WITH/IN LIMITS: PLAY AS PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL VERNACULAR

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

For Jamie: It looked impossible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

WITH/IN LIMITS: PLAY AS PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL VERNACULAR

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Participatory cultures were among the first groups to form communities online. Since 2004, however, the interpenetration of "social" media with "everyday life" has transformed the way fans and others use and inhabit digital spaces. Taking SuperWhoLock fandom on Tumblr as a test case and textual archive, this project demonstrates how fans' manipulation of digital accordances has in turn transformed the social media landscape: from the creation of "user-generated content" that keeps digital audiences engaged, to the integration of entextualized media fragments into everyday communicative practice. Working with a set of texts selected from SuperWhoLock fandom (c. 2012-2015), I identify key "protocols" developed within participatory cultures that continue to structure the sociolinguistics of the vernacular web. I examine how fans' tactics for foregrounding, representing, and managing affect in digitally mediated

relationships rely on an underlying ethos of play "within constraints"[1] that translates to

everyday vernacular usages of digital technologies. Finally, I show that the prolific

textual generativity of fans' "play/work" functions as the unpaid and discursively elided

labor on which social media's continued profitability depends.

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[1] For this terminology I am indebted to Jim Berryman, former Assistant Director of the Tennessee Valley Art Association, who in conversation provided me with not one but two complementary definitions of *art* that informed my thinking over the course of this project: "Art is play within constraints" and "art is making what you want out of what you have."

CHAPTER ONE

<u>Introduction: Balls Against the Walls: Mapping the Room</u>

Paul Booth, in his introduction to *Playing Fans: Negotiating Media and Fandom in the Digital Age*, notes that "Play only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (2015: 15). This project examines some of the textual practices by which members of one specific speech community (SuperWhoLock fandom) in one relatively limited context (the social media platform Tumblr) *play* with media texts: most notably through parody, and partly because it is in the nature of parody to reveal precisely those rules it chooses to flout.

To use an analogy: If we threw a rubber ball in a room with invisible walls, we could infer the existence of those walls by watching the rebound of the ball. If we threw the ball enough times, we could begin to guess the shape of the room and the location of the walls by the pattern of the ball's altering trajectory/ies as it arced around the room.

This project, then, is a map, or a three-dimensional cartography, that traces the patterns etched by fans' engagements in a room with invisible walls. The room is constituted by our political and economic conditions: by a global neoliberalism that profits not only from explicit labor and from the expropriation (Harvey 2006) of raw materials but, as we shall see, from the activities we practice during our "leisure" hours. The map is a survey of textual production and human interaction in a delimited context:

a tiny cross-section of digitally mediated life as it is currently lived. The aim is to contribute some details to our existing understanding of the room we — at this moment in history, at this juncture of space and time — are in.

<div align="center">**<u>The Project</u>**</div>

This project examines a collection of public posts shared on the social media platform Tumblr within the fan community known as SuperWhoLock during the years 2013-2016. These posts include written communications, typically in English, as well as visual media in the form of both still and moving images. These images are primarily sourced from the media texts of the three media "fandoms" that together make up SuperWhoLock: *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock*.

Supernatural

Supernatural is a long-running American television program, hosted first on the broadcast network WB and then, following a UPN/WB merger in September 2006, on the CW. The series details the adventures of the Winchester brothers, Sam and Dean (Jared Padelecki and Jensen Ackles) as they "hunt" various supernatural threats and participate in the long battle of (mostly) good against (complicated) evil. As of October 2019, the series is in its 15th (and expected final) season. *Supernatural*'s producers broke new ground early in the series's run by choosing to incorporate fandom — with all its eccentricities and occasional brilliances — into the show's canon. Novels based on Sam and Dean's eternal crusade function as a recurring plot device within the series

text, and periodically the brothers find themselves having to attend fan conventions based around their own work.

Supernatural's actors and producers, also, have consistently taken an interactive approach to their relations with fans, opting to speak directly to and with fans and, at times, demonstrating an awareness of fan culture and fan texts that until recently was relatively absent in the culture industry. Misha Collins, who plays the Winchesters' angelic ally Castiel, maintains a particularly dynamic and engaged persona, both online and on the convention circuit; in addition to corresponding directly with fans, he has turned his cult-celebrity status into a vehicle for charitable action, most notably through the formation of the Random Acts non-profit and the annual team-based scavenger hunt GISHWHES.[2]

Doctor Who

Although the BBC television series *Doctor Who* lapsed production for more than a decade, the series was never officially cancelled. This makes *Doctor Who*, which first aired in 1963, one of the longest-lived serials in television history. It also means that *Doctor Who* fandom, though slower to attract scholarly notice, actually predates the (perhaps more culturally recognizable) *Star Trek* fandom by some four years.

Doctor Who is a distinctively British program, and despite a very occasional slyly adult wink at sex is aimed largely at families, with fans now ranging from grandparents down through very small children. From its inception in the 1960s the program was conceived partly as an effort to get children interested in, among other

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[2] Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen; www.gishwhes.org

topics, science and history, and all iterations of the Doctor (now in the character's 13th and first female iteration, played by Jodie Whitaker) have emphasized the allure of all kinds of inquiry.

