfiction, then, is to highlight particular characters and behaviors that she values and hopes to emulate.

Thomas, the final and youngest participant, was a sophomore when the study began. As someone who self-identifies as “well-rounded” with an interest in video games and sports in addition to writing, he is exceptionally intentional in his reading: “Whether I’m reading history or a spy novel or working with an RPG, it’s the stealthy, clever characters that are the best. Superpowers might be cool, but that doesn’t help anybody in real life.” He explains that he admires clever characters who outwit their opponents and develop unconventional solutions to crises, “You need to be creative, to think on your feet and develop your own strategies. I want heroes who can help me think out-of-the box, who can push my own creativity.” For Thomas, developing creative and analytical skills is a vital part of reading generally and participating in gaming and fanfiction in particular: “When you take characters from games or something, you have know enough about their roles, about their world, and about your own mind to take them on a journey that other fans can appreciate. You have to mix expertise and creativity.”

In some ways, the gaming world is uniquely situated for fanfiction. The video gaming industry has grown in popularity and complexity, and as media fan scholars like Tom Bissell (2010) point out, one of the draws of role-playing

games is that players have “the sensation of being inside a large and disinterestedly functioning world, a main story line that can be abandoned for subordinate story lines (or for no purpose at all), large numbers of supporting characters with whom meaningful interaction is possible, and the ability to customize (or pimp, in the parlance of our time) the game’s player-controlled central character” (p. 4). Put another way, there is no fixed, linear plot to follow; playing the game requires playing with the story, seeking out new information, and actively uncovering alternate paths and journeys within the game itself. This kind of freedom to explore and create different outcomes within a game world of fixed, established hierarchies offers fans like Thomas a chance to experiment with characters and plots without countering the presuppositions found in most other fandoms. When Thomas wrote a fic like “Song of Seryn,” he enjoyed giving background about the social hierarchies and upheaval found in the world of the game. Look at the language he uses to introduce a slave uprising that changed the social order in the *Elder Scrolls* game:

*The border city of Tear had erupted into pure anarchy, buildings burning despite the rain, blood swirling to puddles on the muddy streets...thunderclaps drowning screams of pain and terror. Large pits, which once held thousands of slaves, were now empty. Bits of broken chain littered the floors beside the usual scraps of rancid food and waste...And all around lay the bodies of the dead.*

As the fic unfolds, Thomas pulls his readers into this story of revolt and



revenge as he details the injustices that led to such a brutal scene.

Thomas thrives on researching the lores and backgrounds of the games and then creating various storylines that flesh out sub-plots or minor characters for other fans: “I read up on the histories so I can help other gamers understand the nuances of the game. I guess you could say I read it so I can teach it.” More than any of the other participants, Thomas cites this desire for tangible learning as central to his reading life: “Whether it’s a biography or a game lore, I have to feel like I’m getting something out of it. I have to stay disciplined about how I spend my time. Otherwise, what’s the point of doing it at all?”

That question, the question of motivation that connects these fans and their readings to Care of the Self, is one with many answers. While these fans express clear motivations that include a desire for edification, a search for texts that resonate with their own lives, a need for role models, a yearning to better understand relationships, an aspiration to become more learned and creative, and a hope to share these experiences—and their fruits—with other friends and fellow fans, each participant views reading and fanfiction differently, so each person is able to establish and accomplish specific aims.

### **Subjections: A Convergence of Private and Public**

One way that fans experience modes of subjection, the Care of the Self Component that addresses the moral and social forces that shape their actions, is in their attention to peers, families, and authoritative figures (Foucault, 1984/1997). During our conversations, it became clear that personal

relationships play an important role in the ways fans perform various aspects of fanfiction: What they read, write, share, and experience depends in part on how others in their lives treat literacy generally and specific texts or fandoms in particular. In addition to personal relationships, social discourses, including those of faith, gender, and sexuality, converge to affect the behaviors and practices of these fans. In other words, the task of navigating and prioritizing relationships, others' expectations, and personal desires is an important way these adolescents seek to craft and nurture themselves.

These adolescents were not only conscious of their desire to connect with texts on multiple levels, but they described their experiences as a combination of private and social practices; moreover, they discussed ways in which texts have helped to shape and inspire them. Whether they preferred to physically read with friends like Anne or to share their thoughts and reactions after encountering texts like Jane or Hayden, or even if they sought to demonstrate their new knowledge by advancing to a new game level or teaching others about the game like Thomas, reading bridges private and public realms as these readers develop and hone their views of self. Sumara (1996) explained "Reading, whether it is done for private or public purposes, must be understood as not only the re-creation of the self, but of the various systems to which that self is relationally bound" (p. 87). Such experiences do not occur in a vacuum; peers, families, media, religious institutions, schools converge to position readers and help them to define themselves.

Each of the four fans spoke of the influence of family and friends in their

literate lives. They have grown up in homes that brim with texts and where reading is valued. While their families fostered positive attitudes toward reading, they each describe their family's worldview and reading habits a little differently, and those differences have helped to spark intriguing differences in the ways they approach literacy in general and fanfiction in particular.

Likewise, their connections with friends can play a key role in their approaches to fanfiction. Since our families, friends, mentors, and peers are themselves shaped by social discourses, they can serve to impart or emphasize societal values in key ways.

As the youngest child in a large family, Jane loved being read to by both her parents and her five older siblings. She laughs and recalls, "We bonded over books. I mean, my mom and sisters read *Anne of Green Gables* to me, my brother read *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and it was like a competition to see whose books I'd like best." In her home, television and movies were social experiences rather than solitary ones: "With so many people around, you never watched something by yourself—what would be the fun in that? There are some movies, like *The Princess Bride* that we can all practically recite!" Her family read together, as well. Each morning before breakfast, they would share a Christian devotional, and those moments inspired her own faith: "If I really commit to obedience and service, everything I do—including what I read or watch or write—should help me accomplish that. Why undermine myself?" Her family, which she describes as conservative and old-fashioned, carefully selected books, shows, and films that reflected—or at least didn't contradict—

its values as she was growing up. She muses, “I never felt censored or anything. It’s just that when I read books about magic or violence or romance, we all talked about how it related to what we believe. It’s not that anything is *bad* in itself, you just have to keep your own beliefs in mind.” Jane continues to try to experience stories with the people closest to her, and the books she reads and stories she writes are things she’s eager to share with her close-knit family, especially her young nieces and nephews. Her family and faith continue to shape her literacy and subjectivity in deep, textured ways.

Hayden’s experiences with religion and relatives have been more complicated. For one thing, he laughingly speaks of reading as “something to do” when he played by himself as a child. “There were books everywhere, and my brother and sister are so much older...I mean, talking to yourself and playing with action figures didn’t seem quite right.” While he describes both of his parents as avid readers, he makes it clear that they read very different kinds of texts, and those differences sometimes lead to conflict. Hayden’s mother helped inspire his fondness for romances and books about the supernatural, but, as Hayden explained, his father’s interests are very different: “He’s always reading the newspaper or religious books. He says the things you read spill over to your life...like if you just read horror stories, your life will be a horror story.” Hayden feels guilty about some of his favorite books and fanfiction pieces: “Sometimes I wonder if writing slash or reading some of the fantasy makes me a bad person.”

Just as Hayden shares some of his books, sites, and writing with his

mother but not his father, he is cautious about anyone outside his close circle of friends knowing that he writes romantic slash: “If it weren’t for pseudonyms and stuff, I’d never publish. It’s hard enough to be the geek who some kids at school think is a girl. Imagine if they all knew I wrote about guys in love.” He is very much aware of how his peers would respond to openly homoerotic writing and certainly goes to lengths to hide his notebooks and protect his online life with passwords so that he won’t be subject to criticism or judgment.

Not only do his closest friends provide emotional support, Hayden credits them with turning him on to some of his favorite books and introducing him to fanfiction: “When all of my friends started *Twilight*, I couldn’t get into it at first. It took them awhile to sell me on Bella. Now, they get why her attitude [about romance being more important than everything else] bugs me, even though I can deal with her.” Without the enthusiasm of his friends, Hayden might never have finished the first book, much less become enamored of the trilogy or written fics based on it; conversely, he asked his friends to interrogate their perceptions of the heroine and the values she embodies. He is keenly aware though, that those conversations are a part of himself that he doesn’t want everyone to see.

Anne describes her family as chaotic and playful, and she happily acknowledges that they are all “Disney freaks.” Despite their shared enthusiasm for animation and happy endings, Anne’s family fostered her independent spirit early on: “From the time I was five or six, they let me do creative projects. It was no surprise when they walked in and I was painting a

*Lion King* mural on the wall in my room, and it didn't surprise them much when I started building and running fan sites, either." She describes how her father encouraged her to problem-solve when the family had to relocate out-of-state during her middle school years: "It was awful at first, but then one day my dad sat me down and said, 'You've always done anything you really wanted to. Figure out a strategy to keep up with your friends and make new ones, too.'" Her father's assertive approach not only spurred Anne to maintain and develop friendships through creating fan sites, it imparted a notion of independence and responsibility. She muses that valuing assertiveness led her to develop into a leader: "When you learn that you have to take the initiative for friendships, hobbies, whatever, then you figure out that you need to learn how to keep those things going and that you need to prove yourself worthy of respect."

Anne tries to live up to her family's approach to independence and optimism, and she is also intensely aware of society's often-conflicting views of women. She still loves the Disney films of her childhood, but that fondness doesn't mean that her experiences are solely emotive or that she passively accepts the portrayal of relationships or morality those films depict. Anne confides: "Lately, it's started to bother me that those heroines don't have strong female friends. It's like saying a girl just needs a prince, and that's not how life works." Not only do we hear her independence, we see how modes of subjection, such as the traditionally passive role of Disney heroines and the independence advocated by her family can collide.

Anne points out that many of the classic tales have been sanitized and softened: “It’s a different story when Cinderella’s stepmother has her eyes pecked out or the sisters have to dance themselves to death in iron shoes at the wedding. Is it that we think kids can’t handle violence, or do we want to whitewash everything so that nothing unpleasant happens—even to bad people?” While Anne understood the way Disney and American society sanitized the stories, this protective, romanticized ideological stance was one she chose not to accept. In some ways, then, the independence and frankness of her adolescence gave Anne the ability to consciously reject certain societal views.

This consciousness is not unique to Anne. After all, fans seek out aesthetic experiences texts that call “the reader into the particular subject position, texts are activating those attitudes and beliefs in the reader, making the reader feel them as her or his own, giving the reader the experience of seeing the world in a particular way,” they simultaneously invite a critical, intellectual engagement (Mission & Morgan, 2006, p. 71). If Anne rejects the happily-ever-after of Disney movies or Jane writes fictions she could show her grandmother or Hayden chooses how to portray himself to different groups of people, it is because they select and respond to different ideologies and modes of subjection.

The same is certainly true of Thomas. He explains that his parents and sisters are all busy, well-rounded, optimistic people and that “Mom taught us early on to budget an hour or so for reading every day to stay sane.” With

football, A.P. classes, church activities, and an active social life, Thomas relates that reading remains a way to relax and is an important outlet given his desire to live up to everyone's expectations, including his own: "My parents expect me to work hard and be kind to people, and I want to be that kind of person. With the guys, it's different. Gamers and jocks...they expect different things, right? And I'm both, but I don't want to seem like two different people, either." In other words, Thomas constantly and consciously navigates between differing expectations among his peers.

When asked about the different expectations of jocks and gamers, he laughs, "Well, jocks expect you to be able to be quick with a joke, to be laidback, above it all....cool, y'know? Gamers...they expect you to know your stuff and think fast." According to Thomas, both of his peer groups also hold some conventional notions of masculinity. When I asked if gaming fanfiction included slash, he'd never heard the term. When I explained that slash involved male-male romances, his eyes widened and he whispered in shock, "No way! I mean, guys write fanfiction, and no guy could write that kind of thing without getting raked across the coals!" Instead, he explains that gaming fanfiction focuses on adventure, chivalry, and other, more typically acceptable storylines. This element of gaming culture and of mainstream masculine culture serves as a mode of subjection for Thomas as he approaches fanfiction—and the world—with a particular notion of what men are and should be.

While each of these participants expressed an eagerness to share



expertise and creativity with other fans, Thomas explained that gamers take such sharing to a different level: “Everybody is expected to teach and support newbies. You even see the developers on the boards sharing tips, or getting them, which is really funny.” Thomas respected the view that education and support are fundamental to social, role-playing games, and by taking up this responsibility through his fanfiction, he pointed to another mode of subjection within gaming culture that he embraced.

From Jane’s family bonding over stories to Hayden talking with friends about *Twilight* to Anne’s arguments with her friends about Selene to Thomas’s relationship other with gamers, the social construction of texts is an important element to the give-and-take relational aspect of fandom. Finders (1997) pointed out that if we accept that texts are socially constructed “within multiple relations of power and further accept self as constructed by the rules and rituals of the community” (p. 10), then reading is an inherent part of socialization. Put simply, when readers pick up a book, their choices are influenced by their own interests, peers, and backgrounds. The relationships readers forge with texts and with one another influence the ways they see themselves, and these perceptions entwine with their writing and virtual communities as they seek to craft their visions—both of stories and themselves.

### **Connections**

So far, we’ve delved into fans’ motivations and modes of subjection in terms of reading and fanfiction. Like the methodology Care of the Self, their work extends beyond emotive resonance or learning concrete information.

Fanfiction leads to tangible practices and specific outcomes for each of these participants.

In thinking about the research questions that guide this study, it's helpful to consider the ways two components of Care of the Self—motivations and modes of subjection—speak to fans' creation and re-invention of themselves as they participate in fanfiction. When Anne describes being drawn to strong female characters and choosing to write from their points of view, she is not simply motivated by a passive kind of admiration. Drawing from her family's admiration of independence and her own desire to be a successful, powerful woman, Anne uses fanfiction writing to craft herself and to become the kind of person she admires so deeply. Hayden, on the other hand, approaches the medium differently. His questions about sexuality and gender are censured at home and among most of his peers. Fanfiction writing, with its relative anonymity, offers him a space to tease out his feelings and beliefs as he decides how, when and with whom to share his writing—and the aspects of self it represents. These participants consciously connect fanfiction with sense of self.

Exploring these components of Care of the Self also allows us to consider how the play and creativity of fanfiction allow fans to engage with texts, relationships, and social issues. For instance, Jane chooses to read and write comic or romantic texts that she can share with her family and that honor her religious convictions; for her, fanfiction, like all of her writing, is an extension of those relationships and beliefs. Thomas, though, experiences the play and

creativity of fanfiction differently. For him, adding dimensionality to a character in a game is a way to develop and display expertise about the world of the game itself, and it's a way to help other gamers increase their understanding of that world. In other words, while some fans, like Jane, see fanfiction as an outgrowth of their relationships, others, like Thomas, see it as an extension of the text. For each of them, though, the freedom to interpret and re-imagine these texts offers a chance to fuse play with purpose.

Such complex questions beckon us to approach them from multiple angles, and since much of the process of fanfiction lies in the act of creation, that will be the next point of entry. As we examine some of the concrete practices and goals fans set for themselves, we will continue to discover how they craft both their fanfictions and themselves as works of art.

## **Chapter 4**

### **CARE OF THE SELF AND THE PRACTICES AND GOALS OF FANFICTION**

#### **WRITERS**

While the components of Care of the Self are inter-related and the methodology itself is often a recursive, circular one, this chapter shifts from an analysis of motivations and modes of subjection into an examination of the practices and *telos*, or over-arching aims, of adolescent fanfiction writers. For the fans I spoke with, the processes of writing are multi-faceted: the brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing formula doesn't hold. Instead, these fans establish specific rituals and patterns for various stages in their writing processes, and these concrete, tangible practices tie into the participants' understandings of *telos*. Since fanfiction is a self-selected and time-consuming activity for these busy adolescents, their views of its worth, usefulness, and purposes reveal a great deal about their aims as writers and people.

#### **Writing and Creation**

Some of our oldest cultural legends, from Pygmalion to Orpheus, point to the dynamic connections between artists and their art. Those myths about breathing life into an ideal or about using art to soothe and seduce speak to the transformative power of art, whether it's manifested in sculpture, music, or writing. The end result of art, these legends teach us, is not simply to create a

product. Instead, artists themselves undergo a sort of metamorphosis through their acts of creation. In that vein, Rouse (1978) speculated, “Making fictions we prepare in imagination for other possibilities in life, we prepare new ways of organizing experience” (p. 37). As we examine the ways adolescent fan fiction writers prepare to write, explore storylines, and target their audiences, their words both complement and contradict one another. This messiness, dynamism, and complexity reflect the variety and multi-facetedness of reading, writing, and living online.

### **Writing Practices**

The seemingly simple act of preparing to write is anything but. Just as with reading, we have different rituals. Mine involve stacks of papers and highlighters for referencing, nearly toxic amounts of coffee, and jazz or television documentaries blocking outside noise. One friend has to go on a morning run before he can contemplate turning on the computer; another turns to pretzels and candy bars as deadlines approach. While such habits might seem irrelevant or quirky, they point to another question: These needs for noise or quiet, adrenaline or calm—do they relate to the truths we make?

In speaking with these adolescent fans, they, too, have their rituals, and many of them seem far more deliberate than my penchant for writing with piano riffs in the background. The concrete practices these fans employ point to their goals as writers and people. While each fan describes their process differently, each believes that the habits and stages they’ve put in place are crucial to their performance as fanfiction writers. Beyond that, these four

participants see correlations between successful fanfiction writing and successful living.

### **Habits and Processes**

Foucault (1986/1988) emphasized that taking care of oneself is not a passive activity. Instead, it involves deliberate engagement with various practices or technologies of the self. Foucault proposed that those pursuing self-development would meditate, take notes on books they had read or conversations they had heard, and write down truths that they knew but needed to apply to their lives more fully. Such practices don't take place in a vacuum; mentors, friends, and colleagues provide accountability and motivation along the way. While these four writers deploy various technologies or practices, one thread that ran across the conversations was that writing is an ongoing process that is not confined to the tangible, physical act of composition.

Thomas explains that writing begins long before his fingers hit the keyboard: "How do I start a story? When I get home, I check facebook, write some messages, check e-mail, play Xbox, and then start playing with ideas—you just spend awhile figuring out how things would work." In other words, as he decompresses from school, he situates himself as a writer as he reads messages, reads and plays the games, and begins to brainstorm. For Thomas, writing is a frame of mind that requires these preparatory acts; it would be unnatural for him to simply sit down and begin to write without immersing himself in the text first.

In order to accomplish that seemingly easy task of “figuring out how things work,” Thomas reads books about the world of the game “from novels to history,” researches each of his character’s abilities and weaknesses, and can spend over a month writing a 10 chapter fiction because he constantly checks and double-checks the histories and stories relating to the game as he crafts his own fic. Since he believes that his writing serves a pedagogical purpose for other gamers, even the smallest details matter. Beyond that, he takes pride in the thoroughness of his research: “The point is to learn something along the way, to push yourself to do great work. Anybody can B.S., but it takes time to do things right.”

The habits that Thomas has developed aren’t limited to research, though. Instead, he emphasizes his need to puzzle through elements of plot or character development throughout the day: “Sometimes, you’re driving or you’ll wake up and have an idea or know what to change—you have to have a way of jotting it down because the best ideas don’t come when it’s convenient.” In order to keep track of those serendipitous, if inconvenient, thoughts, Thomas keeps a journal by his bed and beside him in the car so he can make the most of those jolts of creativity.

The willingness to put in significant time into research and drafting can translate into less television viewing, less time hanging out with friends, and less sleep. But Thomas feels that the sense of accomplishment surrounding a solid, well-received fic is worth the sacrifices: “Nothing worth doing is easy. Sometimes you’ve got to prioritize and figure out what you want to show for

your time at the end of the day.” For Thomas, then, fanfiction writing serves to develop the discipline and work ethic he envisions throughout his life.

Like Thomas, Hayden recognizes that inspiration and creativity don’t adhere to a fixed schedule, so he never goes anywhere without his phone to have a place to archive his ideas for fictions. He also reiterates the value of research, “For one *Harry Potter* fic I worked on, I did lots of research because it involved Roma apples. You know, they’re the signature red apple, and they’re a huge deal in fairy tales like “Snow White,” so I wrote about how you could make a sleeping potion out of it; it was cool because it tied together Rowling and Disney, two fandoms I love so much.” This research involved scouring sources like the Grimm fairytales, Wikipedia, and Celtic folklore so that he could write a story in which, “Hermione’s hand reached for the glistening apple while, from behind the thick tapestry, the deatheater watched gleefully.” In Hayden’s fic, the sleeping potion was used to help Lucius Malfoy abduct the heroine, but—as she’s no helpless Snow White--she awakened after only a few hours and managed a daring escape.

While research or note-taking contribute to the discipline involved with writing, other practices speak to conscious acts of performance. Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity takes up the idea that we choose to perform different aspects of the self, and these performances, these enactments, are based both on the way individuals wish to see themselves and the ways they wish to be perceived by others. Audience, then, is a crucial aspect of this complex process.



Such performances manifest in numerous ways. For example, since Anne writes with other fans in an ongoing role-playing fan site, she details sketching out a layout and blocking out her character's actions on paper before typing: "It's important to focus on the scene differently when you're writing an r-p fic. If you're writing a fight scene, it's important for everyone to have a clear sense of how the setting work...where are the tables that somebody could trip over? Will it be closer to run to the forest or to a local hide-out as an escape route?" Particularly with such a collaborative medium, Anne emphasizes the need for clarity and cooperation: "It's like acting with an ensemble. You have to play off one another, so that means uploading maps and sets, sending each other private messages to make sure you're on the same page, and checking into the site regularly so that you aren't holding up the storyline." Practices like sketching, messaging, and routinely checking in with partners speak to Anne's collaborative, social view of fanfiction writing.

