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Beyond Dumbledore's Army: Making Space for Fan-Created Content as Fan Activism

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BEYOND DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY:
MAKING SPACE FOR FAN-CREATED CONTENT AS FAN ACTIVISM

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"The ship is the heterotopia par excellence."
— Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

Ship (*v*.): The act of desiring or supporting a particular relationship in a fandom.
Ship (*n*.): A relationship in a fandom desired or supported by fans.

"Here's an answer to your question that I don't think you're going to like. The current crop of 18- to 25-year-olds is the most politically apathetic generation in American history. In 1972, half of age group voted. In the last election, 32%. Your generation is considerably less likely than any previous one to write or call public officials, attend rallies, or work on political campaigns. A man once said this, "decisions are made by those who show up." So are we failing you, or are you failing us? It's a little of both."
— Jed Bartlet, *The West Wing*

From a traditional research standpoint, current youth culture is apolitical. Millennials—those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s—don't participate in the kind of political engagement one learns about in high school civics, and when they do, the engagement tends to be simple and online. Over a third have signed an online petition, while only 14 percent have attended a political rally or demonstration.[1] Moreover, the *New Yorker* at least claims that social media activism is built around "weak ties," and that instruments of social media are "not a natural enemy of the status quo."[2] Such signs might be less troubling to cultural commentators if Millennials voted, but this generation is also missing at the ballot box. In the 2014 midterm elections, youth voter turnout fell to its lowest level on record. A mere 19.9% of citizens ages 18 to 29 voted in 2014; in contrast, over midterm elections of the preceding forty years, the average youth turnout was 26.6 percent.[3]

While it seems that this generation, at this particular moment, cannot be defined by their traditional political activism, I would argue that this perception is partially due to the fact that some of the most enthusiastic and intensive political work being done by this generation is simply not picked up by conventional civic engagement polls. In fact, some of this 'hidden' work is being accomplished by way of one of the most visible media phenomena of the era: *Harry Potter*. As a Millennial Manifesto article would tell it, "If there is one piece of pop culture that united the Millennial generation, it was 'Harry Potter.'"[4] With the first book of the series published in 1997 (1998 in the United States) and the final film installment released in 2011, Millennials grew up with *Harry Potter* and form the core of its fandom—the community or subculture of people who feel passionate about a particular work and express this admiration in a number of forms. One such form is fan activism, although what constitutes this type of

engagement is debated: some focus on those who participate in fandom through activism, while some focus on those who participate in activism through fandom.

For the former group, fan activism has been defined as "not about the mix between political concerns and culture but rather action that looks like political activism but is used toward nonpolitical ends," "most often… associated with active fans lobbying for a content related outcome." [5] While I shall discuss how the *Potter* fandom's culturally legitimized activism—the second generally understood conception of fan activism—has been used to further traditional political ends, I argue that the real power of fandom is the work it does that does *not* look like political activism: the cultural politics that its content produces.

Conventional Fandom Activism

To defend youth culture come those who do read *Harry Potter* as political, particularly as they emphasize how the series has spurred civic and political engagement. First, it must be noted that *Harry Potter* is rife with political allegories and parallels. Dumbledore (the headmaster of the school the characters attend in the first six books and a critical mentor for the protagonist) was called to defeat a Dark wizard in the 1940s, and not just any Dark wizard, but one who believed non-magical individuals ("Muggles") were not equal to those endowed with magic. If this isn't quite straightforward enough, the main conflict in the series revolves around another Dark wizard, Voldemort, who not only wishes to dominate Muggle society, but also to eliminate wizards and witches of Muggle heritage ("Muggle-born" if you're being politically correct; "Mudblood" if you're particularly prejudiced). With this intense focus on racial purity, the Nazism allegory is quite clear. Critically, the World War II parallel isn't the only way the series address political issues. Hermione (one of Harry's close friends) becomes an anti-slavery activist beginning in the fourth book, for example. Rowling has also explicitly stated that lycanthropy—a

condition carried by one of the series' most beloved teachers and father figures, Remus Lupin—

is meant to be "a metaphor for those illnesses that carry a stigma, like HIV and AIDs."[6] Given

that the protagonists lead an illegal student defense group (Dumbledore's Army) in the fifth book

and go on to participate in full-scale rebellion in the seventh, it's clear that the series is hardly an

advocate for political apathy. Still, it's worth noting that Nazism (and, at least to some extent,

slavery) is synonymous with evil for Western audiences. The series' particular conception of

good versus evil is therefore not so much political as taken as a basic tenant of contemporary

society, such that Nazism can serve as an easy stand-in for the evil the protagonist must fight in

order to complete his traditional heroic journey. As such, the ways in which fandom engages

with contemporary political and cultural issues—whether they appear in the books or not—is

especially important.