The show's longevity has offered the opportunity for people who grew up as fans of the early seasons to become producers in its more recent incarnation ("New Who" or "Nu Who," following the 2005 return to television via the BBC). Most famously, David Tennant, who found early-career success playing the Tenth Doctor, submitted a piece of *Doctor Who* fan fiction for a writing assignment when he was a child in primary school. This humanizing anecdote has endeared Tennant to his broad base of *Doctor Who* fans, cementing the certainty that Tennant — now a noted heavyweight on the British stage and a regular presence on the small screen — is at heart "one of us"; the affably-uncool nerd-next-door persona has become an anchor for his personal brand.

Sherlock

The *Sherlock* series, unlike either *Doctor Who* or *Supernatural*, is not presented as a work of speculative fiction, although the subscript/superscript captioning that sometimes accompanies a cut to Sherlock's own point of view might arguably be construed as venturing toward surrealist territory and although each episode's plot twists, much like the intricacies of the Arthur Conan Doyle stories that inspired the series, often defy credulity and strain viewers' suspension of disbelief. The series does, however, share with *Doctor Who* a home on the BBC; and *Sherlock* was helmed, for the entirety of its seven-year run, by the writing/production team of Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, both of whom had already worked on *Doctor Who*, where Moffat was the series

"showrunner" from 2010-2017, overlapping almost completely with *Sherlock*'s production run. The Moffat/Gatiss team, but Steven Moffat particularly, has been the target of some of the most focused criticism articulated with SuperWhoLock fandom, much of which challenges received notions regarding the uncritical textual receptivity of media fans and fan cultures.

Sherlock wrapped in 2017 with a total of 14 episodes, so its text is now "complete" in a way not shared by *Doctor Who* and *Supernatural*. Throughout the posting period we will be examining, however, the prevailing fandom attitude was one of anticipation, as *Sherlock* had quickly become a by-word for its long lapses between episodes as well as seasons; four seasons total were spaced over the seven years 2010-2017, so that the length of the familiar inter-season "hiatus" was consistently longer than viewers habituated by media industry conventions would be trained to expect. The enduring frustration, always about to break into excitement, of *Sherlock* fans anticipating the release of new episodes early constituted what would become a long-running joke within SuperWhoLock fandom.

Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging platform reliant on user-generated content. One of the distinguishing features of the platform is its "reblog" feature. The "reblog" function is similar to Twitter's "retweet" option; once a Tumblr user has published a post,, subsequent users can reblog it, with or without their own additions or commentary. Users can also, as in both Facebook and Twitter, "like" a post, but it is the flexibility of Tumblr's reblog feature, whose affordances allow for the addition of commentary as text

or as in-line media (usually GIFs), which fosters an array of expanding texts through a process of accretion as the post goes through multiple reblogs. Each time a user reblogs the post, any subsequent user who sees the post on their blog can also reblog it for their followers; reblogging thus potentiates a river delta of textual transmission.

Beyond the exponentially expanding character of textual transmission, reblogging also creates "notes" on a post. "Notes" include replies (only available when viewing the post via the original source), likes, and reblogs. A relatively quiet post may have a few thousand notes; very popular posts will approach seven figures. Tumblr tags, whose communicative implications we will address in Chapter Two, are interactionally significant but do not generate notes.

Like most digital habitats of participatory cultures, Tumblr is not used exclusively as a fandom space; there are, for instance, a number of food blogs, fashion blogs, social justice blogs, and travel blogs; the platform was famous for its "porn blogs" until parent company Yahoo!, under pressure, instituted new guidelines for "sensitive content" blogs at the turn of the 2018/2019 year. Under Yahoo!'s management (Yahoo! purchased the previously independent company from founder David Karp in 2013 at a reported cost in excess of $1 billion U.S.), the platform substantially shifted its attitude toward users; resentment toward Yahoo's approach may partly explain Tumblr's relatively rapid depreciation, as Yahoo's owner Verizon sold Tumblr to Automattic (owner of the popular web design and blogging platform WordPress) for "less than $3 million" (Alexander 2019).

In the years 2013-2016, however, Tumblr was an exceptionally active site of activity for participatory culture, and SuperWhoLock took center stage for much of that period, setting the tone and developing many of the fandom posting practices that helped to make the site distinctive. Importantly, as well, Tumblr's relatively unbounded interior "space" (unlike LiveJournal or Facebook, Tumblr is not differentiated into "groups," "comms," or "friends-lists") initiated a digital "first": an online platform that was shared by producers and fans, without being owned by either: *Doctor Who*, for example, maintains its own official Tumblr and frequently reblogs fan art or "selfie" posts from fans' convention experiences, often with commentary from their Tumblr team, and *Supernatural* actor Misha Collins has made a practice of interacting with his followers. Both these examples mark a shift in producer/fan relations in the transition from mass to digital media cultures.

<u>Methodology</u>

Data collection for this project lasted approximately two years, 2014-2016. In addition, the archive function on Tumblr meant that I could access the post history of active accounts, which for certain blogs proved an effective means of retracing a history of SuperWhoLock fandom's textual productivity. For the archive search, I selected blogs that were particularly active and included a wide range of content during the period of initial data collection, and perused the archives of the following blogs as far back as mid-2012:

deductingthroughtimeinanimpala

green-eyed-hunter-in-my-tardis

superwholockk

superwhoavengelockedroman

gallifreyshawkeye

impossible-leaf

In all, the initial survey reviewed an estimated 150,000 - 200,000 posts (this number includes posts that reappeared multiple times due to their circulation through Tumblr's reblog function). I accessed and "read" these posts over a course of approximately two years (mid-2014 through mid-2016).