For Jane, music is a crucial element in her writing process. While other fans like Thomas describe playing heavy metal whenever they write a fight scene, Jane uses music to spark her creativity in nuanced ways. In particular, she creates soundtracks and playlists inspired by certain characters and story elements:

I started making soundtracks for *Dr. Who* because I was trying to write in the Tardis' voice and wondered how the ship—which is also a sentient being—sees the world. I decided it views the world as a series of musical motifs and songs, but before I could convey that experience, I had to

figure out what that might be like.

An avid actor, Jane routinely creates soundtracks that correlate to the narratives and characters she enacts on stage, and since she views fanfiction as acting, as bringing life to characters based on the original script of the text, she views this incorporation of music as a natural extension of her performance. Not only does she play these soundtracks while writing *per se*, but when she runs or drives, it's her way of continuing to feel her way through her stories: "Creating and playing those playlists falls under the category of spending time with the characters because they're kind of like your friends." After a pause, she continued, "Music and words intertwine with writing and living for me. I'm always looking for ways to expand them...as a writer and performer, it makes sense to pull them together." For Jane, these soundtracks serve to connect her world to the world of texts, and she uses them to connect texts and characters to one another. While such linkages are important to her experiences with fanfiction, they ripple outward as she consciously works to fuse her enthusiasm for writing, acting, and music together in purposeful ways.

From conducting research to creating sketches or playlists, each of these practices serves multiple purposes: on one hand, they are designed to convey a specific element to the audience; sometimes this is a particular emotion, like anger or fear during a fight scene, sometimes it is an attempt at clear description of a character's movements, or it can be an attempt to communicate a particular vision or understanding. But these practices also

shape the way the fans experience the writing and demonstrate these adolescents' awareness of their audience's needs.

### **Fans, Audiences, and Textual Control**

Negotiating the tangled relationship between source texts, personal creativity, and the desires of a potential audience points to other important practices involved in fanfiction writing. While the desire to please fellow fans serves as both motivation and a mode of subjection for these adolescents, each one has adopted specific strategies--or technologies of the self—to achieve particular outcomes. In fact, each of the fans expressed different views of their relationship with potential audiences.

Hayden enjoys “playing with the reader a little” when he writes romantic slash pairings featuring Harry Potter and his nemesis Draco Malfoy. He also works “to keep it simple, which is what most readers want,” by retaining as many of the series' details as possible. In order to accomplish each of those ends, Hayden incorporates a running list of quotations from the original texts that highlight the nature of Harry's competitive relationship with Draco:

It's funny. When you first read it, you think they just hate each other. But they're so fascinated by each other, by each other's friends....why be so invested if it's just dislike? It took me a long time to realize that their obsession could signal to something in a different direction. I run with that idea, but because I base my stories on a different *version* of what *really happened*, other fans are more willing to buy in.

Hayden believes he's picked up on a valid alternate reading. In broad terms, that's one of the appeals of fanfiction, and many slash writers pick up latent elements of innuendo or veiled emotion from the original source texts (Gwenllian Jones, 2002). This line of thinking is carried over to a series of concrete practices for Hayden: Not only did he compile a list of over thirty quotations to support his interpretation of these characters, he draws from them as he offers up an utterly different set of character motivations promoted by the source text. Basing many of his fics on events depicted in the books, he still creates a re-envisioned story. For instance, Harry suspiciously follows Draco in the sixth book because—ironically enough--Harry assumes that his nemesis has been spying on him. Most fans assume that Draco is up to his usual mischief, but Hayden offers a different motivation in one of his fics: *“Draco’s aristocratic lip trembled ever so slightly, and he wondered aloud, ‘Why am I so drawn to the one person I could never have? He’ll never see me as anything but the son of a deatheater.’”* In order to offer a radical re-telling, Hayden forces himself to draw heavily from the original text so that he is positioned as a credible expert that his audience can support.

As Anne approaches her audience, her view of the source text and her fanfiction differs dramatically. For Anne, a high degree of faithfulness to the themes and plot of the original text is crucial: “I’m writing primarily for myself and other people on the RP. We’re playing with parts of the movies that are glossed over or background information that never appears on screen. As for other people, I’m only interested in their opinion if they really know the series.”

In her view, her role is to add to, not utterly re-envision, the text. For example, consider this passage in which Selene confides in her friend about her conflicted, vampiric nature and her relationship with Viktor, the vampire who turned her:

*Selene still clung to her humanity. She was still so human. She hadn't changed at all since the night her family died. She was forever frozen in time the same.... She remained still gazing through the window. "It was Viktor. He saved me. He saved me from the lycans. I would have died like the rest of my family if it wasn't for him. They were mauled so bad when I came out of the solitude of my room. So much blood." She went back to her silence examining the man who seemed to have seen them or so she thought.*

In Anne's interpretation, Selene still wrestles with the loss of her humanity just as she still grieves for her family; part of her character is "frozen" and cold. Anne also wanted to capture Selene's mixed views of Viktor—on one hand, he's her protector and savior, but on the other, she feels as though he's always watching her, always working to control her. Throughout this fic, Anne focuses on Selene's search for independence and identity. This is a key element within the original trilogy, and Anne enjoys taking it up in rich ways.

Anne has developed several strategies for negotiating her respect for authorial intent and her desire to play with and engage her audiences. At any one time, she's generated a list of a dozen or so story ideas that relate to subplots or background within the *Underworld* trilogy, and she and her friends

routinely toss out and debate those springboards before actually writing them. Typically, she seeks affirmation that an idea for a potential fic works within the framework of the source text before she begins to craft it.

Other fans, though, work to push the limits of their source texts.

According to Thomas:

Games are unique because while the hierarchies and abilities are set up, and the specific quests are set out, and you have histories and cultures to work with, but most of the characters are really flat. It's awesome to take that character and make him come alive; you can create whole plotlines and adventures, and all the readers have fun seeing another part of the world.

While notes, storyboards, and charts fill his journal, it's Thomas uses his desire to breathe vitality and drama into the story to connect with his audience: "Gamers like to advance, to rise up the ranks. But beyond all of it is a desire to explore this new take on the world." Since gamers and developers are constantly redefining the game (Bissell 2010), he feels no pressure to write a certain kind of story or to justify every plot to his readers.

Jane also sees herself as exploring new facets of a world she shares with other fans, but writing is the way she works through her own emotions with a given source text: "When I'm grieving because the Doctor has lost another person he loves, I have to probe that feeling and dig through it to see what possibilities still exist for him." Watching the story play out doesn't provide Jane with an automatic sense of catharsis. Instead, it is through writing,

through forging ahead toward new possibilities, that she comes to accept various tragic elements of her favorite stories. Look at the way she integrates Harry Potter's grief over his lost parents into a joyous occasion in her fic "Will You Please." Moments before he proposes to Ginny, he is given his mother's wedding ring:

*Harry continued to stare at the ring. He felt the same way he had once felt when he found a letter his mother had written to Sirius – here was a piece of her life, a beautiful reminder that she had once lived, and had loved his father. His father – he had a sudden vivid image of James Potter staring at this ring, just as he was now, trying to work up the courage to do what he was about to do.*

Jane feels that Harry's whole being has been shaped his parents' sacrifice and that he would be struck by gratitude and a bittersweet remembrance even as he contemplated marrying his beloved. Fusing all these emotions into one scene allows Jane to work through her own conflicted responses to the text. By sharing her thought processes and writing with other fans, she aims to share that sense of catharsis as well.

The range of views these fans express in their attitudes toward source texts and their degrees of willingness to stretch or re-envision them reflects tension that springs from the contentious question of textual ownership itself. Examining this question about who does—or should—exercise authority over stories is important because fans' responses tie into their views of fanfiction and its purposes. When asked if he thought fanfiction counted as literature,

Hayden replied, “I connect with characters whether I’m reading them as fanfiction or as actual works of literature....the only difference between fanfiction and “actual” literature is the fact that it’s copyrighted.”

Not everyone agrees with Hayden’s sense of artistry or artistic license. Published authors have a wide range of responses to fanfiction. A number, such as J.D. Salinger and Anne Rice, have infamously filed lawsuits against fanfiction sites and writers. By adding to or changing the storylines of existing texts, fanfiction writers are challenging some established views of literature and writing that they encounter in schools and throughout mainstream society. First, they challenge the idea that authors create, own, and control their work exclusively; this notion of authorial omnipotence is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Until the eighteenth century, there were no legal licensures or copyright acknowledgements at all, and the claim that an author could, or should, control her intellectual property was simply unheard of (Pugh, 2005, p. 15). Even as authors have become increasingly possessive of their work and its usage, readers continue to clamor for more of, and more from, the texts they encounter. Instead of allowing authors to control or “experts” to explain or texts, fanfiction writers join in the conversation directly. Further, they position themselves as writers, not as imitators, and they develop followings and fans of their own (Black, 2008; Thomas, 2007). In other words, these fans upturn the writer-producer/reader-consumer dichotomy that pervades much of the current atmosphere surrounding texts.



Even as some fans become increasingly critical of the status quo of consumer culture by publicly challenging producers and storylines, (Keft-Kennedy, 2008) there can be little doubt that fans likewise partake in and support the commercial franchises that spring from popular novels, television series, and movies. This convergence leads to conflict and uneasy relationships between the entertainment industry and its consumer base: while entertained audiences are fine and profitable, many writers and producers are uncomfortable with fans who are too vocal, too demanding, too critical, and too possessive (Jenkins, 2006). In other words, the industrial powers-that-be might encourage the commercial benefits and free p.r. associated with fandom, but they worry that this enthusiasm, this play, this cyber Carnival, might go too far. What if enthusiastic fans were to undermine the industry that first inspired them? In fact, fan culture supports an oddly affectionate critical stance in which they critique the producers and executives who seek to control these stories even as they proclaim loyalty and emotional investment to the characters and stories themselves. And, unlike traditional sites of Carnival, fan sites are not bound by the dates of a specific festival. At the same time, even though fans express vocal resistance to attempts among producers or authors to control the discourse completely, their allegiance to source texts means that they cannot simply tear themselves away from the industry, so there is an inevitable entrenchment within the hegemonic, commercial discourses (Jenkins, 2006; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Scodari, 2003). Still, producers, writers, and publishers view fanfiction with a certain degree of

distrust.

But Hayden thinks that writers should honor fans' dedication and develop positive relationships with the fan base. "I read somewhere that J.K. Rowling appreciated and read fanfictions because she appreciated the connection. She was like, let me tell you a different story. There was give-and-take. But then there was Anne Rice. She sued hundreds of people. It was enough that the fan base was like, 'Whoa! You're crazy.' Fanfiction serves as a compliment for authors. I respected this so much that I re-invented it for you to help other fans get interested. Anne Rice turned people off by claiming that they were just her characters...they're not. When I read a character, they're mine, too." This sense of ownership and investment reverberates with each of the fans who discussed their experiences, but not all of them share Hayden's conviction that "there's no such thing as too far.

### **A Multi-Faceted *Telos***

In speaking with these adolescent fans, I quickly realized that there is no one end, or *telos*, that they work toward. Instead, as they shared their visions of the kinds of people they want to become, a few motifs appeared: interrogation, play, and application are the elements of *telos* that these fans mentioned again and again. First, they talked about their need to pursue their own answers rather than passively accept others' assertions. Thomas captured this idea clearly: "It's important to understand what other people think. But it's also important to figure out why they think the way they do. My own beliefs and goals might lie in a different direction, and it's dangerous to just follow all

the time.” This inquisitive worldview has important implications for fans’ reading, writing, and communities—they desire to actively interrogate their own ideas and others’ interpretations. Each of these participants relishes the playful creativity of fanfiction, and they consciously examine, and often critique, mainstream ideologies surrounding gender, sexuality, and power as they write. Hayden’s slash is one obvious example, but they each use this space to explore and develop their own interpretations of the world.

### **Interrogations**

Fans navigate a sort of borderland. On one hand, they express a sense of loyalty to the original text, and on the other, they seize upon the possibilities that the concept of iterability offers. Viires (2005) asserted: “the reader of fanfiction is active: instead of mere reading, s/he actively interferes with the author’s creative process” (p. 167). As they put it, these readers yearn for “fun, unique experiences a “literature that speaks to people in profound ways,” and to feel the “vibrations” that connect texts to the worlds of their readers. Not only do they want to “know” texts, they want them to “feel” them as well.

Since many of the stories that inspire fanfiction tend to be heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic, they do not attempt to provide a transcription of events as they “actually happen” in the real world. Instead, they invite readers to reconsider the nature of good, evil, and the world itself. In fact, some scholars posit that fans are more than readers; being fans “involves extending the reader-text, or reader-icon, relationship into other areas of fan experience” (Hills, 2002, p. 22). The degree of expertise these adolescents have developed

and the connections they experience between themselves and texts certainly indicate fandom can be transformative.

Hayden explained his choice of fandoms this way: “I love mysteries...*And Then There Were None* is one of my faves. But there are absolutely no loose ends. Without plot holes, how could you write fanfiction about it? You might be able to write a prequel or something, but it’s a self-contained world and she ties it up.” On the other hand, he feels that *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* offer opportunities to explore magical worlds and real life: “Fanfiction is based on worlds that overlap into ours and looking for intersections and collisions and filling in what’s between the lines.” As they write, fans want to explore what lies between the lines, and they want to consider how these fandoms line up—or challenge—their own worldviews. Smith (2006) explained, “reading with understanding becomes a matter of getting your questions answered” (p. 5). Still, not all of us ask the same questions of a given text, much less do we come upon identical answers, and sometimes one set of questions simply leads to another. For fans, though, this ongoing process is an exciting, dynamic part of questioning the world.

Distrust of authority might seem like a hallmark of adolescence, but Hayden and Anne each spoke about ways their favorite stories challenge mainstream values. As Hayden talked about one of his favorite books, *Wicked*, he juxtaposed it with its inspiration, *The Wizard of Oz* and focused on the radical shift from the nameless Wicked Witch of the West to Elphaba, a far more nuanced character: “For one thing, the character who had been seen as

completely bad is the heroine now. It's topsy-turvy...now, society is what's evil, and people who are rejected by society because they have green skin or defiant behavior, they're the new good guys. It's like society just labels her 'wicked' because she's different." For Hayden, who wrestles with questions of how open he can or should be, identifying with Elphaba, the green-skinned Other rather than the society that rejects her is vitally important.

Anne, who works to position herself as a strong, independent woman, talked about the way she chooses which characters to write: "In so many movies and shows, it's all about the sweet, pretty heroine. But why are goodness and beauty linked? Shouldn't we be deeper than that by now?" Not only does she refuse to write romantic stories, Anne chooses to complicate her heroines: "Instead of a princess or heiress, let me be a little edgy. My favorite characters to play with are a conflicted vampire and a well-meaning thief. Both of them are altruistic at heart, but they don't mind breaking a few rules along the way." Developing such characters is one way Anne crafts herself—she invests her characters with traits she admires.

As fans examine what the texts they read suggest about who gets to define taken-for-granted notions such as "wickedness," "goodness," "justice," or "love," they interact with these stories in the multi-faceted ways Mission and Morgan (2006) described: not only do they respond emotionally, they critique ideologically. This move to deconstruct, to examine the values and aims of texts, is not a destructive one; St. Pierre (2000) explained: "Thus, deconstruction is not about tearing down but about rebuilding; it is not about

pointing out an error but about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces. It is not a destructive, negative, or nihilistic practice, but an affirmative one” (p. 482). Indeed, one of the aims of fans is to strengthen their connections to stories, characters, and others through active interrogation. As they deconstruct texts and the ideologies embedded in them, fans find themselves equipped to take up those ideologies in inquisitive, playful ways. Put simply, these adolescents recognize the prolepticism of these stories and ask profound questions about the valorization of romance, shifting cultural values, and the nature of social justice.

### **The Work of Play**

These are serious, meaningful questions, and fans choose to explore them through play--the inherent vitality of play serves as another goal, or *telos*, for fanfiction writers. Bakhtinian notions of Carnival, like Derrida’s of play, hinge on the idea that such minute spaces of freedom and resistance exist within larger, often restrictive hierarchies and power-relations. Existing social structures serve as a springboard: when fools become kings, people freely exchange gender, and revelry replaces order, it is not simply a time for relaxation: it is a time for social critique. It is noteworthy, too, that such play is not accidental; instead, it consciously interrogates the normal: Derrida (1966/1978) explained that play is a sort of borderland between that which is accepted and normalized and the elements that challenge it; to engage in Carnival is not to set up any sort of binary but to interrogate and blur those

which already exist: “Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around” (p. 292). In other words, the ability to play, the desire to seek out or create tiny spaces for questioning and resistance keep discourses—and people—vital, fluid, and always already in motion.

There are numerous ways fanfiction channels some of the energy and possibilities inherent in Carnavalesque play. The fluid, interactive nature of fanfiction writing exhibits many features of Bakhtin’s (1979/1986) description of Carnival, the festive period when orthodoxy and hierarchy are questioned and inverted. As suggested earlier, one must question whether adolescents would seek this outside site, this affinity space away from the structures or authorities of school if reading and writing were not treated so formulaically within schools themselves. Like Carnival, fanfiction’s discourses and structures engage both in resistance and hegemony, and there are four playful elements manifested in the discourses of fanfiction: the seeming obliteration of the established order; the apparent open relations among people; a playful stance toward the world; and an anti-official sentiment.

What, then, do we find defined, contested or inverted when adolescents participate in fanfiction? These fans’ experiences often reflect several elements of Bakhtinian Carnival, play is encouraged: readers become the writers; adolescents assume positions of leadership; plots become springboards; roles

and worlds—both of texts and society at large—can be troubled. But unlike traditional Carnivals such as Mardi Gras, (Bakhtin, 1965/1984; McWilliam, 2000) fan writing and online publishing are ongoing; sites do not spring to life one day and disappear with the appearance of Lent the next.

### **A *Telos* of Connectivity**

The multi-faceted *telos* expressed by fanfiction writers fuses play, exploration, and critique, and fans can use their writing to rehearse and develop character traits they admire. As we continue to reflect on the questions that govern this study, this chapter has focused on ways that fans' practices—from research to character development—allow them to work toward *telos* as they work to craft themselves as individual pieces of art. From Thomas's diligence in research to Hayden's interrogation of sexuality to Anne's assertiveness about femininity and Jane's decision to fuse different kinds of art as she writes, the tangible practices these writers employ relate to the kinds of people they aim to become. The playful, relatively open nature of the medium allows them to insert themselves, and their questions, into their storylines as they work through how they fit—and how they challenge—the world around them.

For these adolescents, *telos* also extends beyond individual fanfics to the next phase of our discussion: the formation of dynamic, and sometimes contentious, virtual communities. If such sites of play and troubling are to be sustained, then their members, like any other society, rely on shared expectations and understandings, but the negotiations and navigations of play



and power are far from simple. Within these sometimes contested spaces, tensions ripple between democratic, egalitarian ideals and the ways in which hierarchies and structures both reflect and undermine such aims. The development of such communities highlights other ways in which fans seek to care for themselves, and it is within these virtual worlds that we see a wider range of the potential—and the potential consequences—for resistance and reinvention. These sites have much to teach us about the ways adolescents envision and position themselves within fan communities and society at large.

## **Chapter 5**

### **EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE OF FAN COMMUNITIES**

In previous chapters, we have focused on the individual motivations, influences, practices, and purposes that affect fans as they draft fics. In many ways, fanfiction is a communal practice as well as a solitary one, and the tensions that surround texts and beliefs take on new dimensions as they play out in public forums. This chapter examines how Care of the Self applies to life online where the structures and hierarchies of specific fan communities intersect with fans' artistic and ideological stances.

The fans who spoke with me did not share a common, unifying experience offline that led them to seek out virtual communities. Online fan communities are as diverse as the fans and fandoms that support them. Jenkins (2006) emphasized that fan culture is “defined through the appropriation and transformation of materials borrowed from mass culture; it was the application of folk culture practices to mass culture content.” (p.246). By re-telling stories through publishing on fan sites, fans use their own skills and creativity to engage with popular culture. While various communities are designed and maintained in different ways, fan culture thrives because fans construct ways of reverencing the stories and characters that inspire them; they use the texts as metaphors and springboards as they face their own struggles and work against “the routinization of everyday life” (Thomas, 2007,

p. 31). In other words, it's not as though fans want to *become* Harry or Bella or Buffy; instead, they relate to the predicaments of these characters and come together to work through their own questions—by drawing from fantastic settings, they are able to suspend reality and plunge into writing with playful abandon.

### **Affinity Spaces**

Affinity spaces, sites based around a common interest, allow participants to learn from one another through peer-based instruction as they shape the “the interactional and the content organization of the space” (Black, 2008, p. 42). For example, affinity spaces can be dedicated to the act of fanfiction itself, in which case sites can be broad and allow authors to post fics on virtually any work, or a group of fans can develop a site centered around a single relationship within one key fandom. Fans determine which types of writing they wish to produce or associate with, and they have the freedom to join or leave a site at any point (Thomas, 2007). These affinity spaces urge fans to support one another and build a sense of community through the act of writing, an act that is often portrayed as a solitary one in the outside world. Such spaces provide socialization as fans share their ideas and collaborate on fictions, and fans can take on educative roles as “expert” writers work with novices and model the community’s protocols and practices for “newbies.”

### **Socialization**

First and foremost in the minds of fans, the sites they join are supposed to be open, accepting, fun spaces where they connect with other enthusiasts

through stories. Anne explained how her *Underworld* community made up of fans from Australia, Britain, and all over the U.S. fosters relationships:

It gets pretty crazy, and it's always a blast. We're all a little different inside and outside of RP; you learn that when you Skype and message people privately, and you can bring in elements of outside life and play around with it—inside jokes, situations you know about—it can show a huge amount about your friendships, so there's definitely a human element.