Those who take the youth culture surrounding *Harry Potter* seriously validate the ways in

which the fandom has become engaged in traditional politics. Specifically, they are willing to

validate participation in fandom generally speaking because it is "a place where civic skills can

be cultivated."[7] In "Imagining No Place," Steven Duncombe elaborates on this idea, writing:

> Scratch an activist and you're apt to find a fan. It's no mystery why: fandom
> provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate according to different
> norms, laws, and structures than those we experience in our "real" lives. Fandom
> also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share
> interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture. This
> ability to imagine alternatives and build community, not coincidentally, is a basic
> prerequisite for political activism.[8]

Duncombe thus displays an appreciation for fandom that is based on the idea that it builds

transferable skills for the "real" activism that we can do in our "real" lives in the "real" world.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins maintains that "popular culture and its surrounding participatory

cultures (including fandom) can function as spaces where civic skills can be cultivated" and,

moreover, that "what is most relevant here, however, is that fan communities often form around worlds that may not be explicitly political in nature, but that can offer resources or spaces for political engagement."[9] Of course, with *Harry Potter* in particular, it is the very understanding of the series as political that prompts engagement, as readers are encouraged to identify with the characters and their fight against prejudice—and thus are called to take up the real-world fight against prejudice themselves. Others have pointed to the importance of a "common reference point (shared between fans and more casual consumers) within an otherwise diverse and fragment coalition," the very "remixing" of which enables "community-building work" among protesters.[10] Millennial protesters may not all have the same training in labor rights history, but they do share an understanding of *Harry Potter*—one that claims the series as a symbol for the struggle toward equality.

Perhaps the earliest example of real-world *Potter* activism came in 2000, when a number of organizations (including the Freedom to Read Foundation, the Association of American Publishers, and the National Council of Teachers of English) founded Muggles for Harry Potter. According to the American Library Association, at the time, the series was one of the "most challenged" in the country, with challenges reported in thirteen states, largely because of the series' depiction of witchcraft. Muggles for Harry Potter was quick to leverage the relatively new Internet age: their site was used to enroll members (fans were "encouraged to report censorship efforts in their areas so that they [could] be fought") and educate people on the banning attempts.[11]

Still, *Potter* activism did not end once the banning furor died down, nor did it contain itself to directly *Potter*-related matters. One of the most prominent examples of this type of activism is the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA). Founded in 2005 by Andrew Slack, its initial goal

was to raise awareness of the human rights violations occurring in Sudan. Notably, Slack himself was not an active member of the *Harry Potter* fandom at the time. Cognizant of his outsider status, "Among Slack's first moves was to join forces with prominent fans, directly courting Wizard Rock stars, podcast producers, fan fiction editors and writers, high-profile bloggers, and convention organizers."[12] As such, Slack's organization very deliberately "draws on Harry Potter as a public engagement keystone by first orienting the Harry Potter fan to Darfur activism, then using the Harry Potter story as a lens, and next pushing fans to take action because of intense identification."[13] As Ashley Hinck theorizes, the organization "privileges discursive engagement by establishing an ethic of action that must be performed within the public sphere."[14] Fandom—its community and language—is thus a means by which to reach more traditional civic or political goals.

The HPA steadily grew to become a significant cultural force. As of 2012, the group had over 70 active chapters and more than 100,000 members around the world, along with a 40-person staff (volunteer and paid).[15] According to HPA chapter coordinator Sara Denver, as of 2011, 24 of these chapters were hosted by high schools and 33 were hosted by colleges and universities.[16] Clearly, a significant portion of the HPA's influence is due to the students in these particular chapters, to the Millennials inspired to engage with their communities by way of a work of pop culture. In 2011, the organization won the Chase Community Giving contest. The prize was a $250,000 grant from JP Morgan Chase—hardly small change. As this victory required gaining more votes than the other 10,000 charities involved in the contest, it rested on the HPA's ability to tap into and activate the online *Harry Potter* fandom.

Over time, the organization has also expanded its efforts to include a wider range of issues, from American immigration reform to labor rights and economic justice. One of its most

well-known initiatives is its annual Accio Books! campaign, which began in 2009 and takes its name from the summoning spell featured in the series. As of 2015, the campaign has sent more than 250,000 books to nonprofits across the country and the world, including community centers in the Mississippi Delta and Detroit, as well as a Rwandan Youth Village.[17] The organization is careful to use series-derived names and framing devices for all of its initiatives, which work to emphasize the connection between the series fans identify with and the 'real-world' action the organization wishes to incite. Again, Hinck notes that "the HPA public engagement keystone enables the HPA to invite its members to cultivate public subjectivities, making public engagement newly intelligible to Harry Potter fans."[18] The organization's work to donate books is especially notable given the intense opposition to the series by religious parents in the early- to mid-2000s.