During research collection, part of each day (anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours) was devoted to scrolling through Tumblr's continuously renewing dashboard, on which I had "followed" multiple accounts. The technical success of this avenue of research collection was variable, with some days or hours revealing post threads that not only provided a rich trove of textual material but suggested further questions for investigation, while at other times SuperWhoLock blogging appeared sluggish, or technical issues caused by lack of digital infrastructure made it difficult to load Tumblr's image-heavy dashboard effectively.

The technique, however frustrating, proved invaluable in developing a sense of how texts are dialogically produced in response to ambient themes in fandom discourse, and often collaboratively over multiple "speech" turns; the structure of Tumblr's reblog function also meant that any act of response was also an act of transmission and even replication of the existing post/text. Though I have attempted to provide visual evidence

for this process in screen shots throughout these chapters, I cannot emphasize enough the disjuncture between an archival reading of such participatory texts after the fact (no matter how perfectly preserved) and the experience of reading them as they emerged and developed.

This "prong" of my research process also helped to contextualize fandom content within the wider range of discursive practices in which SuperWhoLock fans (united to some extent in common interest, but by no means a monolithic group) were engaged. Many of the posts that scrolled across my dash in this data collection period were not in fact related to SuperWhoLock fandom at all; rather, they were necessarily included in the textual survey because posts on one's own dashboard, or in any user's blog archive, are sorted by (reverse) chronological order by default, and the inconsistency with which Tumblr users employ the tagging feature for its intended purposes of categorization and classification meant that I could not rely on searching individual blogs using tags related to fandom content. Although this interpolation of seemingly extraneous data posed a frustration during the collection process, it was ultimately fruitful in the sense that it resulted in a much broader view of actual Tumblr blogging practices, and a much more contextualized reading of SuperWhoLock posts, than could have resulted from a simple search algorithm.

Throughout the (approximate) two-year data collection period, I made it a practice to "bookmark" posts that seemed especially revealing or on whose texts I saw grounds for further investigation. I added these to the posts saved from the archive

search and created a digital "folder" comprised of screen shots and page PDFs (roughly 200 files in all) from which I worked throughout the drafting process.

The difficulties posed for researchers examining digital texts within a relevant social context of production and reception have already been documented (Pearson 2012). Tumblr presents a range of methodological and analytical challenges even above and beyond those typically pertaining to research on digital cultures. Paul Booth opens the Tumblr chapter of *Digital Fandom 2.0* by explaining some of these challenges: "Tumblr crowds everyone together, flattening participation into Perez-Reverte's crowded bar of fandom" (2017: 221); "It is impossible to talk about Tumblr's influence on fandom because *every Tumblr blog is a cacophony of voices;* every reblog is a vocal reminder of key themes in the Tumblr conversation" (223-224). Booth attempts to grapple with the unwieldy enormity of Tumblr by taking it as a model for the intellectual generativity potentiated by an unstructured collision of many ideas at once: "Tumblr is a metaphor for what fan studies can be--an undisciplined discipline, a chaotic system" (225).

Perhaps most significantly, the structure of Tumblr demands that scholars reconsider their conceptualization of online communities. In 2010-2011, when I was conducting digital ethnography for my MA thesis on *Star Wars* fan fiction writers, the blogging and social networking platform LiveJournal was a primary hub for participatory cultures online. On LiveJournal, readers could and did respond to posts on individual users' blogs, resulting in extended exchanges via comment threads. Also, however, LiveJournal supported the creation of members-only groups, called "LJ

comms" (short for "communities"), organized by theme and type of content. There were comms specific to individual fandoms; there were comms designated for cross-posting and collecting fan fiction and fan art from individual blogs; there were comms devoted to discussion of media texts and narratives (called "meta").

"Comms" were a structuring affordance in at least two ways. First, they divided up the platform's virtual "space": each comm functioned conceptually as a *place* users could visit. LJ's interior space allowed for, and encouraged, a kind of technical compartmentalization -- it was possible to "leave" one comm and "visit" another, or a friend's blog, within a single session on the platform.

Second, comms offered a ready key to community belonging. Comms differed widely in the degree to which they were moderated and the strictness with which their "rules" were enforced, but all comms had at least one "maintainer," and most made at least a cursory effort to establish guidelines for posting relevance and for social-interactional behaviors. As with membership in Facebook's similar "Groups" function, joining a comm meant agreeing to abide by the community's established rules (at least while posting to the comm), and each user's profile included a "Member of …" listing of comms. While not all *Star Wars* fans (to continue the above example) belonged to all *Star Wars*-centric LJ comms, active participants in *Star Wars* fandom commonly belonged to at least a handful. Within the enormous diversity of digital space, membership in comms functioned as an easy proxy for establishing community belonging.

The Tumblr platform offers no comparable affordances for compartmentalizing its interior space; by comparison with LiveJournal, "the notion of 'community' is uncertain on Tumblr. Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter note that 'the concept of belonging to a fandom on Tumblr is fuzzy. [...] You are part of the fandom when you think you are'" (Booth 2017: 235). Tumblr offers an experience that is at once more integrated and atomized. "Rather than forming social groups and interactive communities, users on Tumblr 'follow' other people's blogs" (Booth 2017: 235). The sense of community and commonality is established not through intimate connection to and knowledge of an individual blogger, but through identification with an affective experience represented in the post(s) a user creates and/or reblogs (Kanai 2017a; 2017b; 2019a). Similarly, one's Tumblr identity is comprised not of discrete disclosures of personal data, but rather emerges as the synthesis of an assemblage created by the sum of posts the user has created and reblogged. From the point of view of the reader/viewer scrolling through a particular Tumblr page, there is no structural difference between a new post and a reblog — an occurrence whose implications we will explore in more detail in Chapter Three. Meanwhile, the absence of any analogue for "comms" that might serve to compartmentalize Tumblr's interior space means that users do not "visit" fandom areas of the platform; instead, all content posted to all the blogs a user follows appear on his/her feed in a continuously refreshing stream (called Tumblr's "soft refresh"), organized by reverse chronology.