This human element, the inside jokes and nicknames that set friends apart, aren't anything new, but the Web branches out beyond a single clique of friends and provides a space for a variety of people from all over the world.

Since not everyone within a virtual community knows one another offline, Anne described those navigations as well. "We're all friends, but we're not all buddy-buddy best friends. We don't all know each other's favorite food or favorite color or that kind of thing." Cordial, collegial relationships can be beneficial to fan communities because they can encourage new levels of performativity. Anne explained: "When you know people primarily through characters, it's easier to play the part, to pick up the dynamic between your characters. If you're supposed to be allies, you pick up that tone. If you're sisters, you tease a little more and might be more competitive." This additional level of performance, of enacting characters' personalities through interactions on the site as well as in the actual writing, lends itself to the practices of performativity and Care of the Self. As fans select characters they wish to

emulate and then take on some of those traits in writing and communication, they work to incorporate those traits into their everyday lives. For example, Anne explained, “My character is a little different when I write with people I know really well or mainly through the site. My best friends may recognize a few more of my inner thoughts through the narration, but whenever writing with other people, it’s like I can be my ideal self.” Discovering elements of that “ideal self” through writing and collaboration is one of the main purposes of Anne’s participation. The consciousness with which she and other fans can enact those ideals within affinity spaces can shape self-perceptions outside of it; the lines between online and offline selves can be porous and blurred.

Not every social interaction can be called collegial or light, and not all fans limit their writing to play. Hayden spoke at length about writers who use sites for therapeutic purposes and the emotional pressure that can put on fans. He described his relationship with a girl he met through *Harry Potter* fiction: “I kept reading some of her pretty dark fics about grief and suicide and was really impressed because they were so deep and well-written.” Because he admired her work, they began sending each other private messages and became friends: “One day, she told me that she was able to talk about cutting because she started doing that to herself after her mom died. She’d even tried to kill herself. Then, that was all I could think about when I looked at those stories.” While he worked to encourage her writing and had several of his friends begin posting positive comments about her fics, he expressed his uneasiness: “Fans can become friends and offer some support, but I’m no

therapist. And it's not like she's a friend I can see every day. But there's still the worry and the sense of responsibility." On one hand, Hayden thinks his friend needs more help than a fan community can provide. On the other, he feels a sense of responsibility: "Since she's working through some of this through writing, don't we need to support her in that writing?" Socialization, then, isn't limited to enjoyment—just as fans choose to infuse certain traits in their writing, they define their responsibilities within communities, and all of these navigations are ways fans craft themselves through participation in fanfiction.

Hayden's experiences have not only challenged him to think deeply about relationships and community, they emphasize how authors and their writings can overlap. Hayden respects the therapeutic nature of writing about private struggles and embraces the relative anonymity of posting because he thinks most communities will rally around someone who is struggling. Still, he thinks such writing can make an already fragile author more vulnerable—especially if it were to collide with "flaming," or posting angry, negative reviews.

The issue of "flaming" is of vital interest to fans and communities. If writers covet positive reviews, flames are the opposite—they can devolve into personal attacks. To understand the distinction between positive or constructive reviews and flames, it's helpful to begin with a few examples of positive reviews, which are far more common according to these fans. Here is a sample of the comments Thomas received on his "Paths of Justice" fic. After he

posted the third installment, he invited critique with his A/N, or author's note, and others responded:

*A/N: All in all, I'm very proud of it, and I hope that everyone that takes the time from their busy schedule to read be glad to have done so. That said, any further criticism is more than welcome; I will do my best to take any comments positively, as is befitting an aspiring writer.*

*Woolymammoth: It's good you're doing something in history. Helps us flesh out the actual lore a bit more in our own minds of what it might have been like.*

*Hauteecole rider: It's smooth, it flows well, and has the right amount of description that I can picture things in my mind's eye, but leaves enough for my imagination to stay busy filling in the blanks.*

*Ghostpaw: Oh great, another awesome story to discourage me from ever writing one of my own for fear of being laughed off the forums.*

*Author: Don't worry. I'm sure anything you write will be great.*

*Hauteecole rider: As for the back alley deal, I think it adds a layer of mystery to the whole thing. Makes me wonder what lies ahead for*

*our hero Seryn. If you have to hit these little plot points in order to set up for the grand climax, go right ahead. It's not that uncommon in fiction, and something I come across quite often. It's hard to do well, but I think you've done it rather well.*

Reading through these comments, it seems that the reviewers aim to offer encouragement and support. Even though one jokes that Thomas writes too well and another points out that there are little plot holes, there is a level of positive engagement with the story, and the reviewers clearly want Thomas to continue writing it.

While positive reviews are easy to spot and categorize, there are different kinds of negative reviews. Some can be constructive and dialogic if the reader politely objects to a romantic pairing or plot device. But flames can get out of control if a reviewer posts an expletive-filled rant that, as Black (2008) put it, “does not bear re-printing.” These tense, sometimes nasty interactions reveal that these affinity spaces, these heterotopias, serve as microcosms of society rather than as idyllic sites.

Most of my participants had experienced or witnessed flaming, and they described its negative effects. Hayden fumed that “flaming is all about power” since flames are designed to censor writers, to decry particular plot devices or departures from the text, or to advance a personal agenda. Jane told me she actually left one *Dr. Who* site because the flaming could be so intense: “There were a couple of people on there who’d virtually memorized every show, and any departure or any little slip, and they’d pounce. They sucked the fun out of



it.” Jane later sent me the link to the site, and here are three of the flames that seemed most jarring:

*‘This piece of crap misses the point of the show. Have you ever watched it? How about you take the time to watch all the seasons before you waste our time with your stupid, rambling, pointless garbage?’*

*‘Your grammar is horrible and, as for style, you don’t have any. Why don’t you learn to write before you inflict your attempts on those of us who are literate?’*

*‘I hate everything about this fic. You turned the Doctor into a romantic lead, you threw off the whole timeline for Season 5, and you took the complex notion of sacrifice and turned it into an bad story a that would bore a pre-schooler. Did you actually think anybody would want to read this drivel?’*

Clearly, these kinds of remarks could dissuade some fans from posting again or encourage them to leave the site altogether. Anne has little patience with flaming, and within her communities, it’s actively discouraged. “Asking questions or making suggestions is great...that’s the point of fanfiction. But there’s no need to be profane or personally insulting. My friends and I will remove flames that cross the line. We have to be civil, after all.” As a rule, these participants seek opportunities to validate and encourage others’ work and feel that the way they respond to others’ work reflects their own character.

But it's the exceptions, not the rule, that worry Hayden. "What happens when some bitchy flame pushes somebody who's dealing with abuse or horrible stuff too far? I work to say positive things in reviews and to defend writers who are flamed." In other words, he sees communities as having a responsibility to defend and support one another. Relationships are central to individual fans and to fan communities have "a major influence on identity, shaping both the social and discursive practices in ways that are unique to that particular community" (Thomas, 2007, p. 190). Various degrees of flaming are encouraged or tolerated on individual sites, and different communities position themselves in various ways regarding rules, etiquette, or what is "acceptable." The idea is that like-minded fans will group together, but sometimes dissention leads to the splintering off of fan communities.

### **Tensions and Play within Heterotopias**

To better understand how communities set themselves apart, it's useful to examine some of the hierarchies and structures that shape them; after all, these spaces serve a regulatory purpose as well. While Black (2008) and Thomas (2007) speak of common ground, egalitarian communities, and consensus, one wonders about the experiences of writers who have differing ideologies, interpretations, or aims than those of other affinity space members.

In considering the ways individuals and communal spaces shape one another, Foucault (1984/1986) coined the term *heteropia* to describe spaces where individual and social interests, as well as contemporary and historical structures, may collide and intertwine in a single location. While these affinity

spaces support communities with similar interests, they are not simply utopian, egalitarian spaces. Instead, these spaces mirror mainstream society and engage with its practices and discourses. While he was not speaking solely to virtual sites of convergence, fanfiction sites exhibit these characteristics. These fan spaces are not unreal or empty voids; instead, “the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, an heterogeneous space” (p. 23). To put it another way, the spaces in which we find ourselves cannot simply be filled with people or things at whim; each space is supported and sustained by a unique system of relations that cannot be imposed or substituted for another. While utopias are idealized spaces that do not exist in tangible ways, heterotopias are real spaces where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (p. 24).

### **Nomad Experiences**

The fans in this study spoke of nomad experiences, of leaving one community and seeking out another. It is not unusual for particular fictions or writers to be blocked—if fans or administrators on a site disapprove of the direction that a fic takes—in that event, unwelcome fans can establish their own sites where they can pursue their interests. For example, after watching the way some members were shut out, Hayden chooses not to publish his slash on more canonical sites where he’d be critiqued for re-envisioning the characters too drastically; instead, he reserves that work, and that performance, for slash centered sites, “It’s just like anywhere else. You show different parts of yourself to different people.” With the relative anonymity that

comes with virtual communities, Hayden enjoys being able to write fics and perform himself differently in different venues as he decides how he wants to perform and be perceived in the “real world.” The ability to rehearse different aspects of himself for diverse audiences or communities is a key motivation for his participation in fanfiction.

While there is the freedom to move between communities or to establish new affinity spaces, there is always the underlying knowledge that certain ideas or styles are sought while others are rejected; fans are conscious that published fics can lead to praise and affirmation or censure. Fanfiction communities are not solely encouraging, nurturing spaces where all writers experience mentoring and support. Instead as Coppa (2006) pointed out, fanfiction writers are keenly aware that they are performing for a very specific and demanding audience.

### **Structures and Discipline**

Affinity spaces vary in size and scope, yet there are recurring structures that regulate fans’ behaviors. These modes of subjection play crucial roles in establishing and maintaining communities. Though communities vary in size, whether a fan builds a site herself or posts on a gaming site run by a developer, all sites have administrators, or admins, who monitor and regulate their content. While admins ultimately have the power to remove or delete posts or to revoke a participant’s membership, many admins work to collaborate with other members to establish rules that the community accepts and adopts in a more or less democratic way.

In terms of mentoring, the sites these fans shared each included an area for new writers to connect with betas, experienced writers who offer to critique or edit others' work, and each encouraged readers to offer constructive feedback. Within these affinity spaces, writers can work with betas and readers on issues of their own choosing at their own pace: English language learners can focus on syntax while burgeoning novelists can hone narrative techniques (Black, 2008; Collins, 2006; Stern, 2008; Thomas, 2006). The global nature of the Web offers writers a chance to work with other fans with diverse insights: "Thus, affinity spaces are unique because they provide opportunity for individuals who ordinarily might not have a great deal of contact with each other or have the opportunity to meet or gather in an online common ground" (Black, 2008, p. 98). The opportunity for such active peer learning and collaboration is one of the leading characteristics of fanfiction sites.

Some sites regulate participation. Before publishing a story, fans must demonstrate that they understand and accept the norms of the site: Anne explained some of her favorite sites include areas for potential members to provide character biographies for figures they would like to add to the role play. Not only is this a way to test a fan's writing ability, it can be a sort of litmus test: "Admins need to know potential members understand the fandom and aren't trying to give themselves every super-power to take over the story." Many sites screen potential members and lay out the community's expectations explicitly so one new member doesn't offend or disrupt the entire community.

Every site that these fans mentioned includes public forums for questions and story ideas, ways for members to communicate privately, instructions on membership and posting, links to stories, areas to post reviews, and a section on rules and regulations. The emphatic focus on rules took me by surprise—after all, if virtual communities are spaces of play, tinkering, and fluidity, the notion can seem counter-intuitive. Simultaneously, the realities posed by these heterotopias mean that these societies, like any others, have norms and mores; among these spaces offer commentaries on larger social ideas of creativity, respect, and discourse.

### **Rules**

Interestingly, while they hail from distinct fandoms, 3 of the 4 participants sent me to the same link, entitled “So You Think You Can RP” to better understand what communities tend to expect from their members. I was taken aback from the wide range of topics covered in this tongue-in-cheek collection of tips and warnings.

There are very specific rules about what to do—and not do—to others on the site. Particularly in RP’s, where each writer is responsible for a different character, it’s considered enormously important not to give your character a ridiculous advantage over others: “Don't start out with (or suddenly find) powerful weapons or armour, or other such items, and you can't take on an entire army of enemies single-handed. It also means you can't summon an entire army out of thin air...it ruins gameplay for everyone else.” The other cardinal rule is not to manipulate other people’s characters. No one writer has

the right to take away another's ability to participate; self-aggrandizing behavior is frowned upon.

There are pieces of writing and characterization advice geared for newbies such as, "You look like a fool if your character's name is Bloodstorm, Rage, Nightstalker, Ghost, the Planner, or any other stupid names...cool names make for dorky RPer's," and "The more boring/normal your character seems, the cooler they are. Armourers, blacksmiths, seamstresses, farmers—these are the guys everyone wants to hear about turning into heroes." By emphasizing that most fans enjoy reading about relatable, sympathetic characters, this expert encourages new members to produce that kind of writing.

If rules are set forth on fanfiction sites, how are they enforced, and how are they interpreted? Who determines the lines between play and more unpleasant issues of abuse? The short answer is that sites illustrate various thresholds of tolerance, but those thresholds are determined and enforced by both members and administrators.

### **Steps toward intervention: An admin's perspective.**

Anne, who has served as an administrator on a number of RP sites, sees her role as that of a protector. She wants to ensure that no one person is able to usurp control of the collaborative, interactive based storyline to the detriment of other members:

Generally, they [fanfic sites] run pretty democratically. Everyone has their say. Being an administrator is about helping things run smoothly...not about looking for people to kick out. The only

person I ever had to kick out was way into god-modding—she was only interested in being this super-powerful character and trying to injure or kill off other characters to make herself look amazing.

You can't write with someone who's only out for herself.

God-modding, or giving your RP character more powers or abilities than other characters possess so that you can control the storyline, is particularly frowned upon in RP's by regular members and admins alike. Since fans see fanfiction as a way to develop as writers and individuals within the context of an interested, informed community, their disgust with "modders" who would shut down everyone else's thinking, writing, and play is hardly surprising.

Anne points out that each site should have several administrators so multiple perspectives can be taken into account if someone has been writing or acting in ways that violate the rights of other members: "I get stressed out if I have to really get on to somebody. My co-admin Victor is able to help newbies out by sending them private messages and helping them figure out how the RP works. And if somebody is a problem, he has no problem blocking them until they either get it together or leave." Anne explained that on most fic sites, new members receive a private warning the first time they interfere with other people's characters or say something overly offensive to another member. If the behavior continues, a member can be blocked for a few days; revoking membership is a final step that, according to Anne, is not undertaken lightly.

There are also times, especially on smaller or collaborative sites, when an admin serves as a moderator between feuding members, especially those who



are, or were, close offline. When romances end, Anne explained that the hurt and anger don't dissipate when the broken-hearted log on: "When people break up, it can cause problems for the storyline—through their characters, they start hating each other too much, or they can take their drama public by posting things on the forums for all to see." To diffuse that tension, she sends people private messages and negotiates specific arrangements for their interactions on the site: "There's only been one time when someone decided to leave the site after a break-up. It was hard for him to get over her if they were writing on the same story every other day." Anne tries to use her work as an admin—like her writing—to develop the qualities of leadership and mediation she admires.

To suggest that admins are solely interested in protecting members rather than controlling elements of the community would be overly idyllic, though. Anne also explained:

There are ways you can keep the story from getting wild. You don't give new members important characters until they prove themselves worthy. If somebody posts something wildly out-of-character, you take it down or re-direct other members around it. The idea that fans can violate an author's intent is just wrong. Somebody has to keep things in line; after all, left to their own devices, some people would go too far.

The seemingly simple phrase "too far" is a major source of contestation. As they regulate whose work is highlighted or whose is censured, admins take a

certain responsibility for censorship and have the power to promote certain textual interpretations and explorations and denounce others.

Hayden, whose slash writing makes him especially sensitive to issues of textual control, explains why he migrated from one *Harry Potter* site to another: "Who the hell is an admin to determine which stories get to unfold? That's the point of fanfiction! You can change the storyline into your version of it. If you need characters to meet in a place that doesn't exist in the books, fine. If you need to shift things around, it's the writer's prerogative." To his way of thinking, the only cause for censorship is explicit material on sites geared for younger fans that could cause the sites to be flagged, fined, or penalized because "Admins have to worry about is who's policing *them*. You're given sites by sponsors...whoever dispenses the bandwidth. And if they feel you're inappropriate, they'll ban you." While it's one thing for a community to avoid censure by the powers-that-be, Hayden feels that some members and administrators take up the mantle of authority too eagerly and too rigidly, and, when that happens, fanfiction sites lose their energy and fun: "With fanfiction, there's got to be a lot of freedom. Otherwise, what's the point?"

If Anne's commitment to the original text and Hayden's assertions of fans' creativity seem to represent a kind of dichotomy, it's worth noting that there is a vast borderland that fans navigate; not only do both Anne and Hayden occasionally waver in their respective positions, but Thomas and Jane speak ponderously of bristling tensions and a search for a middle ground.

According to Thomas, gaming fics “have real histories and mythologies, and you can develop a character or something, but you can’t disturb the whole universe.” While he, like Anne, prizes adherence to the historical and archetypal elements of game lore, Thomas doesn’t think writers should ever be officially blocked or banned by anyone in charge; in fact, as part of the ultra-collaborative world of gamers, he was surprised that such practices existed on non-gaming sites. In his experiences, fans coach and learn from one another: “Newbies, or people who are just getting into the game might try to change something or mix things you shouldn’t. But other people will comment on it, correct them, help them learn how things are.” To Thomas, collaboration and equal opportunities for participation are crucial to fanfiction communities.

Jane, a novelist herself, treads a tightrope in approaching fanfiction. She attempts to: “keep in mind the character that the author has drawn, and the world that they created, and satisfy my curiosity.” At the same time, the thought of censuring a fan who radically re-envisions a character or text makes her very uncomfortable:

If you change virtually everything, it’s fairer to call a piece ‘inspired by’ the original than to label it fanfiction. But directors and actors have presented the same play in such different ways that it’s barely recognizable—it’s art. I couldn’t be comfortable on a site that didn’t provide enough flexibility for wide interpretations.

For Jane, fan communities don’t exist to offer a “correct” version or interpretation of a work but to allow fans to share their ideas freely.

While each of the fans recognizes that there are ideological notions about art, democracy, and power involved with this question of how far fan writers and communities can--or should—go with their interpretations, they understand that the sites where they read and post fics reflect the same tensions between authority and egalitarian ideals that they experience offline.

### **Tying the Threads Together**

This chapter has examined ways in which virtual affinity spaces seek to balance individual fans' desires for play and exploration with the needs of an entire fan community. The structures and disciplines adopted by fanfiction sites can simultaneously provide order and promote--or censure-- certain interpretations and behaviors among fans. As they decide which sites to join and what their levels of participation will be, fans come to experience the hierarchies, responsibilities, challenges, and rewards of community. Such communal experiences illustrate the deliberation of Care of the Self: the motivation to share ideas with like-minded peers, the modes of subjection found on sites, and the practices fans develop as they navigate sites' all relate to the kinds of citizens and artists fans strive to become. These rich, complex experiences are not limited to writing or the Web—they affect their perceptions and relationships offline.

But writing in these spaces can lead to conflict, both internally and with other fans. In these communities, writing takes on personal, political, and creative elements, and these can spark debates and arguments among participants. Within their individual fics and in the context of these affinity

spaces, fans engage in discourses involving violence, sexuality, and power that may be closed to them in at home, in school, or through other mediums. As we will see in the next chapter, navigating these discourses of risk is no simple matter.

## Chapter 6

### PLAYING WITH RISKY DISCOURSES

In the last chapter, we considered the structures that shape and define fanfiction communities. As fans write and perform within those communities, they seek to explore their own ideas and satisfy their audiences. This navigation brings vitality and dynamism to these affinity spaces, but missteps and eruptions are always possible, too. This chapter examines the ways fans deploy various discourses—particularly those of violence and sexuality as they play, perform, and craft themselves within their virtual communities.

As we examine the possibilities and limitations fanfiction affords its participants, it is illuminating to ask how the discourses of fan communities work. In his examination of discourse, Bové (1995) challenged scholars to ask a series of questions, including: “How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects?” (p. 54). Put another way, who has access to a given discourse? What are its rules? Who speaks, and who is spoken? Bové pointed to the need to position discourse, “to describe its place within a network of other analytic and theoretical concepts which are ‘weapons’ for grappling with contemporary society and its history” (p. 54). As they work to define and shape themselves, fans participate in discourses that make up the tangle of the web. These discourses, languages and ideologies reflect various values and beliefs, but

they serve a social purpose as well: they can perpetuate hegemony and offer spaces for resistance.

### **Carnival, Play, and Revising Resistance**

While fanfiction might not initially seem subversive, there are certainly ways in which it challenges authoritarian forces. Lensmire (2000) explained that Bakhtin labeled this “antiofficial current in the Carnival sea” *profanation* because it finds expression in heresies, parodies, and obscenities that “sound in the Carnival square” (p. 11). As they create “alternate universes” and non-canonical romantic pairings, as they merge genres and literary series, and as they delve into violence or sexuality, fans de-center and upset overly reverent attitudes towards texts and societal mores. While traditional carnivals feature elements such as cross-dressing or the use spoons and pots for scepters and crowns, fanfiction writers build worlds of alterity, commentary, and fluidity through language itself (Green & Guinery, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

Such a Carnavalesque sentiment echoed as Hayden described how he takes up some of the parallels between the class structure in his favorite stories, like *Harry Potter*, and real world issues of social justice in some of his writing:

There are full-blood elites and mud-blood nothings and enslaved elves. Rowling said everyone should be treated kindly over and over, and some of the story challenges the world it describes, but in fanfiction you can take it all apart. What if a mud-blood were sorted into Slytherin? Or if the Ministry were to pass marriage

laws saying who could marry who? Or if the slaves rioted? Think about it: when we do that online, isn't that a statement about genocide or class in real life? But there, you can make it absurd and take the sting out.