Another example is the group's "Dumbledore Doctrine," which "provides a launching point for the group's efforts to support legalizing gay marriage, because they see the acceptance and embrace of diversity as core values in the Harry Potter narratives."[19] As part of this "doctrine," in just one day, HPA members called nearly 3,600 Maine residents to urge them to oppose a proposition that would have blocked gay marriage in the state.[20] These direct political efforts—as opposed to the classic charitable efforts of Accio Books!—were continued by such initiatives as Wizard Rock the Vote, which registered over a thousand voters before the 2008 U.S. presidential election.[21]

The HPA very explicitly adheres to the accepted theories about fandom as a path toward traditional civic or political engagement. Starting in 2014, the organization has hosted an annual leadership conference titled The Granger Leadership Academy (named for Hermione Granger in honor of her tendencies to "constantly [choose] what is right over what is easy" and "actively

engage her peers in social activism").[22] While the conference describes the experience as "what it is that sets fan activism apart from more traditional modes of activism and leadership development," this mainly seems to refer to the unique "community spirit" present at the conference. Moreover, the conference's programming page specifically references "talks… rooted in real world experiences and actionable lessons, not academic or untested theories."[23] The Granger Leadership Academy's 'break' from traditional activism lies in its recognition that the ability to give valuable leadership advice is not limited to "long-time professionals" alone; 'amateur' fan activists have developed skills that are ready to be put to use in service of "real world" civic and political engagement.

Notably, the HPA has been embraced by the most authoritative *Harry Potter* figure of them all: Rowling herself. In an interview with TIME in 2007, she said of the organization, "It's incredible, it's humbling, and it's uplifting to see people going out there and doing that in the name of your character."[24] In 2013, she donated signed *Harry Potter* books to the HPA's Equality FTW fundraiser, a general campaign to raise funds for their annual programming (FTW is Internet-slang for "for the win," and thus another example of the group's commitment to framing their initiatives in the language of youth culture).[25] In 2010, when the organization began a four-year, now-successful campaign for all *Harry Potter* chocolate products to be 100 percent UTZ or Fair Trade certified, Rowling's lawyer "made inquiries" after Warner Bros. failed to release timely and transparent sourcing data.[26] As the Washington Post notes, "Like Warner Bros., the Harry Potter Alliance wants to keep J.K. Rowling's creation in good standing."[27] I would add Rowling to this list of stakeholders: everyone's reputation received a boost when the fans' demands were met.

Fandom's Cultural Politics

What fan activism literature ignores, however, is the real work being done *within* fandoms. For proponents of traditional political engagement, the only political work worth being validated as such has a measurable impact (or attempted impact) on well-recognized political or social structures. This way of thinking thus validates fandom work that engages with current infrastructure—with human rights violations, chocolate sourcing, voter turnout, and ballot initiatives. These are issues that one can approach in other ways, not through a fandom lens; if fandom can draw more people into an already-established cause, then that is simply more people advocating for change within in a traditional structure by fairly conventional means—through voting, phone banks, or online awareness campaigns.

A focus on fans' 'real-world' engagement, and the ways in which fandom creates a space for such engagement, belittles the importance of what is continually being produced in fandoms. In a 2014 essay entitled "Diversity Is Not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing," author Daniel José Older writes, "We can love a thing and still critique it. In fact, that's the only way to really love a thing."[28] Large swathes of the *Potter* fandom are not interested in lionizing the canon of the series, however much they adore it. By the end of the series, all of the main characters are happily married (with children!) to opposite-sex partners: an ultimately, completely conservative ending to a series against which so many on the Christian right had once railed.[29] The content-producing fandom's contestation of that narrative is less visible to outsiders than calling potential Maine voters, but their efforts are not without value or importance.

By "content," I am mainly referring to fanart and fanfiction (fic), although fans' own general commentary on the series and their self-perceptions of their roles as fans are also considered. Here, it is important to note that fic writers are primarily female. Although it is

hardly a firm line, male and female fans tend to engage in fandom in different ways. While male

fandom has been primed to be converted into a consumer base (think guidebooks and

encyclopedias), the female side of fandom has become marked by the way it has "altered and

rewritten male dominated texts to suit their own needs."[30] [31] As such, male expressions of

fandom are validated because they fit into capitalist consumer culture, while female engagements

with fandom—which can reject both canon gender norms and capitalism—are ridiculed.

Throughout this section, I will take fandom to be a heterotopia, as defined by Foucault in

"Of Other Spaces." Heterotopias are spaces that are "in relation with all the other sites, but in

such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate,

mirror, or reflect." As I will demonstrate, the content produced by the *Potter* fandom makes

suspect, among other relations, the heterosexual endings Rowling gave to her characters, and

even the capitalistic relationship between content creation and consumption. Foucault outlines

multiple types of heterotopias, including the "crisis" heterotopia, which is often characterized by

the idea that "sexual virility was in fact supposed to take place "elsewhere" than at home," a trait

that certainly could be used to describe an online space where primarily young women write

about sex in ways not allowed by the general culture. Foucault goes on to write that crisis

heterotopias are largely being replaced by "heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals

whose behavior in relation to the required mean or norm are placed." Of course, fandom is a

space that is opted into in a way that psychiatric institutions are obviously not, but the content

they produce is largely relegated to this space and ridiculed when it appears outside of it. This

brings us to the issue of open access. For Foucault, heterotopias

> always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes
> them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public
> place. Either the entry is compulsory… or else the individual has to submit rites and
> purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. [32]

The Internet certainly both isolates fandom and makes it penetrable, but it is also makes fandom freely accessible. Someone not in the fandom might not know exactly where to find fandom-produced content on the Internet, but it is technically accessible to anyone who might seek or stumble upon it, for any reason. Additionally, as Aja Romano, a geek staff reporter for the Daily Dot, notes:

> For all it may be *about* fictional gay men, slash often has very little to do with real gay men. Slash fandom is and always has been a separate space created by women, for women. When men read and write slash (and they do!), they are doing so in female spaces, in a culture dictated and evolved by women.[33]

If fandom is a heterotopia, it is one created by women as an intentionally separate sphere from the male-dominated world at large, even as men seek to define it and ostracize those who participate in it.