Probably many scholars of digital cultures can identify with Roberta Pearson's description of the methodological challenges involved in trying to establish a basis for

textual relevance, or for attempting to determine the scope and scale of an online community: "What had initially seemed reasonably self-contained (gauge fan response to a mere three episodes of a television show) turned unmanageable, as I frantically clicked from site to site, copying and pasting into a massive document that made increasingly little sense" (2012: 151).

The problem is not one that can be resolved simply through diligence; even intensive labor hours dedicated to textual analysis, applied to digital texts sorted through the most sophisticated software available, would not result in a satisfactory conclusion. As Pearson explains, "taking for granted the protocols of Internet fandom leads to a focus on the analysis of content, with all the attendant methodological pitfalls" (2012: 154). *Protocols*, in Pearson's formulation, are "all the factors that structure users' interactions with a specific medium, including technological requirements, hardware, software, and social/cultural norms" (154), and her model provides for "less attention to content and more attention to protocols" (155).

To develop my argument, I adapt Pearson's suggestion. I use the term *protocols* to refer specifically to the sociolinguistic norms that structure SuperWhoLock discourse. Following Rodney C. Jones (2009) and Antti Lindfors (2017), I consider the technical requirements Pearson refers to separately, under the label *affordances*. This separation of terms is important precisely because the technical and social pressures/incitements acting on "digital discourse" (Tannen 2013) are mutually influencing; employing distinct terms makes it possible to draw this mutuality into focus and examine the intersection of the social and the technological in digital space.

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Intellectual Antecedents: Establishing the "Rules"

If play "only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (Booth 2015: 15), then scholarly writing only happens with *reading* in mind, as a reaction to others' work. It is perhaps worth stating the obvious: In any intellectual endeavor, work or play, not all reaction is a reaction *against*. "Equal and opposite" is reaction in physics, not in the realm of ideas. "Standing on the shoulders of giants" is (one hopes) a more accurate formulation for the interplay of ideas that constitutes scholarly work.

We cannot, however, expect our readers to know of their own intuition the particular giants on whose shoulders we have been standing, or which direction they may have pointed us. It may be useful, therefore, to summarize briefly some of the intellectual antecedents that have led us to this point. In this section, I identify some of the key influences which helped to structure this project by shaping analysis and methodology. In so doing, I aim to situate an interdisciplinary project within the necessarily complex context of multiple intersecting fields of study.

The Emergence of Fan Studies & The Dawn of a Digital Era

The early 1990s saw the emergence of a relatively new way of viewing the relationship between mass media and audiences: fan studies. Fan studies emerged out of a diverse set of influences, but if we consider that habitus is a construct affecting academic pursuit quite as much as, say, grocery shopping, then we can think of the emergence of fan studies as an area of research that became, not inevitable, but possible,

at the intersection of several factors: The attention to non-official culture pushed by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham; the general deconstruction of the conceptual boundary between high and low culture that was a feature of postmodernism; and the maturation of a generation of scholars who had themselves grown up as media fans, and therefore were (perhaps) inclined to value the affect and activities of media fandom somewhat differently from their seniors. From its inception fan studies has blurred the lines between mass and popular culture even further in order to examine their areas of overlap, and the field has generally focused on fans' creative endeavors and constructions of community.

Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, sets the stage for a new and more political understanding of how a subset of media audiences — those who identified as fans — read and repurposed media texts. Jenkins draws on Michel de Certeau's model of "poaching" developed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (above), to propose a theorization of fans' engaged and sometimes critical consumption as "poaching" mass culture texts from their producers and reading from them alternative, sometimes transgressive, meanings, or using them as the materials from which to create their own transformative works. In this view, fandom's critical and creative elements — the participatory culture that makes and shares — already constitutes a political project, by their very existence. Participatory culture rejects the authority of media producers, and instead readily consumes and recycles the culture industry's goods for their own ends.

Textual Poachers also draws on other sources, inheriting not just from the "poaching" analogy proposed by Michel de Certeau (1984) but from John Fiske as well as Janice Radway, Stuart Hall, and Ien Ang (Jenkins 1992b), and Jenkins' inaugural work ushers in what Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington and Cornel Sandvoss have called the "first wave" or "fandom is beautiful" era of fan studies (Gray, Harrington, & Sandvoss 2007). The work done in this general framework tends toward a celebratory tone — "yes, good job, fans! You are sticking it to the man!" — perhaps as a reaction against condemnation of fans' taste in mainstream culture. That condemnation was already apparent to Ien Ang when she conducted her study of *Dallas* viewers as fans who undisguisedly enjoy the consumption of mass culture texts. So early fan studies scholars were understandably concerned to justify both the existence of fandom and their interest in it, often by pointing to political possibilities for resistance. *Textual Poachers* places fans in the position of heroic (or possibly mock-heroic) outlaws, poaching on the territory of a capitalist system in order to derive the venison for their narrative-making stew. Some work in this vein has also advanced a feminist approach; for example, Constance Penley's 1997 *NASA/Trek* draws on the practices of *Star Trek* fan culture to describe strategies for better representing women in scientific fields and especially in the space program — presumably a successful strategy, as NASA invited Penley to give a lecture expounding her findings (Penley 2013).