In other words, laughter and mockery cast light on the disparities of society by bringing representatives of every class, gender, and position together, and everyone is subject to critique.

The resistance of Carnival is intricately and inevitably linked to the restrictive structures of society itself; in that sense, it functions as a sort of pressure release valve. Even though Carnival offers glimpses of anarchy and revolution, the temporary relief its celebrants find can enable—or constrain—them to subscribe to the existing order once the holiday has passed (Bakhtin, 1965/1984; McWilliam, 2000). But even as Ash Wednesday dawns and official, sanctioned discourses of state and religion once again seem pervasive, the questions and critiques of Carnival echo in significant ways—that is why the voices of authority, be they government or religious agents, have sought to restrain and curb Carnival's influence throughout the ages. As McWilliam (2000) put it: "Carnival in the feudal order of things was a temporal space in which it became possible to indulge the appetites and at the same time parody the practices of officialdom" (p. 168). There is always something subversive and dangerous about Carnival, and its frivolity can lead to very real consequences. The fear about Carnival, about play, is that it might easily get out of hand, that eventually its reveling participants will refuse to adhere to the



hegemonic discourses that maintain the status quo. For the artists, corporations, consumers, and fans that make up the entertainment industry, Carnival has very real implications.

The discourses of fanfiction writers and communities function in complex ways. Drawing from Bakhtin's emphasis on the liberation of Carnival and Foucault's focus on normalizing discourses that work to control populations, McWilliam (2000) explained that discourses of risk, which interrogate uncomfortable topics such power, gender, and sexuality, are ways of resisting authority: "Discourses of risk do not arise from appeals to pluralism of the 'let-all-voices-speak' kind, nor from any other appeal to authenticity—or indeed, to popular fiction. They protrude to unsettle and disorder" (p. 170). When fanfiction writers take up discourses of risk, they can express dissatisfaction with mainstream ideologies and conventions.

While such resistance is possible, it is far from inevitable. In fact, many fanfiction sites promote hegemonic discourses that support conventional notions of authorial intent and re-enforce stereotypical notions of gender and power (Kelly, Currie, & Pomerantz, 2005; Scodari, 2003). If a fanfiction writer produces a work that offends the sensibilities of the community or its leaders, that piece will not be published, and there will be pressure for the writer to either conform to the community's ideologies or go elsewhere. Since this is the case, one of the most intriguing queries surrounding fanfiction is that of resistance. Why do some fan communities openly challenge widespread societal discourses regarding texts, gender, sexuality, and power, and why do

some writers consciously transgress the conventions within specific communities?

Living in virtual worlds carries with it some of the same complexities and dangers as other realities. Foucault (1976/1990) pointed out that multiple discourses can converge within the same discursive system, so competing ideas and ideologies are hardly rare. As adolescents tease out these conflicts, they not only craft stories: they craft and perform themselves in the process (Bakhtin, 1979/1986; Butler, 1990; Finders, 1997; McWilliam 2000; Thomas, 2007). Fanfiction incorporates several Carnavalesque discourses of risk: these include discourses of the body, gender, and power.

### **Bodies, Gender and Sexuality**

Since the Enlightenment, the mind/body binary has been a source of contention and confusion. Chat rooms, websites, blogs, and portals have become another site of debate: after all, if any space can be described as purely intellectual, wouldn't it be found online? Bury (2005) pointed out that initially scholars saw that the Internet would be an egalitarian space where gender, class, race, and other markers would be invisible; it would be a space where thoughts would reign supreme, where people would benefit from a process of "disembodiment" (p. 4). While Descartes might have lauded such a vision as the rational triumph of the intellect, Judith Butler (1990) warned us "the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy" (p. 12). It can come as no surprise, then, that the lived experience of people online

has been far messier, tangled, and complex. Thomas (2007) explained that the visual, interactive nature of the Web provides “a site for the cultural production of a new type of body” (p. 3). This “new type of body” encountered in fanfiction, which is largely written and developed by adolescent girls, draws from particular discourses of femininity, “some of which conform to Western ideals of beauty and girlhood; others reflect notions of resistance and rebellion” (Thomas, 2007, p. 3). The adolescents who gain and wield power online use and manipulate words, images, and technology to create bodies and selves through writing. As fanfiction writers construct themselves and one another, the body is always part of the discourse.

One way in which physicality asserts itself is through simple activity and engagement; fans do not passively receive and accept information from authors or producers. Whether they are trying to predict what will happen in the canon, fill in gaps, or challenge character or plot developments, these fans grapple with texts in powerful, palpable ways (Green & Guinery, 2004). This grappling is not limited to cerebral sparks, either. The adolescents in this study describe physical sensations like the hair on the back of their neck standing up, their hearts racing, or their palms sweating as they engage in “intellectual” activities such as reading, writing, and editing, and there is a palpable emphasis on physicality both in characterization and plot. Thomas (2006) explained that aesthetic experiences are tied to physical responses in the minds of fans. In other words, a fan “feels and identifies so much with her character that her body experiences genuine pain over the tragedies that are

written into the plot” (Thomas, 2006, p. 232). My participants related similar experiences: Jane bites her nails when she writes the Doctor into nerve-wracking situations; Hayden finds himself laughing as he drafts satirical scenes and his heart “races a hundred miles a minute” during a steamy romantic scene; Thomas even “teared up” when the hero of his story, a warrior monk, sacrificed himself so his beloved would be safe. These adolescents use writing to explore their own ideas about beauty, sexuality, and relationships (Black, 2008; Cherland, 2008; Scodari, 2003; Thomas, 2007), and an engagement with such issues cannot take place in an aphysical world.

The seemingly simple act of writing and posting fanfiction is also subject to its own system of discipline. It is not as if adolescents are completely free to say or share any thought or question. Many sites require that betas and webmasters must first approve a particular fic before it can be posted on the site; receiving negative reviews, or being “flamed” by readers could convince some writers to either alter their stories or remove them altogether, and the desire to be a popular writer on a site can drastically shape the kind of fictions writers produce (Cherland, 2008; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006; Thomas, 2007). One of the especially interesting questions, then, is how and why some writers and sites consciously position themselves against mainstream discourses of gender, sexuality, and power.

Many scholars insist that fanfiction writers are consciously aware that they are performing for particular audiences of readers. Coppa (2006) compared fanfiction to theater because of its emphasis on performance,

fluidity, and adaptation. Instead of investigating the connections adolescents see between their lives and writing, critics dismiss fanfiction as “being derivative and repetitive, too narrowly focused on bodies and character at the expense of plot or idea. That may sound like failure by conventional literary standards, but if we examine fan fiction as a species of performance, the picture changes” (229). Just as theatrical works rely on physical portrayals of grisly violence and frank sexuality, fanfiction is also a kind of performance directed toward an audience. Like other storytelling genres, fanfiction is a “performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium” (p. 229). Instead of being a flaw in the literary, aesthetic conventions of these texts, the sweat, scents, bruises, fumbling gropings, and erotica of fanfiction can offer a rich resource for researchers who would examine the worlds and selves these authors wish to perform. Fanfiction probes vulnerabilities: not only do writers put their own questions and thoughts out in the world, but they create (or reveal?) openings, holes, and gaps—both within texts and society.

### **Violence**

To say that society sends mixed messages about violence is an understatement. While increasingly violent and explicit stories, music, movies, and games soar in popularity, some people fear that anything that deals with magic or violence might lead children astray: what if kids couldn’t differentiate between those fantasy worlds and reality? What if they actually started muttering incantations or throwing knives around? Some parents wanted

*Harry Potter* and *Twilight* banned from school libraries; critics decry the brutality of games like *Grand Theft Auto*, and television shows and music are deemed—you guessed it—too sexual and violent for children.

But not everyone thinks that children are so easily confused or that they should be completely shielded from the sometimes grim truths of the real world. In his study of how consumer culture has transformed some of our oldest stories, Zipes (1997) explained that while traditional fairy tales focus on the uniqueness both of suffering and magical restoration as people or things are infused with new life, there is something particularly reminiscent of consumerism about striving to be forever young and blissful in America's fairy tale films which "continually package youth and bliss in the same manner so that the end effect is homogeneity in perfect synchronization" (p. 92). Instead of providing security, Zipes suggests that in its zeal to provide sanitized stories that parents and society see as safe, Hollywood actually promotes superficiality and an overly romantic view of the world.

That superficiality is something that the fans in this study resist. As Hayden laughingly explained,

Snow White isn't the same without the iron shoes that dance you to death, and the Little Mermaid is different without all the murders. It seems stupid that we have the death penalty and are all about punishment, but we clean up the stories and take away their powerful morals.

Put simply, Hayden sees it as hypocritical when groups that censure traditional stories--which describe the consequences of abuse and injustice--simultaneously decry the collapse of morality. His writing, like that of the other fans, incorporates and addresses violence. This is a deliberate, conscious move that indicates the commitment these fans have to engaging with difficult issues rather than ignoring them. While some may be uncomfortable with the idea, violence and sex are part of life and society, and our stories bristle with them, whether we're reading *Othello*, watching *Jersey Shore*, or writing fanfiction.

The lines between violence and heroism, bloodsport and courage, can seem blurry, and fanfiction is one of the places where adolescents can take up these discourses without risking immediate censure. For example, consider this excerpt from Thomas's fic, "The Path of Justice" in which an unlucky soldier stumbles upon a slave who has joined a revolt against his oppressive masters:

*The soldier reeled back. Large pits, which once held thousands of slaves were now empty. Bits of broken chain littered the floors beside the usual scraps of rancid food and waste...And all around lay the mangled bodies of the dead. Then the soldier saw him. The slave took one step forward. His face was obscured in darkness save for glittering black eyes, shining with bloodlust.*

Rancid waste, mangled bodies, bloodlust...such vivid details contribute to the sinister mood Thomas worked to create; instead of being merely gratuitous,

they serve his artistic purposes as he strove to pick apart the social injustices that led to such slaughter and mayhem. Such evocative language not only captures a certain degree of intensity; it garners the attention and enthusiasm of other fans.

The idea that gaming and fanfiction sites foster communities where participants can take up questions about societal ideals is echoed by fan scholar Tom Bissell (2010), who described his brush with heroism one night when he risked his character's life to protect two of his friends: "It *was*, it did *feel* heroic...All the emotions I felt during those few moments—fear, doubt, resolve, and finally courage—were as intensely vivid as any I have felt while reading a novel or watching a film or listening to a piece of music (p. 47). Just as books, movies and games gain traction when they connect to our personal lives, navigation of heroism and violence overlap online and are intensified by relationships and a degree of active choice.

While each of the four writers view and deploy violence differently within their individual fics, they each scoffed at the idea that fandom might cause people to lose their grip on reality or to adopt violent or psychotic behaviors. Rather than engaging in discourses of violence to release tension or avoid real life issues, these fans seem to face some of society's ugliness with a directness that some of us might find intimidating.

Thomas is particularly scornful of those who equate violent writing with potentially dangerous behavior, and he explains that he writes about violence to draw attention to societal injustices: "Ignoring abuses isn't going to make



them go away. Instead, we have to look at things and take responsibility for them.” The interwoven nature of violence and social injustice takes center stage in his “Song of Saryn,” based on *The Elder Scrolls* game. The fic opens in the midst of a violent revolt; the Argonians, a reptilian underclass enslaved by the elves, have banded together to demand freedom and enact revenge. Consider how he sets the scene:

*The border city of Tear had erupted into pure anarchy, buildings burning despite the rain, blood swirling to puddles on the muddy streets...thunderclaps drowning screams of pain and terror. Surveying the scene with satisfaction, the Argonian breathed in deeply and savored the mingled smell of blood and freedom.*

Not only does evocative language take the reader to this stormy, bloody night, we see the fury of at least one avenging slave. In this opening chapter, the reader learns that the city’s slaves massacred their abusive masters. When I asked him to explain his approach to the uprising and subsequent bloodshed, Thomas elaborated: “Who can blame the Argonians? They live in a world where the powerful elves control everything: wealth, education, ideas of beauty...they can split up those families, and they get away with it. There was no reasoning with the elves who’d convinced themselves of their moral and intellectual superiority, so violence is the only option.”

His thinking extends far beyond the world of the online game; he frowned as he talked about ways control and domination play out in the real world: “You might think slavery ended in 1865 or genocide started and stopped with

the holocaust. But there's still a slave trade, and you still have people killing each other because of nationalism... Never mind rich people screwing over the poor—we have that in America now! Aren't all those *victims* going to snap and show everybody that nobody really has all the power?" Thomas is keenly aware that no one group holds complete power; indeed, he views the widening gap between the rich and poor with alarm. In his writing, he describes the tension surrounding social injustice because he wants to make other fans more aware of these issues offline.

Thomas insists that critics who would complain about the stabbings and fires he describes during the anarchic scene would actually be more concerned about his criticism of the upper class's abuse of power and his sympathy with the oppressed than with any descriptions of blood or screams: "People who'd complain about the mayhem are really more afraid that they might lose affluence themselves. I write to show people—and remind myself—that we have a responsibility to each other." Once again, we see that fanfiction isn't neatly compartmentalized for these writers—the discourses and themes that surface in their fics relate to the way they perceive society and their role within it.

Another issue that fans take up relates to the struggle to fight against one's nature in order to be a role model within a violent culture. Anne, who currently writes about the vampires of the *Underworld* trilogy, describes this tension in "Starless Night." Viktor, the head of the coven, reconciles himself to restraint despite his desire for fresh blood:

*The hunger at least should be easily enough sated. He moved to a chair, made himself comfortable. He would however wait. To enjoy blood inside the coven house it had to be sipped from glasses, something he could only enjoy if he built up the craving. That took time. In truth he detested the practice. It was better to take it from the cow, at least then there seemed to be a taste to it.*

*But he was an Elder. His behaviors would directly influence those around him. It would be foolish to refuse the refined way the coven had taken to with such fervor.*

*Even if it was a disgusting practice through blandness alone.*

While ruminations about craving blood could hardly be termed polite conversation, such work illustrates the complex characterization of Viktor that Anne has crafted. Like all vampires, he wants and needs blood to survive. But he's no mere vampire; as a leader, a role model, he must exercise self-control even though he finds the pretense of elegance and refinement both absurd and unsatisfying. Anne sought to portray the tensions between explicit and implicit violence. As she explained, the blood in the glasses had to have a source, so despite the illusion of culture, death is a pervasive and unavoidable reality—whether anyone likes to acknowledge it or not.

Not only do fan writers describe the causes of violence and use it for exposition or characterization, they elaborate on its aftermath. Jane elaborates, “Most of what I write deals with the aftermath of violence, the collateral damage...people trying to move on amidst their grief.” In her fic

“Learning to Tell Time,” she focuses Ginny Weasley’s trauma after watching her brother Fred die in the final battle between Voldemort and Harry Potter.

Instead of describing the battle itself, Jane shows us a private moment when Harry joins Ginny beside Fred’s grave the burial:

*She was staring fixedly straight ahead, obviously not seeing anything, and her hands were clasped tightly in her lap; with a small hint of alarm, he realized she was gripping so hard that her knuckles were turning white... ‘I’m scaring myself, Harry,’ she said a few eternal moments later. Her voice was low and even, but he could sense the barely controlled rage in its softness. The pit of his stomach clenched even tighter. ‘I want to find whoever did this. I want to find the exact person who spoke the curse. And I want to hurt them. Not just hex them; I want to kill them. I want to watch them die.’*

This scene focuses on Ginny’s internal struggle to work through her grief and to maintain her own ethical values and beliefs. Jane talked about why she wanted to show Ginny’s struggle with anger and her gradual acceptance of loss:

If you have to fight for the greater good, that’s one thing. But revenge isn’t ours to take. If we all start seeking vengeance, the cycle can’t end. When you lose a loved one, it’s normal to want to make the guilty person pay. It’s not immoral to *want* revenge, but we have to be wise about what we *do* about it, who we become.

Jane, who seeks to fuse her religious and ethical beliefs with her writing, advocates forgiveness and self-control. She does not see a dividing line between her fics and herself; instead, one of her aims as a fanfiction writer is to challenge the ways she feels that society glamorizes violence: by focusing on grief as opposed to glory, Jane probes more deeply into the nature of heroism. In her writing, it is nobler to forgive than to pursue vengeance—otherwise the cycle of violence will be unending. These grapplings extend beyond her writing as she works through ways bravery, anger, and loss influence our actions and relationships.

This tension between vengeance and justice, desire and action surrounds notions of becoming: whether we see Thomas grappling with social justice or Jane's contemplation on anger and grief, we see adolescents troubling one-dimensional ideas about power or loss as they envision the people they want to become and the society they want to create.

### **Romance, Sex, and Groping With Words**

There is nothing simple—online or off—about romance or sexuality. Those concepts get tangled and complicated in a hurry, and the ways in which fanfic writers take them up are shaped by—and often collide with--their own questions, values, beliefs, and desires. Three of my participants, Hayden, Jane, and Thomas often include romantic elements in their fanfiction writing. However, they take up romantic discourse in vastly different ways.

For Jane, writing serves to chart her growth from girlhood to womanhood. She reflected on how her writing has shifted from her earliest

fictions centered around Taylor Hansen: “When I wrote all those maudlin pieces, I was writing and fantasizing about the perfect man. Rather self-indulgent, I guess. But honestly, don’t we all take time in our teens to decide what our ideals are?” Though she views those pre-teen writings as “maudlin” rather than as artistic, they provided a space for her to explore those first romantic twinges and to share those daydreams with a supportive audience of other fans, and that positive peer support encouraged her sense of self (Bury 2005; Cherland, 2008; Currie & Pomerantz, 2006; Finders, 1997). As early as sixth or seventh grade, she used fics to strategize her own flirtations and initial forays into romance because “it was safe to experiment with witty lines and flouncy walks online because you don’t have to worry about making a fool of yourself in front of your entire middle school.”

Jane’s current writing reflects lessons she’s learned from relationships, romantic and otherwise: “Early on, it was about finding happiness once the romance was in place. Now, it’s about cooperation, struggle, mutual sacrifice and nurturing. I understand now that love isn’t always enough to make things work; hopefully, the writing reflects that.” Jane thinks that the “happily-ever-after” endings girls see in movies are unrealistic, and she consciously challenges that discourse by writing about couples in her fandoms that don’t have simple or carefree relationships.

Jane feels that the best romantic fic she’s written centers around two minor characters from the *Harry Potter* series, the werewolf Remus Lupin and

the shape-shifter Nymphadora Tonks. She explained why she was drawn to this couple:

Not only are they both outsiders because of their different places in the magical hierarchy, they're caught up in this war, and they've lost friends and loved ones. Plus, they each have issues about self-worth, and they have to face their fears of losing one another.

They have to learn to love themselves before they can really be with the other person.

In many ways, her thinking echoes one of the principles of Care of the Self: one must learn to nurture oneself before becoming useful to anyone else—when each character becomes self-accepting, they can come together. In Jane's mind, Lupin and Tonks save each other from loneliness, and she goes to great lengths to show that Tonks is no mere damsel in distress. Consider this excerpt from the fic's final scene when Tonks exclaims:

*I'm not going to take pity on you and nobly rescue you from your lonely existence. This isn't an act of compassion – in fact, I'm rather selfish about it. I need to be loved – I demand it. And no matter how clever you may be, I refuse to let you resign yourself to a life of self-denial and solitary heroism.*

For Jane, this couple—all loving couples—accept one another's flaws and provide support and perspective. But this excerpt goes further: the female character acknowledges her own needs and desires with a frankness Jane admires. Rather than writing or performing as a dainty princess, Jane takes

on the perspective of an eccentric, outspoken heroine who embodies values and traits she herself deeply admires.

Girls aren't the only ones who use writing to tease out romantic discourses. Thomas speaks about his desire to bridge idealism and romance in his game-based fictions. He explained that most gaming fics feature heroes caught up in chivalric romances where they not only rescue a damsel in distress but find themselves being saved from purposeless lives, but he takes a different approach: "The fic I just finished had a warrior monk who went on an epic journey...he and the princess fell in love like in most romantic pieces, but he ended up sacrificing his life to save hers. He actually does what you hear about in all the songs...he puts her life ahead of his own." Thomas went on to consider the way members responded: "They seemed to really appreciate the twist. Most writers don't kill off the hero. Beyond that, they said it gave them something to think about...what it means to love somebody or how selflessness makes you heroic." Both his storyline and other fans' reactions relate to views of romance. Just as he calls attention to the complexities power in some of his fics, he challenges the idea that men can make the transition from warrior to lover to husband or farmer smoothly or safely: "We're always changing, but not all those changes are easy, and sometimes we lose one thing to gain something else." As he contemplates what those changes might mean for his own life, Thomas writes through struggles that masculine heroes might face.