One additional key trait of heterotopias is their role to "create a space of illusion that exposes every real space."[34] When fandom changes the canonical sexuality or ethnicity of a character, it exposes the lack of representation of these identities in the original content. Or, as Gramsci might put it, fandom pushes against the hegemonic common sense that makes it natural for a story to end with the white, cis-male hero marrying a white cis-woman. In Nathan Rambukkan's article on the role of autonomous media spaces in radical world building, he positions this resistance to cultural hegemony in relation to Michel de Certeau's theories of strategies and tactics: "one cannot simply look at what powerful actors in society are producing and shaping without also exploring what those with less (or different kinds) of power are doing with those products."[35] For fandom, the answer to this is fan-created content that pushes against the overwhelmingly white and uniformly straight narratives offered by their beloved series.

Archive of Our Own (AO3) is currently the most respected hosting site for fanworks (mainly fanfiction).[36] Established in 2007, there are over 96,000 works categorized under Harry Potter — J.K. Rowling. When *Harry Potter* fic is sorted by 'kudos' (AO3's version of 'likes'), the top 40 fics each feature a male-male relationship, with the exception of two, which feature no romantic relationship at all.[37] At least 29.5% of all *Harry Potter* fic hosted on AO3 revolves around a slash (male/male) pairing.[38] It's a fairly remarkable feat for a series in which there are no canonically queer characters. Some might argue with that assessment: After all, in October 2007, after the final book was published, Rowing revealed that she had "always thought of Dumbledore as gay." However, as this is never explicitly confirmed in the text of the books themselves, I am not including it as canonical knowledge. (As Rachel Rostad asserts in her spoken word piece, "To JK Rowling, from Cho Chang," "now gays don't just have to be closeted in real life, they can even be closeted fictionally!")[39] Tellingly, after the audience cheered, Rowling added, "Just imagine the fan fiction now."[40] In fact, Potter fans have been writing Dumbledore as gay (or at least involved in romantic or sexual relationships with other men) since 1998, when Fanfiction.net—which currently boasts over half a million *Harry Potter* fics—was founded. The fandom had not been waiting for Rowling to make this announcement; regardless of canonical sexuality, they had already taken it upon themselves to claim characters for their own purposes.

In Ika Willis's essay, "Keeping Promises to Queer Children: Making Space (for Mary Sue) at Hogwarts," Willis discusses how fic featuring queer characters "*reorients* a canonical text," moving it "away from the abusive false logic of the cultural code." In that sense, queer fic "can be understood as "filling in the gaps" in canon."[41] What could be more transgressive than taking the most famous, most beloved young adult hero of the modern age and refusing to let

him follow the traditional, heterosexual hero's ending? What could be more transgressive than demanding, than writing, an alternate hero's ending, one that involves a boy and possibly an awkward coming out conversation? As Willis asserts, fic is an opportunity for queer writers to "make space for [their] own desires in a text which may not at first sight provide the resources to sustain them," to which Booth would add that such fic is a "space where individuals can investigate the possibilities of other gender identities." [42] [43]

It is also important to explicitly address the relationship between the facts that so much of fic features slash relationships and that it is primarily written by individuals who do not identify as cis men. While it is easy for cultural commentators to declare slash fic to be the mirror of straight men's lesbian fetish, many in fandom reject this conception and believe the predominance of slash fic (again, in context of the overwhelmingly women and/or queer writers) is working in transgressive ways. It is has been posited that one of the reasons why fic writers focus on male/male relationships is because of the presumption of equality between the partners:

> Imagine being in a relationship in which you are treated like an equal, consciously and unconsciously, sexually, emotionally, socially, romantically, without being bound by gender expectations, without risk of pregnancy (or having your reproductive rights taken away from you), without feelings of inferiority, without being mistreated or neglected because men don't understand your body and can't be bothered to learn how to give you pleasure (or that you even deserve pleasure)…
> Girls aren't "making them gay."
> Girls are fantasizing about being equal.[44]

This idea also has the potential to explain some of the gulf between the number of slash fics and the number of femslash (female/female) fics: "two women together is a dynamic that has long been prescribed to us by the patriarchy. It's already been appropriated by men; it's harder to write dangerously, because our ingrained cultural images of women together were images given to us by men."[45] As such, when young women write slash fic, it can be a way for them to

imagine relationships both without traditional gender roles and the baggage that often

accompanies depictions of female/female relationships.[46]