One risk of the celebratory model of early fan studies is that it overtakes its own aspirations; in its framing of media fandom as a sort of scrappy cultural underdog whose textual practices of productive consumption merit attention because of their political

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potential, such work necessarily makes itself vulnerable to a comparison with historical developments. That is to say: scholarship in this model risks becoming obsolete, as its own predictions are fulfilled or prove themselves unviable; or it risks becoming caught in a conceptual loop that continually frames fandom as subordinate regardless of actual events. In this instance,

> a high culture whose authority had been contested for at least a century has, for all analytical intents and purposes, remained unaffected by any struggle for cultural dominance, not to mention any changes in the material conditions to which this struggle might be related. […] Curiously, then, a popular culture that interests critics because it hints at resistance expressed via a politics of taste remains interesting despite, or perhaps because of, its very lack of success in accomplishing its goal (Albanese 2010: 20).

Potential, perhaps, is more enticing than result.

Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington describe a "second wave" of scholarship on fans and fan culture(s) from, roughly, the late 1990s into the early 2000s (Gray, Harrington, and Sandvss 2007). One could chart the shifting currents simply by following the progress of Henry Jenkins' career over the past twenty years, as his work incorporates changes in both the object of study and the academic discourse around it (Jenkins 2006b). Gray, Harrington and Sandvoss describe this second wave as drawing on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, asserting that such work "highlight[s] the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and sub-cultures, as the choice

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of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structure through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital" (Gray, Harrington and Sandvoss 2007). In other words, the second wave provides a cautionary corrective to an earlier idealistic fervor. This reading of the timeline is open to alternative interpretations (above), but these interpretations need not be mutually exclusive; rather, the process of differentiation among scholars helps to produce precisely such shifts as these. Academic discourse — like parody, like play — relies on reacting *to* (not necessarily against) what has come before.

Perhaps one way of understanding the current state of fan studies and its relationship to mass culture and cultural critiques might be to chart out some of the political and intellectual stakes before us — not in the cultural mainstream, but in the academy, where justifying intellectual legitimacy and claiming turf mean departments formed or dissolved, new positions formed or old ones allowed to lapse: all the shuffling that takes place when reputations are to be made and funding is in short supply (Hills 2017).

In understanding the scholarly literature as tracing a trajectory from folkloristics, through a sharp turn toward critique of mass culture in the first half of the 20th century, into the formation of the Birmingham School and a renewed, politically engaged interest in the examination of mass media texts and textual consumers, I am indebted to Denise Albanese's contextualized analysis of the interrelations between scholarly impulses and influences within Cultural Studies that sets the stage for her own examination of *Extramural Shakespeare*. This is particularly true at points where the political project —

whether in fan studies directly or within the wider ambit in which fan studies scholarship

circulates — presupposes "that matters of taste still constitute the leading edge of

politics, a position that has as its corollary the assumption that popular culture is

genuinely a 'culture of the people'" (Albanese 2010: 21). Albanese's skepticism

regarding the construction of "[c]urrent progressive myths" in which "[r]ather than

celebrate the laboring masses directly, these myths (promulgated until recently by,

among other elements, cultural studies scholars) honor their habits of consumption,

particularly when it comes to mass culture" (2010: 16) also forms an important

connection for troubling the relation between media fandom and the "general" public

(also an abstraction of which we must be wary) in which, as Paul Booth notes, "chances

are that everyone is a fan of *something*" (Booth 2017: 24).

The first efforts in fan studies arose at the confluence of media studies and,

depending on scholarly orientation, literary studies or sociology. The influence of the

Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, on the one hand, and a post-structuralist

skepticism of received categories, on the other, is evident here. These studies typically

involved an ethnographic component, stronger or weaker according to the scholar's

training and the demands of the project, and they were first and foremost engaged in a

project of legitimization — for the scholars as well as the field of study; much of the

work on fan culture(s), even today, is carried about by academics who also identify as

fans.

Early works in fan studies were, in a very real sense, "coming out" texts. The scholars engaged in studying fan culture felt a need to justify their chosen object of study, and partly for this reason they made fairly large, but not necessarily disingenuous, political claims for the potential of fandom and fan studies, participating within a wider ambit of cultural studies work that sought to treated media texts as "coextensive with the tastes of subordinated or economically disempowered populations" such that "the study of mass-cultural representations constitutes a form of solidary with those populations" (Alabanese 2010: 16-17). Understandable and even in many cases genuine as the impulse may have been, the linkage of academic legitimacy to the quest for political potentialities has not always served fan studies well.

The respectability of fan studies has been slow to take hold (Hills 2017; Booth 2017), a fact that is reflected in the somewhat defensive postures adopted by many scholars and in the tendency to open publications with a justification not merely of the project, but of the field itself. Responsive both to ambient conditions (inside and outside the academy) and to the need to demonstrate the abstract but essential quality of "seriousness," then, around the turn of the millennium we see fan studies scholars launching their campaign on a different front. Work on fan cultures is important precisely because they are imbricated in existing social structures: rather than offering points of resistance, they reveal the inexorability of the machine.