In a fic he was drafting around the time of our interview, Thomas began to focus on a character who, at least momentarily, was unable to protect his



beloved after they have been captured by rebellious slaves eager to overturn the social hierarchy. Seryn, the story's hero, watches as

*[Nina's] violet eyes filled once more with tears. They ran down her mangled face and dripping silently onto the cold earth. She was covered with fresh cuts, long red marks that stood out painfully against her blue-gray skin. Her silken hair was a shadow of its former beauty, cut in jagged lines by spiteful Argonian daggers.... Seryn could only watch as she fell into sobs, unable to hold her, to tell her sweet lies about how everything would be alright. All he could do was sit and wait for the morning, and the fresh pains it would bring.*

When we spoke, Thomas was unsure of how Seryn and Nina would escape, but he explained that he wanted to focus on Seryn's fear and despair, at least for a bit: "Usually, the hero is always supposed to have it together. But sometimes, it's not that simple. He feels like a failure right now; he can't save himself, much less her." Thomas confided that one of his fears is that he might be unable to protect his loved ones, but he believes heroism is—or should be—defined by action and intent rather than outcome alone. Writing within an interested community opens up a space for Thomas to contemplate different, more complex versions of romance and heroism.

While Thomas uses fanfiction as a means of contemplation, Hayden views his romances as a place for experimentation: "I focus on relationships and the obstacles in relationships. And since creating relationships takes a

long time, it can't carry over into a one-shot. Or even a two-shot. With the stories I want to write, it's impossible, or at least impossible to create a relationship in a one-shot. It takes time and commitment...kind of like the real thing would." Part of the complexity underlying Hayden's writing relates to his way of re-envisioning characters and texts. He tends to read and write slash fanfics which center around same-sex relationships.

### **Slash**

Slash fanfiction is an especially contested space. Studies have shown that the primary authors of slash fics are women, and some scholars position it as female porn that projects feminine sexual desires onto male characters or that challenges conventional male dominance in the arenas of sex or technology (Black, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Penley, 1992). Others take a more critical stance and suggest that slash is a genre that subverts patriarchal discourses or hegemonic forces because its narratives place male characters in traditionally feminine positions of submission. (Scodari, 2003; Kustritz, 2003). Still others simply argue that fantasy—which flouts virtually every societal convention—urges fans to think beyond mores like marriage when they begin to play with these characters (Gwenllian Jones, 2002). Scholars are hardly the only ones to disagree about the functions of slash, though. Some fans shy away from re-envisioning characters as gay, and they cite either textual integrity or personal ideology. At the same time, slash sites like silversnitch.net have become increasingly popular and attract loyal followings among female and male, straight and gay fans.

While he cites a number of motivations for slash, including the relative ease of writing from the perspective of male characters, Hayden explained the rewards and challenges of slash writing:

If you want to see male relationships, you have to go online because it's not a regular part of most books you pick up. Writing for Harry and Ginny is so readily available, but with Harry and Draco, you have so many more complexities between them: what would it mean to be openly gay in that world with all its rules and hierarchies? They have more obstacles that they'd need to get through, and I feel like it's more about getting things to mesh together so they can be together.

For Hayden, who writes differently on slash and straight sites and who doesn't share his slash writing with many people, these questions of openness and society's responses take on special significance. When he writes slash, Hayden does in fact shift characterizations and pairings, but he also challenges conventional, hegemonic ideas about "normal" sexuality and romance—not only in the text's world but our own.

But Hayden's writing reflects some hegemonic notions even as it challenges others. His somewhat stereotypical views of gender also shape his decision to develop romances around male characters. First, he asserts that men tend to be logical while women tend to be driven by emotion: "I know how a guy would assess a situation. Women would be more emotional while men are rational....It's like my friend. She gets so emotional about other people's

problems and relationships that sometimes I want to just shake her. I can't think like that. So I can't write women." While some (including me), might object to the rational/irrational binary he references in his portrayals and understandings of men and women, when I asked whether his male characters feel and respond to emotions, he acknowledged that his views are complicated and tangled: "Well, Harry or Draco are very emotional, I guess. But it's different because...well, I don't know why. [Pause] It's easier for me to justify my decisions if I write about guys. It's, just, more natural for me to write from a guy's perspective, and with guys, you don't have power struggles like with normal, straight pairings."

This need for justification is both intriguing and ironic given the value he places on interpretation and play, but—given the loaded nature of society's attitudes toward sexuality—it may not be all that surprising. The inferiority he mentions within "normal" relationships refers to notions of male dominance and female submission: "Most of the time, you have a man who takes the lead. who provides safety and security, and it's the woman's job to be supportive and nurturing. But with two men, things can be equal." While the idea that same-sex relationships are unaffected by power structures may seem naïve, Hayden is questioning the different forms masculinity might take, and he is not the first to voice such an idea. Scodari (2003) posited that slash could "be viewed as a way for female fans to envision an egalitarian romance" (p.113). Grappling with the ways power, love, and sex entwine, then, is another motive for some participants to read and publish stories.

Hayden describes slash as “a way to push texts and characters in new directions while I play,” and the fics he shared focus on characterization and social issues rather than explicitly sexual content. One of his works-in-progress opens with Harry Potter, dressed in his invisibility cloak, stalking his arch rival, Draco Malfoy. Instead of uncovering a nefarious plot, Harry overhears Draco confiding his feelings to the ghost who haunts the girls’ bathroom, Moaning Myrtle:

*Harry’s mind was reeling at the sudden intake of information: Draco was talking to Myrtle, a dead Muggle-born, about some boy, possibly a love interest. With a muted moan, Harry sat down to relieve his legs of the task of holding him aloft...However, the depth and meaning of the words hit him, they were parallel to his own life; he visited the Room of Requirements yesterday....and couldn’t enter.... But then again, if the room was occupied no one could enter either. It was just coincidence that Harry and the mystery boy had visited on the same day.*

Throughout the story, Hayden shows us one character, Draco, who talks about his feelings, ruminates about their first meeting, and describes his tender feelings, and another, Harry, who’s secretly following Draco, whose heart races, who isn’t sure he can actually remain standing as he hears this shocking secret. When I asked if Harry was shocked because he was aroused or if he was disturbed, Hayden’s response was illuminating: “Who’s to say they aren’t the same thing? My guess is it wouldn’t be easy to be out in high school...even

to yourself.” He went on to explain that he was trying to rely on *entendre*—at least for the first chapter--so that readers could decide for themselves whether Harry is smitten or terrified. “I’ve decided to post this one on a regular site instead of a slash one, so it’ll be interesting to see if people like it or if they flame me.” In fact, most of the reviews were positive: fans noted that the aristocratic Draco must have been heartsick to be talking to a lower-class being like Myrtle, and they appreciated the irony of Harry stalking his admirer. Posting a slash fic, even a mild one, on a regular site was a stressful experience for Hayden, but he explained that it was an important step: “What I think, what I write, it’s my business. But if I’m going to be happy, I’ve got to figure out how to show enough of myself—on sites, with people offline, whatever—to feel like I’m being honest with them and myself.” As he writes and shares his work, thoughts, and fears with fans through the relative anonymity of a pen name, Hayden is navigating what is of performing himself that will spill over to “real life,” too. It’s hard to imagine a more conscious, deliberate process of crafting oneself.

Nobody should assume that all communities welcome such ruminations about the nature of gender or romance, though. Scodari (2003) cautioned that some of the straight women who pen slash insist that their “protagonists are decidedly straight men who cannot help but be sexually attracted to one another because of their shared experiences and abiding trust” (114). Some might label such protests homophobic; they certainly complicate the writing and reading of slash further. Thomas, who had never heard of slash, had this

response: “Gay couples in the fics on gaming sites? No way! (Pause) Maybe it’s because dudes write game fanfictions. But no, I’ve NEVER seen that.” In other words, “dudes” don’t—or shouldn’t--ask “those” kinds of questions or envision “those” kinds of relationships. While slash writing continues to swirl online, so do hegemonic notions of sexuality and romance. The complexities surrounding these discourses mean that a fan might resist one facet of conventional thinking about romance even as he supports others.

### **Explicit Fics**

While each writer views romance in complicated ways, one of the patterns that emerged related to tensions, from within and without, between sexuality and the need to control it. In many ways, their comments about society’s views of sexuality reflect some of the conflicts they later expressed about their own work. As he spoke about the extensive lengths society has carried out to ensure that pornographic images are kept neatly behind curtains or locked cabinets, Hayden speculated that the censorship and taboos in place only serve to pique curiosity about sex: “People are so pre-occupied with controlling who has access to stuff about sex. I don’t get it. Even when you shrink-wrap them, go into those stores, and you’ll find shrink-wrapped packages where people have just been reading away.” In his opinion, it is the fact that sexuality shouldn’t be discussed in polite society that makes it such a fascinating topic for people generally and for fanfiction writers in particular. It would seem that his view demonstrates Foucault’s (1978/1990) argument about power and prohibition: “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power,

anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (p. 101). While fanfiction may be a “relatively obscure” space for resistance or tolerance, it is a genre where participants can interrogate and take up social and sexual mores.

All of the participants acknowledged various degrees of familiarity with explicit fics, yet they repeatedly stressed that they avoided writing such pieces personally. Anne was especially defensive: ““Some of my friends who are online right now, they do fics that are very explicit. I mean, like X rated. But mine *aren’t like that!*” (Emphasis in original) I found myself asking why these writers seemed so anxious to distance themselves from explicit writing, and I found that there was no one, simple reason. Perhaps Anne is responding to societal expectations of femininity and her own values when she says, “No self-respecting girl would actually claim *that* kind of writing—it’s degrading,” and Jane acknowledges that her religious beliefs closely tie into the kinds of writing she embraces, “Well, some people use fanfiction as an excuse for writing soft porn...or not-so-soft porn. That’s clearly it’s own genre of fiction, but it’s not something I could enjoy. It’s all about your own, selfish desires.”

At the same time, Jane doesn’t shy away from romance or physicality altogether. Here is a passage from “Harry and Ginny” when the two are reunited after a year of war throughout the Wizarding World:

*‘What next?’ he asked hoarsely. And then, with a move like a drowning man reaching for a lifeline, he grabbed her and pulled her into a kiss so fierce that he forgot where he was . . . clinging to her as*



*he had longed to cling to her all those dark, uncertain nights in the tent, staring at her dot on the Marauder's Map . . . he poured into her all his fear, all his loneliness, all his ache for her throughout the past horrible year, and she absorbed it, and she was pouring life back into him as he had once watched life seep back into her after his destruction of the diary . . . and she was off the ground, both arms and legs wrapped around him, and he could not tell which part of himself was him and which was her, and it didn't matter anymore . .*

For Jane, romance and sexuality are a part of life, but her focus is on the couple's emotional connection, and—as she explained—she is most comfortable writing such scenes when the couple will quickly be heading to the marriage altar. In Jane's writing, romance must be monitored and controlled so that she doesn't feel guilty, and she cannot imagine writing anything overtly sexual. Both of the girls viewed explicit writing as somehow shameful or perverse, and they were determined to avoid being labeled as *those* kinds of writers.

Not everyone took a negative view of explicit fics, though. While he was initially a little embarrassed, Thomas acknowledged that reading fics satisfies his curiosity in a different way than watching couples in movies:

Some of the fics I read are almost, like...um, softcore, you know? Breasts and kissing, making out. And you hear the character thinking through how he feels, what he's doing next. It helps you sort of think through what you'd do, right?

Reading once again ties into Thomas's preparations and rehearsals of "real life" when he imagines himself in these sexual scenarios; lines between fantasy and reality blur when he draws lessons from these fics that he hopes to apply to his own life. Here, too, he weighs what a strong man would do or say as he thinks about how he wants to behave when amorous situations arise.

In Hayden's mind, fantasizing is fun, but explicit writing serves several concrete purposes within the fandom:

Sometimes you have authors who write....well, it's not *quite* the literary equivalent of porn, and then you have some authors who are definitely going for that. One reason people read like X-rated fics or NC-17 is because they know they're going to get some sexuality out of this piece. Lots of times I'll pick that kind of piece because people will only write that kind of piece if they're a good writer.

In other words, Hayden not only expects a certain level of sexual expertise in explicit fictions, he assumes that only accomplished writers would attempt to publish that sort of descriptive piece. To his way of thinking, it would take confidence in one's sexual experiences and one's writing to post an explicit piece that others will be picking apart. He laughed nervously when he said, "I know I couldn't write a good PWP. When I think about it, I know I haven't, (pause) you know, done enough to be able to pull that off. It would be really bad." His shyness and inexperience mean that he may enjoy reading others' X-rated stories but won't post his own until he's confident in his ability to

describe lurid details. Just as he's working to be increasingly open about his slash writing within all of his fan communities, Hayden does not want to pose as an expert when he doesn't feel like one. He explained, "I might not be the best writer or be able to come up with the best sex scenes, but I can work to be confident enough to be open about who I am and what I like." This desire for self-confidence certainly shapes the ways Hayden experiences fanfiction. More importantly, it extends outward into the person he envisions himself becoming.

Curiosity, idealism, desire, restraint, eroticism voyeurism, fear of failure...all these emotions swirl and blur where romance is concerned--on and offline. Whether fans shy away from explicit fics like Jane and Anne do, envision themselves within them as Thomas does, or use them to gauge others' experiences and expertise the way Hayden does, their attitudes toward overtly sexual material ties into the ways they envision and perform their own sexuality. Whether they see innocence or experience as the ideal, these fans are conscious of the ways sexuality ties into the way others perceive them and the ways they perceive themselves.

### **How safe are these spaces?**

There might be a tendency to think these heterotopic sites can provide a completely safe space for adolescents to wrangle with these discourses of violence and sex, to craft their stories and selves in peace. But life online isn't so simple. While fanfiction allows writers the power to author an identity (Bakhtin, 1975/1981) and to examine their own notions of romance, physicality, and sexuality, it does not provide a completely safe space for such

explorations. Like all heterotopias, digital sites reflect the society that produces them, and there are various levels of risk. Thomas (2007) elaborated on a notorious case that was reported as a rape in cyberspace in which a group of friends were happily communicating in a text-based reality world, called LambdaMOO, when another user, named 'Bungle' logged on and proceeded (through his abilities to execute programming code) to force the friends to force the friends to commit indecent acts upon him, themselves, and each other. Several of the friends felt so violated that they received professional counseling similar to that of rape victims offline.

While such blatantly violent incidents are rare, life online is hardly without risk. The seemingly simple act of writing and posting fanfiction is also subject to its own system of discipline. Many sites require that betas and webmasters must first approve a particular fiction before it can be posted on the site; receiving negative reviews, or being "flamed" by readers could convince some writers to either alter their stories or remove them altogether, and the desire to be a well-esteemed, popular writer on the site can drastically shape the kind of fictions writers produce (Cherland, 2008; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006; Thomas, 2007). One of the especially interesting questions, then, is how and why some writers and sites consciously position themselves against mainstream discourses of gender, sexuality, and power. Anne, Thomas, Hayden, and Jane spoke of issues of collaboration and trust, of the limits of anonymity, of how family or friends might view them differently if that anonymity were breached.

In thinking about the ways communities are and are not safe spaces, Anne focused on the way relationships on and offline can blur; there's always the question about how much characters or pieces reflect the writers themselves:

A safe space? Can anything be safe all the time? It can be complicated. In RP, you deal with people playing villains or playing heroes, and you don't know them as people, so it's hard to not like them unless they cause problems in the writing. It's like acting, but you have to keep your guard up—you can't assume everyone's honest or trustworthy in real life.

In other words, while fans naturally focus on their own performances, Anne cautions that other fans and community members need to be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism. The thought of fans—particularly young girls—meeting people from the site without taking proper precautions gives her pause. “I'd never just show up by myself to meet someone I didn't really know for coffee or something...you can always meet up at conventions or with a group of friends and fellow fans you know, but you can only be safe if you're smart.” This idea, that safety results from wise choices, is not an indictment of the mystery or anonymity of online communities *per se*. Instead, it's a reminder that these heterotopias are microcosms for society as a whole.

Hayden's concerns about online anonymity are different. In some ways, he sees it as liberating to have a place to explore sexuality or to share an idea through a fic or a vision through a sketch. He describes his sense of freedom

this way: “You can write things you can’t elsewhere, and there’s no judgment; label your piece slash or angst or suicide or whatever, and people who read it are people who won’t just write you off as a perv or something.” For him, writing slash for other slash fans provides a chance to perform a different part of himself, but there’s always the fear that someone that online life will collide with his other one:

I have so many passwords up; my friends and parents can’t just see my recent activity and know about my writing or art. Nobody ever casually leafs through my work. Ever. If my sister or my dad read my stuff, they’d freak out and call me gay and nothing would be the same. But I sometimes wonder what would happen if the walls to protect me—and them--actually came down.

In other words, the safety he senses online seems a brittle one. Should those passwords and boundaries fail to keep curious relatives or peers at bay, his life and relationships would shift dramatically. For those who perform themselves differently in different spaces, the idea of losing the secure anonymity of virtual masks, of being called out or rejected, means that safety is, at best, relative.

While fans might be open enough to share deeply personal issues such as sexuality, depression, abuse, drug use, through their writing, there are also practical limits to the kind of safety fans can provide one another. While fans can, and often do, offer verbal affirmations to a writer who may be struggling with personal crises, there aren’t always outlets for direct intervention online. As Hayden learned when he found out one of his favorite writers had begun

cutting herself after her mother's death, "It's not like I can directly ask if someone is getting help or provide them with a place to stay if they need it." At the same time, the fans who spoke with me seemed convinced that sometimes writers can be more open and more vulnerable online than they can in their hometowns or schools, so the verbal encouragement fans proffer—and receive—can serve a useful purpose. Whether fans work to develop friendships or set up collegial peer writing circles, emotive and personal components are at work online just as they are elsewhere.

### **Performing for Others and Self**

In this chapter, we have examined ways fans engage in risky discourses—especially those of violence and sexuality—within and for their affinity spaces. Publishing and sharing their fics online lends another, performative layer to their writing (Coppa, 2006; Thomas, 2007). Their awareness of performing for an audience affects the ways fanfic writers deploy discourses and shapes the kinds of stories they produce.

Fanfiction communities, like other heterotopias, are sites of convergence where social ideologies and structures intermingle with personal experiences. Such sites should not be described as idyllic spaces where there is complete democracy, absolute acceptance, or total safety. Fanfiction communities provide a separate space, if not a utopian one, where adolescents can rehearse and perform themselves differently than they do in the routinized world.

In thinking about fanfiction communities as a Carnavalesque outlet for societal critique and self-expression, one must question why adolescents seek

out such a medium at all. What are the social conditions and structures that lead fans to meet online to create communities, re-envision and write stories, and to develop themselves as artists and people? As we'll see in the next chapter, the kinds of reading and writing these adolescents have encountered in schools have compelled them to seek out alternate approaches to texts and writing. They craft fanfiction and participate in vibrant communities because they are stifled elsewhere.



## **Chapter 7**

### **COMPARING THE DISCOURSES OF FANS AND SCHOOLS**

According to the fans who spoke with me, writing fanfiction and writing in school differ in fundamental ways. While publishing fics online involves risk of censure and tensions surrounding the fragile anonymity of fans, the medium provides a space for adolescents to interpret texts, raise questions, and to take up discourses of sexuality, romance, and violence in nuanced ways. The fans described reading and writing in school as narrower and more limited. As suggested earlier, one must question whether adolescents would seek this outside site, this affinity space away from the structures or authorities of school, if reading and writing were not treated so formulaically within schools themselves.

This chapter highlights ways current political and social issues affect reading and writing instruction and the fans' views of the treatment of literature and writing in school. Further, it focuses on the frustrations with school that have compelled fans to push themselves intellectually, ethically, and socially by participating in fanfiction.

#### **Mandates and Pressures**

Any discussion of reading and writing instruction would be incomplete without a consideration of the current emphasis on high-stakes tests and mandated educational standards. As Marshall (2009) noted, future American educators

may term this era in the history of American schools as the standards period. For decades, “students, teachers, and society have been confronted with ‘a culture of complaint’” where literacy is concerned (Soetart et al., 2004, p. 163). From the moment *Sputnik* reached space before an American shuttle, society has been bombarded with one supposed educational crisis after another. Alsup (2005) put it this way: “The prevailing opinion is that teachers and administrators in the public schools are slacking off and nobody is doing anything about it; therefore, the tax-paying American public must step up and make sure that educators do their jobs” (p. 21). Of course, the tensions surrounding education are anything but simple, but the implications are far-reaching. Cuban (2009) has argued that “finding out what typically happens in classrooms is important since in today’s policy arena, local school boards, state legislators, and U. S. presidents say again and again that without good teaching, students will not learn vital content and skills” (p. 5). Deciding what counts as learning—much less which content or skills are vital—is a tangled, complicated process.

Teachers face increased pressure to teach to standards-based tests so that their schools reach Adequate Yearly Progress, and they feel compelled to maintain strict disciplinary control of their classrooms. This means that class discussions must be monitored and controlled, and writing must focus on the concrete skills—or standards—over which students will be tested. As Cuban (1992) explained, these external pressures are often in conflict with teachers’ pedagogical stances; ideally, teachers would prefer in-depth inquiry and

discussion, but instead find themselves teaching “defensively, oversimplifying knowledge, presenting fragmented information, and omitting controversial knowledge” because of the administrative structure of schools, which privileges standardized tests and classroom control (p. 193). Quiet classrooms and test scores may not be the sole aim of teachers, but educators feel the weight of those demands as reform becomes an ever more popular mantra with politicians and the media. The rhetoric of reform, which has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and an emphasis on standardized assessment, has led to tensions and conflict among teachers, policymakers, and students.

Schools aren’t acting in isolation, though. Instead, they are reflecting and highlighting changing perceptions of learning and valuable knowledge. As our society has shifted from an industrial economy to a more service-oriented one, there have been significant changes in ethical and aesthetic approaches to education as well. While knowledge is becoming both more abundant and more of a commodity, it is increasingly viewed as disparate from the knower.