Some of the work being accomplished by fic can be more thoroughly explored by

examining which pairings are featured in the most popular fics. As it happens, the vast majority

of the forty most popular (by 'kudos') fics feature either a relationship between Harry and Draco

Malfoy (Harry's prejudiced nemesis at school, who joins Voldemort's side in the war but is

ultimately unwilling to kill anyone), or between Remus Lupin (one of Harry's father's best

friends and his Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in the third book, who dies at the end of

the seventh book) and Sirius Black (Harry's godfather, who was wrongfully imprisoned for

twelve years and dies in the fifth book). Other than Sirius, all of these characters are shown in

heterosexual relationships, and the descriptions of Sirius's teenage years imply he was something

of a ladies' man. Rowling has repeatedly expressed how "unnerved" she is regarding "the

number of girls who fell for [Draco]," writing:

> Draco has all the glamour of the anti-hero; girls are very apt to romanticize such people.
> All of this left me in the unenviable position of pouring cold common sense on ardent
> readers' daydreams as I told them, rather severely, that Draco was not concealing a heart
> of gold under all that sneering and prejudice and that no, he and Harry were not destined
> to end up best friends.[47]

While some (usually inexperienced) fic writers produce self-insert fic so that they can

imagine a relationship with the moneyed bad boy, the majority of authors in the fandom are not

writing such stories. Instead, they're writing fic after fic in which they imagine that Draco could

have a redemptive narrative arc; that he could, slowly and painfully, come to realize his

prejudice and actively work to educate himself. Writing Draco in this manner is a way to demand

that we imagine how a post-conflict society (in this case, in regards to a specific, racialized war)

could function and heal; it asks that we find a way to move past the prejudices of our parents,

and, just as importantly, that we forgive those who make the effort to do so. This type of fic requests that we not doom characters forever based on the decisions they made as teenagers, and recognizes the very realistic impact that coercion and familial bonds would have on a sixteen-year-old's 'choices.' A number of these post-war fics, whether they focus on Draco or not, touch on the legal reforms that would grant rights to those discriminated against by the old regime and speak of reparations and tribunals. Still, Draco is the character on the 'Dark' side about which we know the most: is it any wonder that readers choose him to explore the effect prejudice has on those in power? As Booth theorizes in *Playing fans: negotiating fandom and media in the digital age*, the female (content-creating) side of fandom "is as much about constructing a space where the fans can discover their own identities as it is about meeting the band."[48] For Draco fic writers, this means exploring personal growth—and, yes, queering the narrative. Pairing Draco and Harry is not—at least for a significant portion of the fandom—about teenage girls romanticizing bad boys, but rather about characters "choosing between what they were taught and what they've learnt for themselves," not to mention inserting queer narratives into a series wholly lacking them.[49] If, as Rowling posits, girls are indeed prone to "romanticizing" the anti-hero, it is not in order to make him their boyfriend (as she seems to imagine it), but rather to make him the boyfriend of the hero himself.

Fic is also a space where writers can explore conceptions of relationships and success not validated by the traditional hero's arc. The Draco/Harry fic *A Piercing Comfort* is set roughly a decade post-war and features a severely depressed Harry: a Harry who is finally having to come to terms with the psychological and physiological damage brought on not only by the war he fought as a teenager, but also by his post-war attempts to have a conventional happy ending with Ginny (whom he marries canonically). In the fic, Draco explicitly states, "I don't much like the

idea that we require another person to be happy, or to be our best selves. I find that concept, and the way our culture encourages it, incredibly damaging." In contrast to the values and arcs presented by the books, this particular Draco is content to remain unmarried and childless. Harry is also frustrated by his old Hogwarts friends: "They all have such narrow ideas of what constitutes success, and they assume that what has made them happy would make anyone happy. But I really don't want what they have!" After this outburst, Draco replies, "however settled they may appear to you, they are struggling along toward happiness, just like yourself." In other words: although the others are in heterosexual, married- or on-the-verge-of-type relationships and following traditional career paths, these tropes are no guarantee of happiness. What's more, Draco's understanding of the world—one that Harry comes to share—is that not following these conventions does not mean one is inherently 'wrong,' nor does it mean one will be forever shut off from happiness of any form. Although in the fic's epilogue, Draco and Harry are in a romantic relationship, in contrast to the epilogue of the series itself, neither marriage nor children are mentioned.[50] Again, fic can be and is used to reject cultural norms and imagine alternate paths not embraced by most mainstream media narratives.

The second most-beloved male/male relationship in *Potter* fic, between Sirius and Remus, is also worth discussion. As previously mentioned, Remus is a werewolf, a condition Rowling positions as a parallel to AIDS. In the world of Harry Potter, there is anti-werewolf legislation and strong enough anti-werewolf prejudice that Remus resigns from his job as a Hogwarts professor after another instructor discloses his condition. It doesn't take a strong leap of imagination to connect this to the real-world ramifications many face due to HIV-positive status. However, Remus is not portrayed as queer in the series—and parts of the fandom are not pleased. As a fan concisely wrote—in an article posted on a site whose tagline is "pop culture

with a political agenda"—"in making Remus Lupin a straight character, Rowling has co-opted a disease and erased the turbulent, troubling and very much queer history of it for, seemingly, no apparent reason."[51] As the writer goes on to explain, Rowling's apparent understanding of the "stigma" of blood-borne illnesses is that they are "probably due to taboos surrounding blood itself," which erases the fact that the actual HIV stigma is largely due to people's discomfort with queerness. [52] By writing Remus as queer, fic writers reassert the importance of understanding AIDS in the context of queer history.