This "pushback" still makes itself felt from time to time, and like its predecessor is not without value — and sometimes it is less about returning fans to the position of cultural dupes than it is about urging some caution against very large claims. Matt Hills'

work might be placed here; but it might also be placed in a more nuanced position that refuses to take sides; in *Fan Cultures*, he sets out his project as a mediation between, and avoidance of, what he calls "decisionist" narratives — those that attempt to determine a fixed position for fans within larger social structures (Hills 2002). And given that the late 1990s and early 2000s also saw Penley's *NASA/Trek* and some cautiously optimistic work by both Will Brooker and Elisabeth S. Bird, perhaps this intermediate period is better described as one of tentative moves forward, a bit more cautious than the early forays.

A central problem in fan studies, never satisfactorily resolved, has been the construction of its object: the academic homes of several fan studies scholars in departments of media and cultural studies, variously configured (for example: Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, Paul Booth, Abigail de Kosnik) would seem to suggest a focus on media texts, or perhaps on media fans in their role as audiences/consumers of those texts — two vastly different projects which nonetheless frequently become institutional bedfellows. Then again, the prevalence of work on fan fiction, fan art, and other creative and textually productive work in scholarship examining "participatory culture[s]" in Henry Jenkins's influential term indicates an enduring interest not in fandom as such, a focus on the audiences of media texts, but rather on fans' texts.

This latter tendency immediately raises the question of what it is about fans' texts that makes them particularly worthy of study, and the usual answer has been some version of "because they are written by fans." This answer is not quite the reductio ad absurdum I have presented; in the right hands, it is in fact the grounds for its own

penetrating line of inquiry. The complex interrelation between a body of texts and the community in which those texts are produced and circulated has long been a present concern in cultural and linguistic anthropology, and in related fields in which the collection and analysis of "texts," broadly understood, in relation to some construction of speech community, forms a central interest — notably folklore, for which the relation between people and textual tradition provides the name of the discipline itself.

Most scholars who undertake to study fan culture or fans' texts, however, are not trained or practicing folklorists; and although a number of central insights from anthropology have filtered into academic discourse by way of Straussian structuralism and then the upheavals of the poststructuralist debates, many of them cannot reasonably be said to be anthropologists, either. As a result the text/community question, always an open one in any case, sits somewhat uneasily within fan studies. One of the aims in structuring methodology for this project, therefore, was to take advantage of existing scholarship to work across disciplinary lines, allowing methods derived from work on vernacular cultures (rich in folklore and anthropology, fields in which varying constructions of online communities in what I call "digital vernacularity" are already being explored) to re-situate and reframe some of the persistent questions that have teased fan studies up to this point.

The most up-to-the-moment work on fan cultures suggests attempts to pry fan studies out of the political and disciplinary corners it has inhabited and to put it into engagement with other academic discourses. Thus Abigail Derecho has put participatory culture into conversation with Derrida's conceptualization of the archive and produced a

new theory of fan works that must radically alter the shape of the field and our understanding of what participatory culture may mean if it is taken seriously (Derecho 2006). Deborah Kaplan has reconsidered fan fiction as a practice of textual engagement focused on the intimate understanding of a particular character (Kaplan, 2006). Francesca Coppa has explored the ways in which fan fiction writing is more closely related to the traditions of the theatre than the expectations of print culture (Coppa 2006b). Henry Jenkins has turned his focus to examinations of the ways in which digitality and internet fora (re)structure fandom and participatory culture (Jenkins 2006a). Paul Booth has begun to examine the shift from textual to visual cultural production in digital communities (2015; 2017). And, of course, the shift toward interest in specifically digital communications and the affordances of particular platforms also opens opportunities for scholars to examine the hyperlinked intersections between public and private, civic and playful, subjects/selves and their digital performances, practices, and projections.

Clearly, fan studies and especially forays into participatory culture are not the only lens through which to study mass culture. But certain conditions which are especially in use within fandom(s) may give some insight into the digital fragmentation of mass culture into something we might begin to call *post*-mass culture.[3] The viewing and listening experience is not what it was in the CCCS heyday. Cable television and especially the introduction of DVR capabilities have changed the way we watch

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[3] For this term I am once again indebted to Denise Albanese, for her framing of the historicity of media cultures in their relation to material conditi

television. Even cars now frequently come equipped with the ability to search dozens (if not hundreds) of satellite radio channels.

Digital communications, too, change how we receive cultural texts and also how we use them, individually and within our various subcultures — whether we define those as fandoms or not. Scholarship on digital culture does exist — it is even plentiful[4] — but it has a hard time keeping up with the uses of technology. It is hard to theorize adequately about a situation that is changing even as the monograph goes to print, and it isn't easy to reflect thoughtfully on experiences in which we are still engaged. Academic work on digital culture(s), whether it focuses on fandom or not, may require a certain re-positioning and re-evaluation: from hindsight and a distance analysis to a "critically close"[5] engagement with culture as it happens.

Playing Together: Participatory Culture(s)

Media fandom is a multibillion dollar annual industry. Fans' eagerness to consume new texts enables an enormous and encompassing global culture industry. And many of the practices of participatory cultures have enjoyed over the past twenty years a gradual shift toward the cultural mainstream — consider, for example, the ubiquity of *Star Wars* references in popular culture: "I am your father"; "I find your lack of [x]

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[4] Of particular interest for this study are two volumes edited by Trevor Blank: *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (2009) and *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* (2012).
[5] I take this term from Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson's "twin ethnography," *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play* (2011).