Drummond (2003) suggested that this disparity is especially true in schools: “Educational institutions may say that they are student-centered, when actually they are becoming more knowledge-centered in the quest for transparency and quality of product” (p. 59). In other words, this trend—which resonates with the culture of accountability—exteriorizes learning from the learner. Within this context, demands for transparency and for clear benchmarks raise other ideological questions. As Lather (1996) pointed out, clarity is not simple or pure; by excluding context and dimensionality, it is both

violent and noninnocent (p. 528). Not only do such measures to calculate and quantify learning frustrate and dishearten teachers, they prove especially offensive to students like these fans, who want to make learning and language their own.

### **Envisioning Education Beyond Standards**

In order to understand some of the tensions and trends that ripple through the field, it is crucial to examine how various discourses are conflating within education and the institution of school. St. Pierre (2000) explained: “Foucault’s theory of discourse illustrates how language gathers itself together according to socially constructed rules and regularities that allow certain statements to be made and not others” (p. 485). In other words, without our educational history, cultural perspectives, institutional frameworks, and societal expectations, it would not be possible to label a five-year old in a kindergarten class a “remedial” learner or a “disruptive,” “troubled” pupil. The ways in which society employs and deploys language serve to shape and discipline its members, but language and discourse cannot be rigorously controlled—they are porous, fluid, vital forces that can shift direction, absorb or reflect new ideologies, and expand over new territories.

Schools have become increasingly bureaucratic and top-down, and accountability is the buzzword of the day. But treating students or teachers like mere cogs in a wheel creates its own problems. As Delpit (2006) has argued, all students bring unique cultural and linguistic styles with them to the classroom. Further, Hargreaves (2003) emphasized teachers too have

unique experiences and areas of expertise. Incorporating the diverse needs of individual students and teachers has become increasingly difficult and increasingly crucial.

The English classroom, with its focus on literature and writing, becomes an especially contested space. After all, Bakhtin (1979/1986) asserted that no utterance—and by extension, no text—can ever be repeated; the sense and significance will shift with socio-cultural developments. Even as students endure multiple-choice tests that supposedly measure their understanding of literature, poststructural theorists have troubled the idea that textual meanings are fixed or unchanging, while readers and teachers of reading have considered these developments in literary criticism and decided that “any decisions we make about literary quality and literary understanding rest upon assumptions that might well vary across cultures and across time” (Marshall, 1993, p. 321). Authors or New Critical theorists might hope that a work would absolutely capture an author’s vision and that a reader would experience (and accept) that vision with absolute fidelity. But since each reader brings a unique set of experiences, contexts, and knowledge to a text, such absolute authorial influence is virtually impossible (Bakhtin, 1975/1981; Rosenblatt, 2005; Derrida, 1966/1978; Marshall, 1993, Mission & Morgan, 2006).

Likewise, culture, literature, and art offer practically infinite possibilities and are “essentially as boundless as the universe” (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 140). The constrictions that readers—especially students-- can experience are

not due to the limitations of writing but because, as Bakhtin elaborated, “We have narrowed it [culture] terribly by selecting and modernizing what has been selected. We impoverish the past and do not enrich ourselves” (p. 140). Despite the many genres and styles that exist, a few are privileged almost exclusively within schools, and even when approaching these texts, readers are to passively accept “standard” analyses. In short, “We are suffocating in the captivity of narrow and homogeneous interpretations (Bakhtin, p. 140). In our own era, these warnings seem prophetic.

### **What This Means for Students**

Classroom discourse is often shaped by high-stakes testing or rigid curricula, and there are those who would propose that such a “narrow and homogenous” culture is the goal. Yet in their creative, out-of-school process, fanfiction writers question and push back such artifices and assert that this constriction presents only a shadow of culture, an insubstantial reflection of the fluid, multi-faceted, dialogic reality. Foucault (1976/1990) explained that power and influence are not linear or simply top-down; instead, “power comes from below” and that “the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (p. 94). In other words, discourse supports dominations and hegemonic effects even as it provides outlets for interrogations and resistance. There can be no solely hegemonic or authoritarian discourse or policy. The very social restrictions that constrain

people are interwoven with eruptions of resistance and rife with the search for new ways to engage in discourses and power relations. Even the most oppressive structures allow for a certain amount of resistance.

One possibility, then, is that adolescent writers participate in fanfiction because they are trying to resist the isolated, teacher-centered writing they encounter in schools; if writing were approached in more creative, dialogic ways, would adolescents find fanfiction so compelling? Further, the social, peer-oriented nature of fanfiction changes the nature of writing. By writing for social acceptance within friendship groups, these writers are still performing for a critical audience, and there are still structures in place that constrain and mold the kinds of stories these writers produce. Bové (1995) explained that re-envisioning literacy and literary theory “might assume a powerful political position within our society or that it might be of some assistance to some people in their own forms of struggle elsewhere in the system” (p. 63). The adolescents who engage in these discourses are responding to society’s various portrayals of reading and writing, to notions of authorship, and are, in a sense, considering what it means to engage in such forms of struggle. In many ways, then, fanfiction communities reflect intriguing aspects of Bakhtin’s Carnival—these are writers who flout some mainstream discourses, but they do so in a narrow space and with a full awareness that their interrogations of these texts and discourses are witnessed and judged by other spectators and performers.

According to the fans who opened up during this study, schools brim with authoritarianism and the threat of censure. They rattled off numerous

sources of dissatisfaction: boredom, an over-emphasis on testing, a lack of authentic dialogue, a double-standard concerning the content of canonical literature versus the kind of writing they are expected to produce. The end result is that kids feel that English classes haven't prepared them adequately, so they seek out chances to write, research, and receive feedback elsewhere.

### **Bored with the Status Quo**

Frankly, these fans are bored. Formulaic persuasive writing doesn't engage their interest, and they want opportunities to breathe some life into their school writing lives. Thomas's frustration is illustrative. He doesn't understand why creativity rarely enters into English classes:

We don't *really* write in school, and it sucks. I'm in two English classes now, English II and I'm getting ahead on English IV. I really don't see why we can't write a monologue or an adventure from a character's point of view when we're reading about folklore or mythology. It would help you remember it and make it more fun to write something from Odysseus' perspective than to just answer stupid questions about the passage.

Thomas isn't alone in his conviction that reading questions aren't real writing. But Anne extended this critique even further. Not only does is creativity glaringly absent from school writing assignments, she explained that reading is equally bland. Anne is convinced that if she, a girl who enjoys writing and talking about stories outside of class, finds the tasks lifeless, less verbal kids will suffer even more, but she also feels guilty for resenting assigned tasks:



Mostly, you just read a text without talking about how the characters really are. It's flat, and there's no real discussion, and it's boring. When it's boring, you fail the test. I might have remembered more of those Supreme Court cases for AP Government or about those plays for AP English if there'd been something to do other than summarize them. Does that make me a bad student?

When Anne and I met, she was enrolled in multiple AP classes, participated in drama, creative writing club, and had never missed a spot on the Honor Roll. If schools can make students like Anne second-guess themselves, something is very wrong.

Of the four, Jane was the only fan who'd had the opportunity to delve into creative writing at all. She credited a series of elementary teachers with inspiring her enthusiasm for writing. She unwittingly illustrated Anne's and Thomas's assertions that creative writing would lead to engagement and retention when she remembered one fifth-grade assignment with particular clarity:

Creative writing was such a big deal, especially in fifth grade. For each genre, we had to write a piece *in* that genre. We had to write a play; we even had to write a mystery, and let me tell you, that was hard! When we were writing Edgar Allen Poe, we had to re-tell the story from another character's point of view. My teacher let me write from the demon's perspective in 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' The

demon never appears, but it drove the protagonist mad. I called it 'The Demon's Self-Ruination.' I'll never forget that piece.

From a standards-based perspective, wouldn't a learner have to fulfill reading, critical thinking, organizational, analytical, and writing standards in order to successfully complete such a project? One could hardly call such an undertaking frivolous when it would entail so many different kinds of thinking. Why, then, do our students—especially our secondary students—encounter few such prompts? According to these disgruntled fans, the institution of school focuses on control rather than inquiry.

### **Control and Double-Speak**

While the fans were frustrated about the synopsis-based writing that surrounds them in school, the issue of control and censorship is a source of enormous consternation. Put simply, they see a disconnect between the content of the literature that's taught and the writing that is permitted. Thomas explained that he and his classmates read about Odysseus's sexual escapades and Hester Prynne's adultery even as they were told to steer away from such subjects in their own writing:

Oh, yeah. There are double standards. In school, it's all death or suicide or adultery. Come on. Most of the movies people see or the books they read have stuff like violence or sex in them anyway. It's what makes things interesting. I don't see why we can't write like that.

These adolescents resented the idea that teachers, counselors, and administrators had the power to monitor and censure their creativity. Thomas was furious that he and his classmates were assigned passages from *The Odyssey* that detailed sex, magic, and warfare while their discussions and writing were expected to be coldly academic. While he enjoyed the reading and felt especially drawn to the battle scenes, there were no opportunities for him to emulate or play with those elements; unless a battle unfolds on the pages of his literature book, it's unwelcome in the classroom. He shared a passage from a fic in progress that he would never share at school for fear of calls home, parent conferences, and labeling. He explained that the hero Seryn and his love interest Nina have been ambushed:

*The dagger tore through his gilded bracers, digging deep into his flesh. Seryn ignored the pain, taking his chance to leap at the Argonian, sending him toppling backwards. His fists flew at the scaly face, the Argonian's jaw giving under his knuckles with a sickening crunch...Behind him, Nina was under a similar attack. Her arms were pinned behind her by one Argonian, while another approached her from the front. She was struggling furiously against the lizard's grip, but to no avail. The second Argonian would be on her in moments, his jagged axe seemed eager for flesh.*

In some ways, the most shocking element of this fight scene is that Thomas is convinced it would get him in trouble. After all, nobody dies. There's no profanity. Even so, he thinks it's too much for his high school teachers to

handle. While he points to his teachers' close-mindedness and traditionalism, Anne shares his frustration but understands that the issue of monitoring students' writing extends well beyond individual teachers:

There's definitely no vehicle for writing about romance or violence or anything like that anywhere but online. If you turn something in where someone was bludgeoned to death, the teacher would assume something was wrong—or she'd have to cover herself. That means you get in trouble and wind up in the counselor's office. You just can't go there in school.

As a teacher and current teacher educator, I found myself asking who teachers are “covering” for and from. Have we really reached a point where students, administrators, and policymakers alike have decided that teachers that should—or will—always assume the worst about their kids whenever any sort of violent imagery appears in student writing? Even as these fans protest that such a passage like Thomas's fight scene pales beside canonical pieces like *The Odyssey* or *The Red Badge of Courage*, they are convinced that if he were to submit such writing in school—or if it were even seen in a notebook—he would be viewed with suspicion and seen as a someone who might be predisposed to violent acts.

If violence is taboo in classrooms, so is sexuality. Again, many of the literary writers adolescents study deploy romance and sex for comic and dramatic effect, but students who choose to do so risk being labeled perverse.

Jane, who avoids X-rated fics for personal reasons, still laments the overly-sanitized atmosphere of school writing and discussions:

How can we talk about the ethical and moral and cultural implications of works if we're supposed to ignore that we face the same decisions and issues? In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve had sex before the fall. That's a huge point for Milton: Sex isn't dirty or wrong in itself. We read about that. Why can't we talk about it or write about it?

While her own writing is, by her own admission, relatively conservative, she never turned in anything romantic or remotely sensual when rare opportunities for creative writing appeared. She wrote a fic based on her ideas for a sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but she shied away from submitting it in school. Darcy, who has travelled to London and fallen dangerously ill, dreams of his beloved wife:

*He dreamt that she had come to him that time, speaking words of love and devotion as he gently took both of her hands and pulled her into bed with him, bestowing kisses and caresses before she had even fully settled herself next to him. This dream was different in that every thing was dramatically slow, and incredibly vivid. He could hear her breathing, and the blissful dream ended with Lizzie asleep in his arms.*

Again, among the most striking things about this passage is its mildness and focus on innuendo instead of lurid detail, but caresses, kisses, and a married

couple sharing a bed might just be too controversial to sanction in high school writing. Jane was not only afraid that her teachers would judge her for such fantasies; she feared that they would call home. While her family has always supported her writing, she wants to avoid situations that they would find embarrassing or uncomfortable, like attempting to justify a piece of writing that refers to physicality. For those reasons, Jane too decided to avoid potential conflict by doing her “real” writing outside of school.

For Hayden, the stakes are even higher. Not only does he worry that teachers or peers would judge and mock him for writing romances, he is especially eager to avoid the censure of their reactions to his slash writing. He’s keenly aware of the muttered comments and jokes about even canonical writers who, like Shakespeare and Wilde, deployed homoerotic imagery, and he thinks that the social consequences would be extreme. Even though some of his teachers know he writes fanfiction, he would never share examples with them. He talked about the firestorm he would encounter even with his milder writing:

If I showed anybody a fic about two boys, there would be calls home before I could even run out of the classroom. My stuff is more about hints and innuendo anyway, but it wouldn’t matter. Not to the school. Or the other guys.

When we spoke the second time, Hayden had just finished reading *The Great Gatsby* in school. He was struck that Gatsby’s secret apartment in the city, like the Room of Requirement in the fanon of *Harry Potter* served as a safe place

for romantic rendezvous. But he wondered what would happen if, like Draco in his own fic “Bathroom Confessions,” the lover was isolated and frustrated, so he decided to play with the conversation between Draco and the ghost Moaning Myrtle as she chortled:

*‘I saw him follow you all the way to the seventh floor--to the Room of Requirement--just yesterday, but you shut the door to, you know, let yourself go as you thought about him, and he couldn’t get in... he was terribly upset.’ she frowned.*

*‘The---the seventh floor?’ Draco asked, losing all color in his face.*

*“Does he—he know?” Draco stumbled.*

Not only does such a passage touch on the element of voyeurism and secret pursuit, Hayden consciously alluded to a subject that is always off-limits in school: masturbation. The reader sees that a lonely, frustrated Draco sought refuge in the Room of Requirement, a secret chamber many fans have used as a setting for sexual escapades, to “let himself go.” Hayden also called attention to Draco’s embarrassment and fear of exposure; he may want Harry, but he doesn’t want Harry to see his utter vulnerability.

Hayden shrugged as he described the way sexual desire, especially homosexual desire, has to be avoided at all costs within school and acknowledged that he and many other fans simply follow the rules at school and push their writing—and themselves—elsewhere. As he critiqued the strict propriety of school writing, Hayden pointed out its superficiality: “Limiting

creative writing is just an *illusion* of control. But all you can get is vanilla, white-washed writing.” This illusion of control, this pretense that sexuality and violence are discourses that can be strictly controlled, serves to define and constrict the nature of student writing in today’s English classrooms.

### **Lack of Feedback**

The fans who spoke with me felt stifled by the constraints on their writing in school, but that was hardly their only frustration. They also expressed a deep dissatisfaction with the quality of feedback they received on their writing. Instead of comments regarding content, organization, or style, they complained that most of their papers received only cursory attention.

Anne explained:

Part of what makes writing in school pointless is that with all the pressure to be ‘right’ and to be so structured and uptight for all these stupid tests, teachers don’t make time for real feedback.

Most of my papers just have a couple of commas circled and one or two comments about whether or not it was ‘effective,’ whatever that means.

Anne’s complaint is multi-faceted. First, because of pressure for students to perform well on current high stakes tests, teachers are only focusing on the formulaic, unauthentic writing such assessments demand. Additionally, teachers are so concerned about the test and its focus that they don’t offer substantive feedback about an individual writer’s progress. Instead, simple grammatical errors are highlighted and a paper either meets expectations or it



doesn't. Perhaps such feedback is unsurprising given the increasingly mechanical nature of schools themselves.

If some of the other fans complain of harried or discouraged teachers who don't have time to provide specific feedback, Hayden's experiences with writing in school have been more negative. With a certain degree of bitterness, he fumed about the careless disparagement he received from his tenth grade English teacher:

On one of first my papers in tenth grade, the only comment was that I needed to work on my writing. That's all she said. So I thought she meant my actual, physical cursive. But when I asked her what she couldn't read, she said, 'Oh, I meant your flow and fitting your ideas together and style.' I was blown away. I mean, how do you just throw that out there and not help somebody figure out *how* to do those things? I mean, I was devastated, and I *like* books and writing. What about people who hate that stuff?

Hayden's experience is one that proves especially exasperating for dedicated teachers who spend countless hours trying to provide useful strategies and feedback to student writers. Sadly, though, Hayden's experience isn't unique. There are teachers who either lack the time or skills to help students cultivate style and organization; of course, with the current emphasis on simply meeting standards, the finer points of writing often end up overlooked. The emotional impact of comments like the one Hayden received can hardly be overlooked. For Hayden, a young writer who desperately wants to improve, a vague

condemnation of his writing was painful, but as he pointed out, such a comment could turn off a reluctant writer permanently.

Fans online receive feedback from multiple readers with various areas of expertise. Reviewers comment on a range of writing issues from characterization and style to grammar and syntax, so these adolescents complained that in schools they write and hear from the teacher alone. For kids who are used to performing for and hearing from dozens of interested readers, such a limited audience can prove frustrating and narrow.

### **A Desire to Learn Differently**

There is a great deal of talk about reluctant or resistant learners. These four adolescents have all gotten through school with A's and B's and relatively little academic difficulty, but they made it clear that they often find themselves bored and uninterested. It's not that they're reluctant to learn; instead, they want to learn things that school ignores or glosses over.

For instance, Thomas complained that he never learned anything useful about research in his classes, so he decided to teach himself how to collect, organize, and relate research through reading history and writing gaming fanfiction:

My teacher's idea about research ends at a Roman numeral outline, numbered index cards, and 5 print sources with correct MLA citation. I've taught myself how to do research, how to focus on specific questions and where I can find answers, how to structure plot in my fics, how to use descriptive language by

reading on my own and by using lores and other resources when I'm working on a fanfiction.

Once again, formulaic conventions in schools seem to enforce structures rather than to inspire creativity and inquiry. In a very conscious move, Thomas has decided to educate himself; just as Socrates proposed that the wealthy Athenian elite pursue rigorous self-development after the pedagogical status quo had failed them (Foucault 1985/1988), he is trying to equip himself with skills that will help him become a lifelong learner.

In a similar vein, Anne explained that her experiences with fanfiction were more useful in preparing her college applications than any of the writing she'd done in school:

I didn't *write* fanfiction because it was a real-life situation, but I approached it like it was a fanfiction. Take the word limit: most one-chapter fics are around 500 words, too. I decided to write a fanfiction about the situation, and then afterwards, I just put my name into it. I used my experience in fanfiction to tell a story—to create the emotion I want you to have.

According to Anne, fanfiction is her only outlet for emotive writing. Unlike the persuasive essays students churn out for standardized tests, her application essays needed to be personal and evocative. Since those elements of writing have been shuffled to the margins within school, she looked to fanfiction writing to provide an approach she could utilize successfully.

The dialogic, participatory relationship between fans and texts within fanfiction is what Hayden would most like to see in classrooms. While he doubts that students could ever have the freedom to re-invent a canonical text, he would like to see richer, more purposeful discussions about how texts relate to one another within a given curricula:

You know what I wish we had in English classes? You know how when you read something on your own, and then you talk about it with your friends or online, you talk about other stories it reminds you of? You might talk about C.S. Lewis influencing J.K. Rowling, or Anne Rice and Stephanie Myers. Right? It'd be cool to see how the books...how they talk to each other, you know? Which authors inspired or ticked off other ones? We talked about themes and literary devices, but not how the books hook together. I'm interested in history and culture and how authors learn from each other, but instead, it's all about checking things off a list.

Here, Hayden makes it clear that similes, metaphors, and lists of themes are insufficient. Instead, he wants to know the personal, historical, and cultural influences that shaped authors and their stories—he approaches literature like a writer. If schools have become all about checklists instead of culture, history, and inquiry, our students are truly “suffocating in the captivity of narrow and homogeneous interpretations” (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 140). It's no wonder these fans have sought out a separate space where they can breathe.

### **Wary of (Mis)Appropriation**

While they see serious weaknesses in the rote reading and writing instruction that characterize their schools, these fans are reluctant for teachers to clumsily adapt fanfiction for the classroom. They fear that if fanfiction were to become institutionalized, it would lose the relative spontaneity, vitality, and dialogue that make it appealing. Thomas expressed particular skepticism:

For me, if fanfiction were introduced into schools, I would be comfortable and could do it pretty well. But assigned? Without choice? That would be tough. It might help people think more creatively, and it would make people think outside the box. But I'm not sure it would be fun if you *had* to do it. I don't think schools could ruin fanfiction, but introducing it as an academic thing might take away from the fun because you'd be cut off from the whole fandom thing. The other thing is well, don't use the term 'fanfiction.' Some people think that if schools do something, it *has* to suck.

The idea of mandated topics or an absence of genuine fandom would result in what Thomas called “fanfic lite—have the flavor and half the fun.” While the incorporation of creative writing would be a welcome development, fans are reluctant to let teachers or uninterested peers turn fanfiction into another formula or academic protocol.

Fear that schools would sanitize and monitor fanfiction aren't the only hesitation for fans. Hayden and Anne talked about the tensions between their

school lives and their private ones, and they're hesitant for those worlds to collide. Anne described her mixed feelings:

I'd like to write stuff like fanfiction in school; it's be so much more open...but that doesn't mean I'd want to share it with everyone.

I've worked hard to keep my school life separate from other areas.

I read stuff; I draw; I'm into cos-play; I'm a *Pokemon* nerd, a Disney nerd—but I don't need to wave a flag around school announcing all that. Online, everybody else is a fan, too. People *judge* you in school.