Still, this is not the only 'use' fic writers have made of Remus or the relationship between Remus and Sirius. In the series, werewolves turn into wolf form around the full moon, such that Remus is 'ill' for a few days every month. Fic writers have taken this monthly cycle and transformed it into the one that exists in our world: a menstrual cycle that a transgender Remus must hide (or not) from his friends. Again, fic offers ways for writers and readers to explore identities that are often ignored—much less respectfully portrayed—in mainstream media.

In the series, Remus marries a younger woman, Tonks, who has special magical powers such that she can change her appearance at will. Notably, Tonks prefers to be known by her androgynous surname, rather than her first name—Nymphadora, or Dora for short—and her preferred hair color is bright pink. For some readers, this particular heterosexual marriage is thus a double slap in the face, as this move was seen as a way for "JKR to retroactively de-gay [Remus] at her convenience by emphasizing his lifelong heterosexuality and pairing him up with the series' only shapeshifting genderqueer punk rock butch-dyke… who promptly gets rewarded for her heteronormative conformity by giving birth."[53] For comparison, AO3 has 1,035 fics that include a relationship between Remus and Tonks (although the pairing may not be 'endgame' or the major focus of the fic), but 7,774 fics including a relationship between Remus and Sirius

(with the same caveats). As 203 fics tag both pairings, this indicates that a significant fraction of the Remus/Tonks fic at least addresses the Sirius/Remus relationship, even if the latter is not the end result.[54] When creating their own content, readers reject the heteronormativity of the series and use their own works to represent identities and relationships they may have difficulty finding elsewhere.

Queer representation is not the only kind of representation with which the content-producing elements of the *Potter* fandom are interested. Many fanartists carry out Rowling's blood status analogy to its full logical conclusion, thus envisioning Hermione (who is Muggle-born) as black and Harry (a half-blood) as biracial (generally with one parent white and the other black or Desi). Others have drawn pureblood Sirius as part Chinese and pureblood Lavender Brown as black (Lavender's race is not specified in the books, although she is portrayed by black actresses in the second and third films and a white actress in the final three, when Lavender's character has a more substantial role). It must here be noted that Noma Dumezweni, a black British actress, has been cast as Hermione in the new play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, set to open in the summer of 2016. It seems not unlikely that the producers were in part relying on the support of racebending elements of the fandom to counteract the backlash by those unwilling to see Hermione played by anyone less white than Emma Watson.

Not only have many fanartists committed on a basic level to increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the characters, but they—as with their fic-writing counterparts—have also committed an enormous amount of *time* to crafting and then sharing these new interpretations with others in the fandom. Studies on Millennials and online activism portray youth culture as one that engages only superficially, as one in which all online engagement is structured to take up as little time or mental energy as possible. The content-producing sections of fandom are a

rejection of this characterization. Of the top 20 (by 'kudos') completed Harry Potter fics on AO3, nine have word counts over 50,000, and five of those word counts are over 100,000. (For comparison, the word counts of the books in the *Potter* series range from just over 75,000 to nearly 260,000.) Queering the narrative is hardly a weekend whim and requires much more effort than 'liking' a status, sharing an article, or adding a filter to one's profile picture. The same could be said for fic readers: committing to reading a 50,000- or 150,000-word fic requires significantly more time than taking the latest BuzzFeed quiz. Similarly, fan artists would not spend hours drawing an explicitly black Hermione or biracial Harry if they were not committed to the world such art portrays—if they were not committed to proclaiming that black girls can be clever and brave and beautiful, and biracial boys can be heroic. This is online activism, online politics: it simply doesn't look like the kind of political work that is seen as legitimate enough to be surveyed and studied.

Much of the reason why fandom content is ignored is because it is mainly created by young women—and, more than that, because there is the conception that it is nothing but sex. A basic defense of fic would be to say that, just like movies, fics come with ratings, and one can search for fic based on one's preferences; that fic is also regularly about friendship and homework and terrible first apartments. However, such a knee-jerk defense ignores that, yes, there *is* a lot of sex in fic, and fic is primarily written by young, often queer women and is stigmatized, belittled, and devalued for that very reason: in our current cultural constructions, young and particularly queer women do not get to unabashedly write and read about sex— especially not through mediums not necessarily subject to the scrutiny of parents or librarians. As one fan—who works as a sex educator—explains, "So much fanfiction is queer, in fact, that it should come as no surprise that it is widely reviled and made into a joke; homophobia is still

very real and I trust that I don't have to explain how it would cause queer literature to be denigrated."[55] What's more, "many of us have learned more about consent, negotiation, gender, and sexual orientation from fanfiction (and other 'unpublishable' content on the internet) than we ever did from anything published or offered to us in school."[56] Young women and queer individuals of all gender identities are not waiting for corporations to make content for them; instead, they're creating it for themselves and for each other.