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disturbing"; and so on. Former Vice President Dick Cheney even once said, memorably, that we needed to "use the Dark Side" more in our operations.[6]

The past three decades have seen a general "mainstreaming" of media fandom (Booth 2015), pushing media fans from the fringes they occupied when *Textual Poachers* was first published in 1992 and toward a position of acceptability that is just now beginning to approach that long enjoyed by avid sports enthusiasts. If one takes Booth's assertion that "everyone is a fan of something" (2017: 24) seriously, then that assertion must also be understood in light of Albanese's contention that

> an increasingly pluralistic and market-based model of cultural goods has
> effectively put paid to the long struggle between high and low, elite and
> popular, that consumed twentieth-century debates about culture, class,
> and the production of public consciousness (2010: 18).

More, that pluralism — as well as constructions of class and the very notion of public consciousness — merits reconsideration in the context of digital back-and-forth across social registers and interactional contexts.

At the same time, I would not suggest that the concept of media fandom, or its related terms "fanboy" and "fangirl," have lost all utility. Unlike most sports fan groups, individual areas of fan activity still tend to be distinguished by discursive practices not broadly understood by, nor readily accessible to, members of the general public. The dramatic increase in the number of self-identified fans (Booth 2015) and media fandom's cultural influence makes it imperative to understand the discursive

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[6] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/darkside/etc/script.html

practices which, developing in these groups, later have the potential to appear elsewhere without cultural and generic context that renders them intelligible.

From the late 1990s onward, the affordances and constraints (Jones 2009) of digital platforms rapidly began to shape the interactions that took place in digital spaces. Thus Oren Soffer (2010) points toward the speed imperatives of (group) chats as a formative factor in the drift of (some types of) CMC (computer mediated communication) toward features previously associated with orality, conditioning an interactional context in which "reaction time is much more important than grammatical correctness or spelling and punctuation" (392). In the Tumblr context, by contrast, while certain exchanges may indeed privilege rapidity over technical accuracy, the more common scenario is that the "mistakes" characteristic of carelessness are deployed deliberately as stylistic markers of informality or affective excitation. The management of digital pragmatics through such manipulations of the platforms' affordances constitutes an important element not only in the development of digital communicative competence (Buccitelli 2012; Lindfors 2017) but — relatedly and indissolubly — in the structure and maintenance of social relationships which partake of digital interaction (Buccitelli 2012; Gilding and Henderson 2004; Jones 2009; Kanai 2017a; 2017a; Lindfors 2017).

Tumblr emerged as an early frontrunner among the digitally active who were less eager to "mainstream" their online lives than core Facebook users, and more multimedia hungry (or productive) than those of Twitter. From the beginning, then, Tumblr's user base shared a strong self-selecting overlap with technophile nerd culture. And Tumblr

— for a while, at least — showed itself more amenable to third-party adaptations to suit user preferences than the site's major competitors. Popular (desktop) browser extensions like Tumblr Savior (which filtered content), Missing E (which offered a substantially enhanced set of technical capabilities), and x-kit (similar in some ways to Missing E, but far behind the latter in breadth of usage as long as Missing E remained functional). Such extensions, and the highly customizable sets of tools they offered, made Tumblr a far more personalized — and thus, for some users, more satisfying — experience than either Twitter or Facebook.

Social media ushered in not only the development of new, digital, platform-specific communicative norms, but also a new area of cultural content production and free/unpaid (digital) labor for commercial exploitation. The exploitation of user-generated content has subsequently become a normative business practice not only for the commercially-owned digital platforms themselves (which use the attraction of user-generated content to sustain and increase the number of users on their platforms as well as the total amount of time each individual user spends on that platform, such that users' attention becomes the commodity which platforms like Facebook or Tumblr sell to advertisers, who through the use of increasingly finely graded tools for data tracking are able to place their ads before users specifically chosen for their likely responsiveness), but for the producers and copyright-owners of media texts.

Perhaps equally transformational has been the advent and rapid spread of smartphone usage. From the release of the first Apple iPhone in mid-2007, smartphones made a swift transition from high-end tech commodity to practical necessity for day-to-

day functions, as not only social contacts but business expectations began to operate on the assumption of 24/7 smartphone (Internet-enabled) access (and accessibility).

The explosion of "labor" into times and spaces previously understood as "private" renders Michel de Certeau's 1984 claim that "There is no longer an elsewhere" (1984: 40) almost quaint by comparison. Indeed, the colonization of non-working hours by digital media (for attention and user-generated content) and by more traditional representatives of work/paid employment (the expectation of answering work calls/texts/emails outside-fandom the traditional "business hours" of Monday-Friday, 9-5) represents an inverse of de Certeau's furtive, fugitive "usages" that have no *propre* — capital/power/"The Man" is stealing back time, re-appropriating and making new gains.

Thus the main attraction of social media — the ability to find anyone, anywhere, at any time — is also its greatest threat, hiding in plain sight.

Paul Booth: Philosophy of Playfulness

Acknowledging the political and analytical challenges posted by the semi-authorized position of media fandom, whereby "playing fandom isn't just what we do with our everyday media; it's also what our media do with us" (2015: 1), and by the binary argument that persists at the heart of the academic discussion (2015: 3-5), Booth suggests that

> A productive examination of the relationship between media fans and
>
> media industries sees the generative potential in the hybridized
>
> interaction between the two, not as sites of resistance or sites of

complicity but rather as enduring moments of temporal connectivity,

because both the resistant paradigm and the neoliberal paradigm

ultimately concretize the same distinction: fandom exists as separate from

(and therefore, able to be valued in relation to) the industry. [...] An

examination of the play between pluralism and neoliberalism reveals the

moments of interface between them (2015: 12).