At school, being seen as a nerd can be socially devastating, but within online fandoms, it's not merely "normal," it's valorized and celebrated. While there can be flaming, censure, argument, and social consequences online, Anne pointed to the relative anonymity of online writing. After all, it's different to receive a bad review from someone you haven't met and to see everyone in your senior English class snickering. Anne worries that a school-mandated fanfiction project would either be completely cut off from readers other than the teacher—which would defeat the purpose of performing for a wide, interested audience—or that everyone would be forced to offer up their work to people they don't necessarily trust. In either event, she fears writers would give up control of their work; whereas Anne can collaborate with other fans or Hayden can publish on slash-friendly sites online, that choice would be sacrificed in school. The conventions of school and the conventions of fanfiction are radically disparate. Fans are all too aware of the differences, and their

experiences with formal writing assignments and the structured nature of schools have bruised and censored fans. Thus, they are understandably skeptical about the willingness of teachers and administrators to incorporate the creative and profane Carnavalesque spirit of fanfiction.

### **Putting the Pieces Together**

The current political atmosphere that stresses minimal proficiency, back-to-basics learning, and high-stakes testing stands in stark contrast to these fans' desires for dialogue, multiple perspectives, rich feedback, and collaborative learning. The adolescents who participated in this study discussed numerous frustrations with their high school classes: they find the formulaic approaches to reading and writing one-dimensional and dull, and they believe that the lack of genuine discussion, feedback, and variety fail to prepare them for learning and living outside of school.

To that end, unfulfilling experiences in the classroom clearly influence fans' decisions to participate in online writing. The research questions that shaped this study considered the relationship between school discourses, adolescents' desires to play, and the Care of the Self methodology, which emphasizes the personal, social, and ethical components of creating oneself as a work of art. By reviewing these adolescents' frustrations with an educational system that does not foster inquiry, incorporate culture, or provide space for creative play and exploration, one quickly comes to understand their motivations to establish their own sites for creation, critique and collaboration. Just as Socrates encouraged the elite youth of Classical Athens to take

responsibility for their own education and improvement for their own benefit and that of the state, these adolescents face a similar dilemma. In numerous ways, their decisions to pursue writing as an avenue for self creation echoes the assertion of Socrates' student, Alcibiades: "I will begin straightaway to *epimelesthai*—to 'apply myself' to, to 'be concerned with' . . . myself? No: 'with justice'" (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 71). These fans don't simply publish fics out of boredom. Instead, they take up and critique social issues such as social justice, sexuality, violence, and the purposes of education.

The final chapter will consider the implications of these adolescents' experiences with school and with fanfiction for educators, administrators, and policymakers. Many teachers are even more disillusioned and frustrated than these young writers with the top-down, increasingly rigid mechanisms of school. Just as fans have sought outlets for creativity and re-envisioning, teachers can also seek out spaces for dialogue, play, and inquiry.



## **CHAPTER 8**

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Fanfiction provides a medium where adolescents can engage with writing, social issues, and the challenges of community as they pursue personal, artistic, and ethical development. When they re-envision texts, fans push the boundaries of interpretation and can find themselves in opposition to various authoritarian forces. This chapter examines the implications such a process holds for educators. After all, looking at the kinds of writing and communities adolescent fans experience online is one thing. Even sympathizing with their desires for more varied, applicable writing in schools can only go so far. The question I found myself asking at various points throughout this study seems so simple: How can the practices of fans online help teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers re-evaluate what we label education?

Of course, that question isn't simple. In today's world of increasingly bureaucratic schools, teachers are bombarded on all sides: too often, the politically correct discourses of accountability equate to discourses of blame (Black, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hargreaves, 2003) and there is so much pressure to produce AYP worthy results that schools implement rote test preparation. One system near my university even requires high school English teachers to show a PowerPoint that proscribes an exact structure—including

segues and transitions—all students “should” follow in order to pass the state’s High School Graduation Test. While teachers may face the brunt of the criticism from students, that was one of many mandates and restrictions that has been imposed upon educators in recent years.

But “power comes from above and below” (Foucault 1976/1990), and if teachers are to survive, much less thrive in the ideologically and politically charged environment of today’s schools, there are elements of fanfiction that may actually help educators and policymakers deconstruct and re-envision the roles and characteristics of English/Language Arts instruction.

First, teachers, politicians, and the public might (ideally, at least) remember that criticism of the institution of education and the practices of educators is nothing new. While the critique of American education took center-stage after *Sputnik* beat NASA to the moon and has been a source of contention culminating in programs like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*, it’s an old mantra. After all, one of the reasons Care of the Self developed in Classical Greece is that Socrates and other philosophers felt that formal education didn’t adequately prepare boys for leadership. (Foucault 1985/1988).

At the same time, it is useful to acknowledge that at any point, change and transformation are possible. Individual subjects—be they teachers, researchers, administrators, policymakers—can make decisions about how to respond to the institutions of education and the discourses surrounding them. That move, that choice to evaluate, interpret, and respond rather than to

accept the structures of the institution as unavoidable, can lead to change, both for individual subjects and those in their sphere of influence. Just as the adolescents who spoke with me consciously choose to create and re-create themselves through their practices, relationships, discourses, and various performances, subjects have the potential to shape and craft themselves throughout their lives (Britzman, 2003; Lather, 1991; Phillips & Jorgenson, 2002; St. Pierre, 2004; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009). While no individual can re-invent the institution of school, both professionally and personally, we can each re-invent ourselves and interrogate the ways we perceive the system itself.

Since that's true, it makes sense to heed Alsup's (2005) advice: [R]eaching the in-between ground, the place of becoming, the place of ambiguity and reflection, *is the goal*" (p. 9). In short, I'm not proposing one, right way of approaching the English classroom. Instead, I believe that the practices and approaches that shape fanfiction can provide a point of entry as we each consider the system we've inherited, the one we're navigating, and the one we envision. As policymakers, educators, and citizens re-evaluate the roles and purposes of education, it might be extraordinarily beneficial to consider the desires of students themselves. Put simply, in their free time, adolescent writers re-interpret and revise existing texts; they explore issues of sexuality, gender, and power, and they incorporate socialization and collaboration with peers. Such practices do not often make their way into classrooms. If we are to undertake the radical work of deconstruction, we can adopt a crafty smile—it might be madness, but there's method to it, after all.

### **Troubling Binaries**

Among the legacies of the English classroom are: a reverence for the canon, the idea that education prepares—or should prepare—students for the real world, and the idea that as readers, we consume texts and as writers we produce them. If anything, schools today seem to be re-enforcing each of those ideas. Most scholars and teachers woefully agree that high-stakes testing has significantly narrowed an already restrictive curriculum, and—as the preceding chapter demonstrates—students are feeling the pinch.

If we are willing to evaluate and interrogate these binaries, we find ourselves deconstructing and re-envisioning what it means to declare oneself a teacher of literature. To recognize the political and cultural implications of such teaching means that we must step back and question what has become so pervasive that it seems perfectly normal: we find ourselves re-assessing the curriculum itself, wondering how the strict tracking of students became possible, asking who benefits from the role of high-stakes tests and the way they have narrowed the kinds of writing and reading many students experience, and analyzing the discourses of blame directed toward teachers and administrators within schools—many of which just happen to be in impoverished districts--that fail to meet the seemingly arbitrary scores that would indicate quantifiably acceptable learning. The increasing surveillance within schools means that teachers might find themselves less apt to discuss or assign anything that smacks of controversy, and an institution that seems to valorize right and wrong answers hardly lends itself to the ambiguities and

interpretations inherent in literature. By examining a few powerful binaries, we can begin to better understand both the structures of school and possible modes of response.

The binaries of such a legacy might be summarized as the competing values of literature / non-literature, consumption / production, and academic / real world learning. These binaries pervade the curricula, instruction, and assessment of English classrooms, and considering the interpretive practices of online fanfiction writers can prove helpful in the interrogation of each of these concepts.

### **Literature / Non-Literature.**

Walk into most high school English classrooms on any given day, and you will probably find students reading from their literature textbooks or other pieces of canonized literature. Popular books, like *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games* don't find their way into schools. For that matter, neither do many mysteries, histories, or biographies. Textbook publishing companies, literary critics, and university professors have sought to narrow and concretize the definition of literature for generations, but those notions of value have been shaped by social and ideological forces—there's nothing absolutely or intrinsically valuable about the canon itself. As Scholes (1985) pointed out decades ago, "The Literature / Non-Literature distinction cannot survive a critique that succeeds in separating literariness from value, yet that is precisely what all the formal and structural studies of the past decades have enabled us to do" (p. 8). In other words, it would not be possible to declare the ascendancy

of some texts and authors over others or to proclaim some universal truth to be crystallized in a particular literary work today if we had not inherited such traditions. Despite the proleptic nature of privileging certain texts and ideologies, literary theory has grown to incorporate notions such as transactional reading or the contextual, rather than fixed, nature of language itself, we are increasingly aware of “the fact that any decisions we make about literary quality and literary understanding rest upon assumptions that might well vary across cultures and across time” (Marshall, 1993, p. 321).

Does that mean that I advocate throwing out every canonical work? Absolutely not. Simply replacing the canonical works that we currently revere with other, more recent ones won’t change the system—whether we’re teaching *Hamlet* or *The Hunger Games*, we must change the way we view texts themselves.

Rather than looking at some texts—or entire genres—as invaluable and others as valueless, there is much to be said for taking literary works out from behind the glass cases of correct interpretation and allowing our students (and ourselves) to play with them, to discuss them within the context of our own values and experiences, to look for spaces of resonance and dissonance.

Of course, if we determine to re-assess the kinds of texts we incorporate, we find ourselves seeking to broaden the variety of texts we present to students. If our aim is for students to become life-long readers, it makes sense to allow them to explore pop culture bestsellers alongside mainstays of the curriculum—after all, none of their contemporaries would have predicted that

Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, Dickinson, Fitzgerald, or Steinbeck would someday be hailed as literary geniuses. Who's to say that Stephen King, J.K. Rowling, or Barbara Kingsolver won't one day receive such praise? And, more importantly, if students come to view texts as vital and useful rather than as stagnant and irrelevant, does it matter if they're reading a text that's popular now instead of one that was popular a century ago?

### **Consumption / Production**

Despite the testimonies of published writers who describe reading as a crucial element of their work, schools tend to portray reading as the passive consumption of texts and writing as an isolated act of production. If consumption of literature is equated with developing the right kind of understanding (a conventionally accepted one), then writing is caught in a strange double-bind: not only do schools privilege a certain passive sort of reading, but students and teachers alike seem to have a shared understanding that students cannot craft "real" literature—after all, literature can only come from the outside and must be certified by experts. Thus, writing in schools is largely associated with practice. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that, within a society where consumption pervades so many aspects of daily life, writing can be diluted into a formulaic, pseudo-production that is predicated upon the consumption of texts. After all, students cannot successfully write about Antony's funeral oration without reading—and accepting the orthodox interpretation of—*Julius Caesar*. Is it any wonder that students and teachers

can find themselves resistant to school writing if it is only a kind of practice for real writing that only occurs somewhere beyond school walls?

When students take up a text, they do not merely read the black squiggles on the page to uncover the correct meaning; there is nothing passive about the convergence of experiences and the making of meaning readers experience. Only when both reading and writing are envisioned as dynamic, interrelated activities do they come alive; Bakhtin 1979/1986 explained: “I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself” (p. 138). In other words, when we encounter texts, stories, and ideologies, we consider them, weigh them, and decide what we believe, question, or reject. That process of interpretation is vital if we are then to participate in the discussion of ideas.

There are also ways in which the purposes and role of writing in school need to be re-envisioned. By labeling student work to be merely creative or analytical writing, thus neatly classifying it as non-literature within a discipline that so clearly privileges literature, the implication is clear: students’ interpretations and creations can be dismissed as practice for a socially constructed real world outside school walls. In terms of the production of writing and of literature, Rouse (1978) challenged educators to treat students’ fiction and poetry writing as art:

And the making involves the same elements of risk, anxiety, and faith as when we made of first choices of self. But at its close we



feel as though the contradictions of which we are made have been resolved into an unfamiliar harmony (75).

In other words, students—like all artists—craft themselves as they craft their work. Why shouldn't schools be spaces for such creation and exploration?

### **Real World / The Academy**

We have inherited the idea that the purpose of school is to prepare students for the “real world;” embedded in this notion is the idea that anything that happens in school somehow lacks reality or substance. The perception that our lives are divided into tidy, linear structures or rigid stages is challenged daily—after all, professional adults can pursue degrees in higher education and high school teens can have the responsibilities of parenthood, but there is still the tendency to categorize school as preparation for life rather than part of life itself. But all anyone has to do is ask a high school kid how the social and academic pressures of school affect them to know that school is, in fact, a very real place. As Gallagher (2009) pointed out, successful students, like the fans who participated in this study, do fine. They're bored and apathetic about school, but they can get by. Struggling readers and writers are the ones who sit in remedial English courses year after year; the emphasis on test-taking skills and strategies has decreased both large-group and independent reading time as workbooks replace novels, writing is limited to the persuasive essay, and reluctant readers and writers drown in skill and drill test preparation that values narrow thinking, and struggling students come to

equate reading and writing with these routinized, boring materials. Is it any wonder that they start to hate reading?

Struggling students, who are often poor and racially diverse, are the ones who catch the brunt the madness. Ravitch (2007) put it this way:

Congress should drop the absurd goal of achieving universal proficiency by 2014. Given that no nation, no state, and no school district has ever reached 100 percent math and reading proficiency for all grades, it is certain that this goal cannot be met.

Perpetuating this unrealistic ideal, however, guarantees that increasing numbers of schools will ‘fail’ as the magic year 2014 gets closer.

In other words, even if we could actually agree about what qualifies as “universal proficiency,” labeling our schools as failures, immersing our students in an ever-more restrictive curriculum that discourages free thinking, interpretation, student-driven research, and banning literature and writing in order to pursue a mirage of test preparation does nothing but ensure that the achievement gap between the poor and the affluent remains intact and that increasing numbers of students will be pushed away from lifelong reading and writing.

Despite the pressure students and teachers feel to produce solid performances on timed essays and tests, the teaching of writing encompasses another key concept—whether in school or out, there are processes to writing; we think, scribble, toss out, begin again, jot, polish, and, perhaps, share.

Whether we're sophomores scrawling an essay or adults pounding out a memo or article, we know the frustration of the elusive phrase and the relief of a finished (or finished enough) result. Real and academic writing, then, can be said to entwine.

### **Fanfiction as a Point of Entry**

Fanfiction writers have interrogated these institutional notions in various ways: not only do they see fanfiction as literature and themselves as capable of producing literature, they blur the lines between reading and writing, consumption and production, as they draw inspiration from source texts, other stories, and the fandom itself. While there are some, like my former professor, who might lament that fanfiction isn't "real writing," my participant Jane countered, "If writing is useful for the writer, it *is* real and valuable—what else can you ask from a story?" Unlike critics or teachers, who sustain and are sustained by the structures and traditions of the field, fanfiction writers are not looking for validation that their writings—or the texts they draw from—are of quantifiable worth. Instead, the processes and practices of fanfiction allow for fans to tease out and perform characters in ways that they and their communities find entertaining and meaningful.

This study's participants seemed to view fanfiction as more authentic than school writing; this theme extends beyond mere boredom with one-dimensional topics or feelings that classrooms demand rigid, formulaic writing. In schools, students are repeatedly told that they read things of value and write

in order to develop a skill that they will need later. Online, though, their writing can be seen as valid, as real, as artistic—in short, as literary.

### **Future Work**

Throughout the field of education, discourses of practicality, measurability, and accountability reverberate, and critiquing entrenched binaries is a messy business that can take numerous forms—there’s no one tidy approach or strategy to deploy. As teacher educators, literacy scholars, and classroom teachers take up this work differently, there are some points of entry to consider.

Teacher educators, who often encourage prospective teachers to question the ideological nature of the curriculum and the role of the canon, might complicate the roles of popular literature and out-of-school literacies. Encouraging future teachers to unravel their own views of literature, reading, and pedagogy against a backdrop of popular culture can kindle a new conversation. Instead of YA literature--or popular literature more generally--being neatly classified in terms of reading level or being necessarily perceived as less than “real” canonical literature, the conversation can shift. Instead of either or, we can move into and. Here are some of the issues future educators might ponder before the pressures of planning, feedback, and accountability clamor for attention: What are our aims as teachers of reading and writing? How much should we adjust our syllabi to meet the needs of our students? Or do we expect our students to conform? If we believe that the adolescents in our schools each have something to say, are we willing to provide different genres

of writing so that they can each get it out, or is it enough for them to echo back our own words?

While literacy researchers discuss various theories of reading and learning, fanfiction and its discourses remain a relatively unnavigated borderland. Even as important scholarly work has examined the benefits of fanfiction writing for second-language learners (Black, 2008) and the ways fan sites can function as egalitarian spaces for adolescents (Alvermann, 2008; Stern, 2008; Thomas, 2007), there is still a great deal to examine. The ways in which fans claim ownership—and expertise--of books, games, movies, or shows as they open these texts up for exploration and re-envisioning demonstrates a very different approach to reading than the comprehension aimed approach fostered in schools. There is much to be learned about why adolescents choose certain texts over others, how they define knowledge and investment in texts, and their eagerness to add to and play with stories that they find meaningful.

The reading and writing supported by fanfiction extend beyond simple engagement with a given story; adolescents grapple with numerous questions and beliefs as they write battle scenes, romances, and create worlds that reflect their hopes. While feminists have begun to discuss the ways gendered discourses reflect various hegemonic or resistant tendencies online (Cherland, 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Kustritz, 2003; Scodari, 2003; Wiltse, 2004), few scholars have spoken to adolescent fanfiction writers about their motivations for participating in, forming, or governing online fan communities.

Conversations with a small group of fanfiction writers revealed distinct

opinions about freedom and censure, hierarchies and egalitarian ideals. Further exploration might provide both an intriguing consideration of the social power relations that ripple across the Web and a richer perspective in the ongoing discussion of how young people perceive and engage in questions of civic responsibility and personal accountability. For researchers, then, adolescents' participation in fanfiction raises questions of socialization and community as well as those of literacy, definitions of texts, and classifications of writing as adolescents consciously set about crafting themselves as artists, community members, and subjects.

Fanfiction has become a vital aspect of what Finders (1997) termed adolescents' "literate underlife," practices that challenge official expectations, and the level of engagement these writers experience with texts, writing, and their fanfic communities warrant the attention of educational researchers and teachers alike. Such points of entry may prove useful to classroom teachers who, like me, want to better understand why reluctant school writers rush to type stories to share with fellow fans they've never met.

Certainly, some teachers might incorporate aspects of the genre into their instruction, but such a negotiation is far from simple. On one hand, students might enjoy writing an alternative ending or re-envisioning a scene as a reprieve from a formal, formulaic essay, but some of the bawdiness, violence, or harshness of online fanfiction would be unwelcome in many classrooms. While this tension might beckon us to question the schism between schools and the outside world, it must nonetheless be acknowledged. It is possible that

teachers might modify and appropriate an out-of-school literacy to such an extent that it could become hollow (Alvermann, 2008), but there may still be ways to tap into some of the dynamism and collaboration of fanfiction in order to allow more adolescents to play with these concepts and discourses, even if the experience cannot fully capture the spirit of Carnival that they might experience online (Lensmire, 2000; Cherland, 2008).

Teachers might ask if they want students to be fans of the literature they encounter and what such fandoms might look like. Beyond specific writing prompts or activities, considering the experiences of online fanfiction writers urges educators to recognize and embrace both the interpretive nature of reading and the ability of students to produce literature as well as to consume it. If the hegemonic nature of school somehow perpetuates or supports the popularity of fan communities, then it may be necessary to attempt a re-envisioning of the practices and ideologies of English classes themselves.

The discourses of risk—of the body, sexuality, gender, and power—that permeate so many fanfics and fan communities draw attention to the ways in which certain discourses are privileged, or silenced, within schools; while fanfiction can work to open up interpretations and ideologies, many students feel cut off from dialogue, and as Gee (1996) put it, “the exclusion of certain students’ Discourses from the classroom seriously cheats and damages everyone. It lessens the map, loses chances for reflection and meta-level thought and language, and impoverishes the imagination of all” (p. 221). As policymakers, educators, and citizens re-evaluate the roles and purposes of

education, it might be extraordinarily beneficial to consider the desires of students themselves. Put simply, in their free time, adolescent writers re-interpret and revise existing texts; they explore issues of sexuality, gender, and power, and they incorporate socialization and collaboration with peers. Such practices do not often make their way into classrooms.

If, as Gee (2004) and Black (2008) suggest, schools allow adolescents few opportunities to transform or contribute to classroom instruction, and if, as Thomas (2007) found, “the pursuit of fun and the desire to create a character that would engage well in the community” could inspire adolescents to devote hours of effort to writing and editing, it would seem that students are sending an explicit message about the ways writing is viewed in schools and online (p. 100). Through fanfiction and participation in fan communities, adolescents experience and wield the power of language; they learn that to be literate is to have access to the discourses of power. To ignore or withhold such lessons would be an attempt to ignore heteroglossia, Carnival, and play, to ignore the fluid nature of texts and self-creation, and to commit a kind of educational malpractice.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **“Sunlight for Moonlight”**

By Jane

Tonks slipped from the hospital ward, closing the door quietly behind her on the sounds of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Fleur still gathered around Bill’s bed. The hall outside was heavy with the silence of nighttime; moonlight streaming through the many tall windows gave the air a dim, blue radiance. It seemed unnatural that the moon should still shine so brightly, while it couldn’t shine on Dumbledore anymore...

But it wasn’t a full moon. And right now, that was all that mattered.