At the 2014 National Poetry Slam, spoken word artist Brenna Twohy performed a piece entitled "Fantastic Breasts and Where to Find Them." The piece opens with her saying, "Ask me what kind of porn I'm into and I will take you on a magical journey to fanfiction.com/harry potter/nc-17." In later lines, she continues,

> I am an unapologetic consumer of all things Potterotica and the sexiest part is not the way Cho Chang rides that broomstick or the sounds of Myrtle Moaning. The sexiest part is knowing they are part of a bigger story. That they exist beyond eight minutes in "Titty Titty Gang Bang." That their kegels is not the strongest thing about them. And I'm still told my porn is unrealistic.[57]

The comments on a Tumblr thread about the video are particularly telling: "#this is the real reason fandom is mocked derided and insulted by creators#because it *can't* be packaged and resold#because our culture doesn't know how to sell sex to women outside of the male gaze#and because women have created a community where they don't need to buy anything to get what they want."[58] In short, fan creators are not ignorant of the work they are doing: instead, at least for some, their fan content is a conscious rejection of the stories normative culture would sell them. Author Zan Romanoff explains the general cultural narrative regarding such fandom fantasies as follows:

> I get this sense when people talk about women having fantasy lives– especially fantasies that involve romance or sex / especially when the women are young, are girls– that what's behind what they're saying is the idea that no matter what the fantasy is, it's the wrong one. That having a fantasy in and of itself is childish and either damaging or

evidence that you are damaged. Straight men's fantasies get packaged into art, and called culture, or turned into kink and called porn. Straight women's fantasies are evidence that we're girls, that we're frigid, that we're scared of something. Why doesn't anyone believe that we're just daydreaming about the same impossible things everyone wants? [59]

Here, Halberstam's "Female Masculinity" may offer some explanatory power. Through this lens, one can view fandom participation as akin to being a tomboy, wherein it is conceived by the general cultural to be a "pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment" (something that certainly fits with the creation of queer texts) and a "longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach." This "power" can be seen as the "power" given to canon-producing corporations, a power that means their work is legitimized in the broader culture. Just as Halberstam notes that tomboy tendencies are punished when they "threaten[] to extend beyond" what the culture has deemed acceptable, so too are fandom efforts punished when fans dare to assert themselves too loudly.[60] Tellingly, the Potter phenomenon has been paralleled to that of the Beatles in the 1960s.[61] Romano might add:

> the real fear is not a lack of female decorum but an abundance of female expression. Fangirls, and people who actively participate in fannish cultures, have wrested control of their own pleasure, and how that pleasure is expressed, away from a society that would rather they kept a lid on it, thanks. The cultural language that dehumanizes and demonizes fangirls does so because it fears what happens when female fans express unrestrained joy and pleasure in their hobbies, their favorite celebrities, and their consumption of media.[62]

Of course, it is not simply the content of fics that makes fandom so disruptive: it's the fact that they exist at all. As Abigail de Kosnik points out in her essay "Fandom as Free Labor," "the abundance of fan content online has led some to disparage fans as prolific amateurs who make nothing of importance or value." However, it is important to note that the attachment of "nothing of importance or value" to fanwork rests on the assumption that nothing that is free—nothing that resists capitalism—can have value (because value is clearly a shorthand for monetary value). Fans are clear to mark their works as outside the capitalist system. Although

this particular method is growing less common in certain fandoms, in the author's notes at the beginning of fics, authors regularly include a line reminding readers that they do not own the canonical text, and instead give credit to whoever does hold legal ownership over the canon (in this case, J.K. Rowling).[63]

As Jennifer Spence notes in "Labours of Love: Affect, Fan Labour, and the Monetization of Fandom," "fandom operates on a gift economy." Fic authors regularly write stories in 'exchanges' with other members of the fandom. Fan communities on Tumblr and Livejournal also regularly create threads or posts with fic prompts in a kind of collective brainstorming. Fic authors are fastidious about citing the prompt and prompt creator when they post the fic they developed off of that prompt. In fandom, it is this recognition that matters, not monetary compensation.[64]

Although fic writers are quick to assert their place outside of the capitalist system and canon-producing corporations find it easiest to control a fandom that engages in traditional, male-coded ways (e.g. encyclopedias of canon content), as fandoms become more visible, corporations are starting to recognize how to convert these marginalized groups into profit. For example, even minor memorabilia has great market value, due to the "emotional landscape fans construct around them." De Kosnik also notes a tension between fans' self-perception of their engagement and corporations' use of it. That is, as "fans generally conceive of their activities as "resistive" to consumerism, they refuse to consider that their works might constitute either promotional materials or ancillary products." But what is a *Potter* fic, at least in the eyes of a corporation that knows a fic writer isn't receiving income from it, if not an advertisement for the series, if not a way of imbuing the series with even greater worth? And to be very clear: these

unpaid marketing agents are not a collection of impossibly neutral or identity-less humans, but are primarily women, whose labor in the 'real world' is also systematically devalued.

De Kosnik further argues that "fans' perception that what they do is explicitly anticommercial prevents them from considering what they do as warranting pay," and that, moreover, due to fandom's categorization as "deviant," it is "unlikely to organize and issue economic demands," instead focusing on "the right to exist and operate without interference."[65] However, such an analysis privileges the capitalist system and assumes that fanwork creators would *want* the products of their labor to be part of it, if it were an option.[66] Regardless of individual fans' feelings on corporations' deriving benefits from their fanworks, though, surely it is easy to see how, if fans were paid for their work in some way, part of the community could be lost. That is, would there be as many collaborative fics? Would fic-inspired fics or fanart vanish? Would less popular relationships or tropes be pushed out of the fandom 'marketplace'? How would this affect basic access to stories about the very relationships and identities that make fanworks so vital to so many in the first place? Although de Kosnik is no doubt well intentioned and is attempting to look out for fanwork producers, it cannot be a stretch to say that the unique dynamics of fandom would irrevocably change if money were systemically introduced into the system. As AO3's About page states, "We are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending our work from commercial exploitation and legal challenge. We preserve our fannish economy, values, and creative expression by protecting and nurturing our fellow fans, our work, our commentary, our history, and our identity." Drew Emanuel Berkowitz, in "Framing the Future of Fanfiction: How *The New York Times'* Portrayal of a Youth Media Subculture Influences Beliefs about Media Literacy Education," deplores the way the *Times* "generally

presented fanfiction as a financial opportunity for the corporations that own the intellectual

properties copied by fanfiction," as

> This "co-opted/encouraged by industry" frame presents a view of fanfiction's future as a marketing tool, rather than a fan-driven culture. The frame is frequently associated with the "self-branding" purpose frame; teenagers who desire to become part of their favored franchise show their solidarity with the product and fan subculture in ways which are extremely beneficial for intellectual property holders.[67]

Of course, fic *is* beneficial for intellectual property holders in that it increases the value of the

brand, via the increased emotional value it acquires through fic. However, the co-optation does

indeed ignore the ways fan content creators in fact shun the narratives encouraged by industry.

Still, labor is being done, and convincing people that their labor is not *labor* (by belittling

and marginalizing the work produced) is an enormous coup for capitalism. Again, this is

complicated by the fact that fic writers are not simply producing works parallel to the series.

Instead, they are producing counter-narratives, narratives that explore issues of identity that are

often deeply personal to the writers. As such, while canon-producing corporations—in this case,

the *Potter* franchise—may not be willing to explicitly feature a queer relationship, they are not

going to turn down a way to benefit from the expression of fanwork producers' passion. In an

article about why women write and consume slash fic, Miranda Popkey posits,

> when a woman, in a field dominated by other women, deliberately queers the straightest, most traditionally masculine figures—Captain America; Captain Kirk; Green Bay Packers' quarterback Aaron Rodgers; even Sherlock Holmes—there's an added, electric frisson. Women—straight or queer or not so easily defined by either term—have not yet succeeded in seizing the means of production; they are, however, definitely, literally, fucking with its products.[68]

Harry Potter—the Chosen One, the hero of the new millennium, the Millennial hero—could

certainly be added to Popkey's list.

In Jenkins's 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, he writes, "Fandom, after all, is born of a

balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be

no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it."[69] Furthermore, in a 2015 article, "Science Explains... Why Being a Fan Is Good for You," Booth remarks, "Fans want to make the things they love that much better, so they find something that they don't agree with — a problematic representation or a social issue that could be highlighted — they talk about it, work with it, try to explain or understand… This is how significant social change happens." *Harry Potter* fans love *Harry Potter*. They love *Potter* so much they have put incredible amounts of time and effort into creating communities that "gives so many of us access to characters we love, cherish, admire, and look up to being like us, feeling like us, loving people like us."[70]

In short, the content-producing segments of the *Potter* fandom are so radical not solely because of the specific identities and relationships included in fic or fanart, but—in combination with this content—their mere existence. When this content is belittled as the creation of deviant young women—when cultural commentators and copyright holders speak of the products of fandom in a derogatory fashion—this minimizes the powerful act of women embracing sexuality in a way they are not generally allowed to do. And when these cultural commentators dismiss the possibilities of online engagement and are scornful of fan-created content, it is a dismissal of the cultural politics work being done by fandom—of the very real, purposefully transgressive narratives individuals create in defiance of typical cultural stories. To dismiss fandom is to dismiss a critical element of youth culture, and to dismiss the cultural politics of fandom in favor of traditional civic and political engagement by fandoms is to ignore the more radical positions being explored online.

The *Harry Potter* series infamously ends with the line, "All was well."[71] The fandom challenges the simplicity of this happy ending, especially when it is an ending that too often—

and certainly in the series itself—is not available for people of color, for queer individuals, for young women. The fandom would assert that all is *not* well—but they are also committed to making it better, one gay Harry and one black Hermione at a time.

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