She moved cautiously but surely down the quiet hallway. Stone benches were set at regular intervals against the wall, partially obscured from view by two lines of giant stone columns. Tonks continued walking steadily, stopping at last by a column halfway down the length of the room. She placed her hand upon the stone, took a deep breath, and peered around it.

“Remus?”

Lupin was sitting on the bench behind the column, huddled forward, his head in his hands. He did not look up as she moved hesitantly to sit on the bench next to him. There were a few moments of silence, in which she noticed painfully how ragged his breathing had become. When he spoke, she realized that not only his voice, but his whole body was shaking.

“No one is safe,” he whispered. “No one – not even Dumbledore. And I can’t – I’ve never been able to stop it. I haven’t done anything. First James . . . and Lily . . . and Sirius . . .” His voice broke slightly. “It’s like a horrible dream, and I’m so helpless – never in my life, not even the first time I transformed against my will, have I felt so helpless . . .” A sound like a dry, shuddering sob forced itself from his throat, and he fell silent.

In the pause that followed, Tonks placed a hand quietly on one of his shaking shoulders.

“Remus Lupin,” she said quietly, “you are the bravest and best man I have ever known.”

The shaking seemed to subside slightly. When Lupin spoke again, his voice was firmer, but a barely-suppressed tremor revealed that everything inside him was still quaking.

“I’m terrified, Tonks,” he said quietly, his face emerging from his hands to stare bleakly into the moonlit hall. “Who will it be next? What if it were Harry, or one of the Weasleys? What if . . .” He fought to keep his voice level, staring determinedly straight ahead. “What if . . . it were you?”

Her hand slipped off his shoulder, and his hand seemed to seek it of its own accord, fumbling for and then grasping it tightly.

Tonks stared at the hand covering hers. There was a vivid scar on the back of his palm; she wondered if it was from that night’s battle, or a wound from this past year spent with Greyback. How many scars had he carried over the course of his lonely, hunted life? How many more could he sustain alone?

“Doesn’t knowing you’re loved make you stronger?” she said, slowly but firmly. “Doesn’t it give you something to fight for?”

“It makes it worse,” he replied, his soft voice filled with the deep, knowing sadness of resignation. “You can’t imagine what this year has been for me, Tonks. All the time I was with Greyback, or any of them . . . I could barely stay focused long enough to do what Dumble- what was needed. I kept worrying about you. It was all I could do to keep from deserting my post whenever the rumors grew too grave.” He took another deep, shuddering breath. “I’ve . . . I’ve lost so many, Tonks . . .”

“And I’m not going to try to replace them,” she said suddenly, resolution making her voice almost fierce. “I can’t. And what’s more, I don’t want to. I have my own needs, Remus,” she continued, pulling him around slightly to look her in the face. “You think I don’t understand *fully* how scary this year has been? How do you think I’ve felt, knowing you were cut off from all of us and living with a murderous monster? And thinking – thinking you didn’t care, or didn’t understand . . . .” Her voice trailed away as her eyes slowly filled with tears. Her mousy brown hair, if possible, became even limper.

Lupin produced a patched handkerchief from an inner pocket of his robes and sat watching her as she wiped away the first few tears. A light was threatening to break behind his eyes, but years of self-control – of restraint – of discipline born of necessity forced back the needed words. He closed his eyes and steeled himself as he had countless times over the past year, reciting the excuses that continued to pound mechanically in his brain.

“I refuse to allow you to throw yourself away on me.”

“Who’s throwing who away?” Tonks gave a harsh laugh through her tears. “I doubt McGonnagall would agree with you. A respected founding member of the Order of the Phoenix – one of the wizards Dumbledore trusted the most – one who has wrestled his whole life with a terrible fate and never given in – throwing himself away on a cheeky little second-rate Auror who can’t even perform a simple housecleaning spell?”

A rare smile lit up Lupin’s haggard face, but he quickly hid it. He suddenly realized he was still holding her hand and attempted to extricate himself. “That will be enough self-deprecation from you, young lady.”

“I learn from the best,” she said pointedly. She grabbed at his hand as he tried to let go, imprisoning it in both her own. “But like I said, I have my own needs, Remus. I’m not going to take pity on you and nobly rescue you from your lonely existence. This isn’t an act of compassion – in fact, I’m rather selfish about it. I need to be loved – I demand it. And no matter how clever you may be, I refuse to let you resign yourself to a life of self-denial and solitary heroism. You’re never going to be able to slip into the shadows again – *not when I need you so much.*”

She sat gripping his hand tightly for a moment, trying to see into his eyes, but his head was bowed. He remained silent, gazing down at her hands. After a few moments, she gently released him and stood. Step by slow, faltering step, she set out for another year of waiting – of hoping – of fearing . . . . But she could wait. She would prove that she was strong enough –

“Nymphadora,” said a voice behind her.

She froze. This was a quite different voice – one she had never heard before. It was still soft and gentle, like the one she knew so well, but she was sure that no one else had ever heard this tenderness – this longing – this fathomless ache. Or this quiet, steady strength. No other voice had ever held such firmness.

“Nymphadora.”

She slowly turned, marveling at how the sound of the hated name sent a thrill right through her, making even the roots of her hair tingle.

He stood and walked towards her, his whole being more steady and sure than she had ever seen him. Only his eyes, surrounded by the lines drawn by years of premature care, betrayed the tumult behind the steadfast voice.

“Nymphadora,” he said again, standing quietly in front of her, his hands hanging by his sides, “will you marry me?”

She looked at him for a moment.

“Yes, Remus, I will.” Then she took his face between her hands and, standing on tiptoe, gently kissed his forehead.

The light struggling behind Lupin’s eyes suddenly broke, and it seemed to him that sunlight had illuminated the dim hall. His arms found their way around her as if they had always belonged there, and before the excuses could resume their frantic droning, he kissed her, effectively drowning them out in the roar of breaking waterfalls of light.

“Remus?” Tonks asked some time later, her voice somewhat muffled with her face buried in his shoulder, her hair now a violent shade of pink.

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever call me Nymphadora again.”

And Professor McGonnagall, entering the hall on her way back to the hospital wing, stopped suddenly and leaned against a pillar, delight spreading over her drawn features as she listened to the sound echoing around the stone walls.

“I wish,” she thought fervently to herself, “that he could have lived to hear Remus laugh like that.”



## **Appendix B**

### **“Bathroom Confessions”**

By Hayden

Harry drug his eyes over the parchment of the Marauder’s Map, tracing the movements of a particular Slytherin. The set of feet on the map moved in a circle, pacing inside the room labeled ‘Slytherin Dorm.’ Then, as the curfew bell chimed, the Map showed the footsteps as they exited the dorm, exited the common room, and left the dungeons.

Harry hopped out of his bed ecstatically. Flinging on his invisibility cloak, Harry ran out of the Gryffindor Tower, intent on beating the footsteps to their destination. Clamoring down stairs, leaping over banisters, and sliding around corners, Harry reached the seventh floor corridor to find it completely empty. Whipping out the Map under the protection of the invisibility cloak, he scoured it for those eleven letters.

The Map showed Draco Malfoy, about to turn the last corner on his way to the room of requirements. Harry almost jumped with glee, he was going to find out exactly what Malfoy was doing. He caught the shimmer of blonde hair as Malfoy glided across the floor with unmatched grace, and Harry could feel his heart-rate double. Malfoy passed the spot where the door would be once, twice, thrice. The door revealed itself and Draco reached for the handle. Harry was immediately behind Draco, prepared to do anything to get into that room.

Harry listened to his heart pound erratically and excitedly as Draco twisted his hand around the door's handle, but didn't open it, it was like Draco knew Harry was there... and just wanted to tease him.

Harry had to hold back his frustrated bellow as Draco stepped back from the door, which proceeded to melt back into blank wall. Draco pivoted quickly, and Harry leapt to the side, not wanting a head on collision with the boy he was stalking whilst invisible.

Harry let Draco flitter away with pattering footsteps, before he opened the Map. He watched the indicator closely, and when Draco reached the fork in the corridor, he went left... the dungeons were on the right. With a menacing, jovial smirk, Harry folded the oversized parchment and began to chase down the escaping Slytherin.

Harry treaded lightly as Malfoy came into view, but continued to advance on him until they were only a foot apart. It didn't take Malfoy long to get to his destination; the second floor girls bathroom. Harry, completely befuddled, followed Draco into the bathroom.

"Oh, I was thinking you were going to hide from me.... Everyone else does." a girl's voice pierced the silence of the night.

"You know that I wouldn't. I need someone I can trust in this school." Draco answered in a clipped tone.

"You can trust me," Myrtle smiled, blinking flirtatiously. "Do you want to talk to me again?" she asked with a syrupy sweetness.

“I do.” Draco replied, sitting down on the tiled floor of the bathroom. “Can we talk about him?”

“Mmhmm,” she smiled, floating downwards until it looked like she was sitting on the floor as well. “Is he being mean to you again?” She asked glaring angrily, but it wasn’t directed at Draco.

“No... he’s... I don’t know what he’s doing. I hardly ever see him.” Draco answered, resting his hands on his crossed legs. “I haven’t seen him in days. It makes me.... feel discontent that he’s avoiding me.”

“I’ve seen him watching you.” Myrtle replied coyly as she smiled.

“When?” Draco asked hopefully.

His mind was reeling at the sudden intake of information: Draco was talking to Myrtle, a dead Muggle-born, about some boy, possibly a love interest. With a muted moan, Harry sat down to relieve his legs of the task of holding him aloft. He had been silent so far, and he intended to stay that way; the unknown eavesdropper who sat only a foot away.

“All the time... I’ve been watching him. He follows you everywhere.” Myrtle replied and answered Draco’s grin with one of her own. It brought her a semblance of accomplishment having alleviated the pain of the boy who so often visited her. “I saw him follow you all the way to the seventh floor just yesterday, but you shut the door and he couldn’t get in... he was terribly upset.” she frowned.

“The---the seventh floor?” Draco asked, losing all color in his face. “Does he—he know?” Draco stumbled. Harry had to cover his mouth with his hand to

keep from laughing; flustered Draco was a rare sight. However, the depth and meaning of the words hit him, they were parallel to his own life; he visited the Room of Requirements yesterday....and couldn't enter.... But then again, if the room was occupied no one could enter either. It was just coincidence that Harry and the mystery boy had visited on the same day.

Myrtle sighed heavily, bringing back Harry's attention, before she replied, "I don't think so... he complains so often about you being up to something ..."

Again, Harry was comparing himself to the mystery boy they were talking about.

"Tell me again how *you* met him?" Myrtle asked, fluttering her eyelashes.

"I-I ... Which time?" Draco relented, forgoing any form of rudeness towards the deceased girl; she knew all of his secrets.

"Both." She sighed dreamily, and Harry couldn't help but to quirk his invisible head toward Draco.

'How can you meet someone for the first time, multiple times?' Harry pondered, before relinquishing to listen to the story Draco wove.

"Mother wanted me to have the best robes for my first year of Hogwarts; So I stood on the platform as the enchanted needles and tape-measures sized me for one of Madam Malkin's more expensive robes... Then he came in; confused, scared, awestricken. I didn't know then... but now after all these years of watching, I know he was raised by Muggles, that's why he was agape: He had never been in the Wizarding world."

Harry grasped at the invisibility cloak, trying to reassure himself that the story he was hearing didn't have him as a main character.

"I..."

## **Appendix C**

“Forever and a Day 500 Years Ago”

By Anne

Selene looked at the house lit by the mystical moonlight. A single room was lighted by the light of a flame. Had someone moved into her old home, the place where so all she loved died? She couldn't bear the fact of others living inside. She was outraged yet understanding. She had no use for the house but the memories that lingered in the building were unfathomable.

Amelia would probably start wondering where she'd gone to if she didn't get back to the tower soon. She decided to examine the new found people in refuge in the blood bath that was her home.

The scent of blood was still in the air. Even from the outside, she could smell it. The smell impregnated every floorboard in the house, and, though the house had been modified, Amelia could pinpoint where the barn had been; horses had a strong scent.

She wasn't wondering where Selene was. She had followed soon after, with a small contingent of death dealers. At first, her plan had been to drag Selene back. After Amelia saw her, clinging to the wall and looking forlorn inside past the grimy glass of a window, her sympathy got the best of her.

She turned and addressed the death dealers. "Stay here, wait for me." Were her only words before she set off alone, to go talk to the girl. She

approached her cautiously, as she didn't know what the girl's purpose was yet. When, after a while, she still didn't move, Amelia made her presence known.

"Who are they?" She asked quietly, nearing Selene. There was a young boy, maybe seven, clinging to his mother's skirt while the father grabbed some firewood and started to light the chimney.

Selene stared longingly through the window. She didn't glance at Amelia, she just replied, " I don't know." She didn't break her gaze. They were like her own family. Mother was always there to comfort you when you were scared or when the darkness crept upon you in the night. Father, working man that he was, always made sure there was wood to keep you warm.

"Amelia, " she murmured, "What was your family like?"

Selene still clung to her humanity. She was still so human. She hadn't changed at all since the night her family died. She was forever frozen in time the same. Amelia had to have a family. Everyone does in some way.

Amelia nodded, understanding the fact the Selene just wanted to see a family again, never mind it wasn't hers. She figured something important must have happened for Selene to have chosen this place in particular, but didn't question the girl further.

She fingered the ring on her thumb at the question. There were three options for a vampire. Forget the family and break all ties to humanity; think they had forgotten but have a soft spot for humans; and the last was to care so much about family that they followed their own.

As much as she wanted to be the unfeeling ice queen most of the coven thought her to be, she couldn't stand the thought to take off her father's ring.

With a sigh, she started, "My father was a landlord, a prince of the Turks is what they called him here. He was kind and attentive, until the Lycans came. The army managed to restrain them for a while, but since we had no idea what they were, there was next to no chance of survival." She paused, staring into the house, looking at the child who was now playing with his father.

"My little brother died in battle, and the same day my father set out looking for revenge and was injured so badly, he didn't make it back to the fortress," she continued, her voice sounding sad, even if she wasn't expressing a tenth of the pain she felt. "I inherited the responsibility to defend the land. A couple of months later, I became a vampire."

She bit her lip; it had been centuries since then, but if she kept thinking about them, she was sure she would remember and cry. She didn't want to.

"Why do you ask?" The ring turned and turned in her finger, the mechanical action distracting her from the memories.

"I know." Amelia replied, not knowing what else to say, and keeping close watch on the family. The boy's clear, smart gaze connected with hers then, and then turned to Selene before he started tugging at his father's sleeve. Her eyes instinctively turned green, thinking of the tales that must be circling his mind. The vampires had the luck to be a little more subtle in their war-related activities, and so he would not dream of fangs and blood, but fur and howls.



"We have to go." She said when, after the father looked out the window, he turned to pick up a crossbow. Why hadn't they ducked down after the child's warning? That gaze had taken her back centuries, only in a second.

Turning to Selene and reaching for the girl's hand, she opted to disappear into the woods rather than be chased the whole night. She leaped, dragging Selene after her.

Selene was enraged. He attempt to hit her? It was her home! "Not in my home!" She yelled quickly pulling from Amelia. The cool wind blew at her as she broke away towards the house towards the doorway she last spotted her father in. A new door took the old ones place. She bashed at the door knocking it down with little effort now face to face with her assailant. She quickly disarmed the man.

She stood boldly and fierce in front of him--eyes ice blue and fangs visible. "Do you know whose home you're in? Did you not see the blood?" Her fangs let on quick what she was and that this home wasn't available to anyone.

The simple act of drawing the crossbow earlier triggered a mental state for Selene. She was at the place she called home for all of her human years where she would watch the sun rise in the morning and set at night while ending the day in the home. A threat from within the house brought her back. A threat came once and eliminated everything. All that meant something to Selene died that night except for the home, wounded in combat. The damage to the doors and blood on the walls flashed in her head while she still intimidated the human. The little boy's fear started setting in.

As Selene escaped her grip and ran back into the house, Amelia could only stand still for a few seconds, mesmerized. The sudden change of attitude was unexpected, and right now as the younger vampire neared the house, she could only think, "Oh, bother."

She ran after Selene, but by the time she got there the human was already disarmed, and looking into the pale blue eyes of a very enraged vampire. She stayed a few paces back, not really wanting to interfere, but if Selene couldn't control herself it would be unavoidable.

He couldn't really know whose home it was, Amelia reasoned, and was about to pull Selene back across the doorway, but stopped just in time to listen to the next part. The hand that had been hovering in the air now fell, and she let Selene calm down a little after venting her anger, knowing what the feeling was like.

She stormed into the fortress, hands fisted at her sides and eyes a bright green. She swore in Hungarian before turning around and grabbing the closest of the soldiers behind her by the neck...

That filthy Lycan had recognized her –no, he'd recognized the crest on her shoulderplate. He had been the one to oversee her father's torturing before, wounded and tired, he was sent back to die. And now he cowered behind a line of snarling, fully transformed wolves.

She knew what it was like. The soldier had been lucky to escape with no other injuries, as tears started to fall from her eyes and, turning around, she retired to her room, too proud to cry in front of her guard.

After Selene's eyes got tinged with brown again, Amelia dared put a hand on her shoulder, slowly turning her around so they could leave the place.

"It's been too long, Selene, for you to have any claim over this property," She said quietly, before turning to look at the man, who was now whispering to his son to escape the house.

"No," she said looking at father and son in turn, and breathing deeply to ward off the tears that again threatened to fall. "This house belongs to your family. I apologize for this incident."

She couldn't. Snapping her gaze away from the boy and to the ground, she let the first silent tear slide.

After mother died, all we had was each other...

"I'll send someone to repair the door tomorrow morning." She whispered at last, not caring if they were still going to be there by then. After that, she turned and walked back in the direction of the forest.

## **Appendix D**

“Path of Justice: Song of Seryn”

Chapter One- The Wings of Peace

-By Thomas

### *The Arnesian War- Riot of Tear*

*During the Imperial Simulacrum of the fourth century, a radical band of Argonians nearly laid waste to the great Dunmer city of Tear. The group called themselves ‘The Way’, and by Rain’s Hand of the year 396 they had successfully infiltrated over two dozen agents into the Dres capital. Thoughts of glorious freedom slowly crept into the minds of the slaves there, the Way spreading their plan by word of mouth until nearly every Argonian prisoner eagerly awaited the fateful night.*

*-Daron Endret; 3E 431*

Tear, Morrowind; 8th Rain’s Hand, 396 3E

The border city of Tear had erupted into pure anarchy, buildings burning despite the rain, blood swirling in puddles on the muddy streets. A relentless downpour beat down on the city, blue-white lightning forking through the night sky, thunderclaps drowning screams of pain and terror.

The white flashes offered brief glimpses into the wanton destruction of the southern side of Tear- home to the infamous slave pens and saltrice plantations. Large pits, which once held thousands of slaves, were now empty. Bits of broken chain littered the floors beside the usual scraps of rancid food and waste. Only a few of the high fences that ringed the pens still stood, most had been trampled in the first moments of destruction. And all around lay the bodies of the dead.

Scaled reptilian bodies, broken manacles still clinging to their wrists, crashed over guard posts like living waves. The few Dres left behind took their last stands with honor, shedding the blood of many a slave, but the tide would not be turned. The elves died, one by one, as would later be sung with pride by the battalions of Dunmer soldiers.

Further into the city, the Dunmer held a stronger resistance. Sandy walls, turned brown with rain, protected the slavers, fortress against their own supposed property. Restless red eyes, ever searching for the first assault, quested through the murky gloom. The elves gripped their bows with white knuckled fear. Each breath felt like their last, the air in those silent towers charged with more than the booming storm.

But the middle of the city, the gray between bleeding corpses and doomed sentinels, was strangely empty, quiet save the screams and thunder. The once

lavish market stands stood vacant. The bustling crowds were all either dead or gone. Ominous dark buildings rose up on either side of the muddy streets, doors splintered where looters had taken full advantage of the riot.

A lone Dres guard sprinted down the empty market street. He gasped for breath as he passed shattered stalls, crimson bleeding through a large hole in his armor. His helm was long forgotten, dropped into the mud along with his sword as he fled the rioting slaves. His silver-gray hair was plastered to his face, dripping rain, dark red eyes alive with panic.

The elf stopped suddenly, doubling over at the end of the alley. He collapsed against the dark tan wall, sliding down to the muddy street. Numb hands pressed tight against the throb of pain in his chest. He tore the netch leather from his chest, worn buckles snapping, both hands pressed against the growing blot of red. His head fell back, another flash of white throwing the alley into sudden clarity. The Dunmer's breath still rattled in shallow gasps, his mind still blank with terror. As the roll of the thunder died away, the splash of footsteps awoke him from his half conscious nightmare.

Another flash of light exposed the tailed silhouette standing at the far end of the alleyway, a jagged weapon raised in one scaled hand. The slave took one slow step forward. His face was obscured in darkness save for glittering black eyes, shining with bloodlust.

“Please,” the elf gasped, pleading, “Please, no-“

“Silence,” the shape hissed, his low voice thick with trembling fury, along with a barely contained excitement. “Time for words... over.”

“No,” the Dres cried weakly, slipping from the wall, crawling through the puddle towards the open street, “Almsivi, no!”

“Prayers uselesss now.” Another step. “Your kind done, Kai show uss Way.”

The Dunmer splashed helplessly, blood mixing into the grimy pool that surrounded him, fingers slipping uselessly over the slick muck. Tears joined his rain soaked face; his gasped mutterings sank into vain bawling. His descendents would praise him for dying in the name of Almsivi, in the name of the Great House Dres. No glorious thoughts of duty surfaced in the elf’s mind, only the all consuming fear of the shadowed figure, now just a few feet away.

“Silence, smooth skin. Be proud. You open the Way.”