From this perspective, the point is not that media fan culture failed to spawn a

revolution. Individual fans and fan communities could and did practice resistant readings

and subversive texts, writing prolifically in what Abigail Derecho has called "the

literature of the subordinate" (2006), even as media fan culture as a whole obviously

provided the financial incentive for the mass culture industry to produce ever more

distracting and pacifying spectacles for fans' consumption. Both the avid consumption

and the complicit resistance are culturally and historically significant, and they have

both received, appropriately, a fair amount of scholarly attention within the relatively

limited field that constitutes fan studies, in particular as this term differs from its cousin,

audience studies. But although broadcast media still exist, and even though cable and

satellite channels (for both television and radio) remain operational, on my reading the

core conditions of "mass culture" — especially a limited set of widely available cultural

texts to which virtually all members of a linguistically defined culture were exposed, at

about the same time, and in pretty much the same way — have now been largely

replaced. Though an online "meme" that "goes viral" stands a reasonable chance of

crossing the consciousness of a wide swath of the total population roughly equivalent to

that once reached as the audience of a popular television program, the timeline for exposure will vary by weeks, if not by months, from one "Netizen" to another, and the conditions under which we now encounter memes are far more variable — thanks not just to home and office computers but to the ubiquity of Internet access via smartphones.

Where mass culture was encompassing, digital culture is characteristically diffuse. At the level of analysis, in the examination of specific texts and practices, scholars have been demonstrating an awareness of this shift for at least the past decade. Like a nervous tic, however, many members of the first and second generations of fan scholars — Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, Cornell Sandvoss, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, Paul Booth, and many more — continue to open and close their work with nods to the ethos if not the text of Stuart Hall's question. Caught in the gravity of a central discourse whose terms were offered before Internet access was a widespread, daily reality, such scholarship has produced, and indeed continues to produce, valuable insights — but its construction of the community/text relation struggles to break orbit from "the fetish popular culture has become" (Albanese 2010: 33).

Furthermore, and perhaps more crucially, vernacularity is not revolution. Even in the most eulogistic reading (say, the opening of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*), the "cheerful, annihilating" quality of "the people's laughter" (Bakhtin 1984; 1986) is not the precursor to, nor the catalyst for, open revolt or systemic change. Indeed "the people" themselves — not wholly unlike some of the clergy, who were known to dabble in holy parody (Bakhtin 1984) — fundamentally view their own habits, their mockery

and subversion and occasional disruption, as temporary, local, and limited. Lacking a "propre," they exercise "tactics" (de Certeau 1984).

At the same time, however, we have to remain alert to the question of who "they" are — and allow that question to remain open, in play, rather than seeking the comfort of a neat resolution. After all, "the people" has only ever illusorily existed as a self-evident and unproblematic category. And while interrogations of that category — the folk/the people/the ethnographic Other — have taken a leading role in discussions within folkloristics and anthropology over the past twenty-five years, the political urgency of the cultural studies project has tended to inhibit a similar deconstruction. The result is often, implicitly, a reification of "the popular" which "locates all value with 'the people' — and a strangely monolithic and uncomplex version of a working class at that" (Albanese 2010: 33). This historical and discursive baggage offers another reason for preferring the less-loaded term "digital vernacularity" (discussed in more detail below) to some other iteration, such as "the digital popular" or "the people's Web."

Refusing the already-given question(s) has the advantage of freeing us up to locate our analysis in the central undecidability of SuperWhoLock fandom, and of the political and social potential(s) of digital vernacularity. Embracing ambivalence, in turn, allows us to understand that two seemingly disparate theories of Tumblr culture — Paul Booth's "philosophy of playfulness" (2015; 2017) and Akane Kanai's "feelings rules" (2019) and "affective belonging" (2017) are in fact two faces of the same Janus: the most liberatory and anarchic, yet also the most minutely regulated and intractably

disciplinary, aspects of Tumblr as a dynamic digital space, within which SuperWhoLock fandom once played a central and centering role.

Playing Politics: The People Are not Your Mascots

Paul Booth centers his account of digital media fandom (2017) on what he describes as a "philosophy of playfulness." In Booth's terms, "the contemporary media scene is complex, and rapidly becoming dependent on a culture of ludism: Today's media field is fun, playful, and exuberant" (2017: 8). Inasmuch as media fandom has always been, for most of its participants, primarily a leisure activity with escapist overtones, participatory culture has always embraced ludic elements of play and festival, as well as more "serious" attempts at literary or artistic excellence that might fit the stylistic, if not the content, criteria demanded by "official" culture. It is therefore not new to treat the practices of participatory as "play" in this generalized sense of the term. Booth, however, foregrounds and then centers a more theoretically resilient definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (2015: 15-16).

This definition is particularly useful for describing and understanding the practices of play within participatory culture(s), because it proves especially apt for play with texts, which is always pre-eminently play with *language*, play *with* and play *within* a system (of signs). Play — as Booth explains — "happens only with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (2015: 15). *Play* in this sense is the source of slash fic, of *Sherlock* parodies, and in the outside world, of puns. *Play*, notably, is by its nature already linked to parody: it is a *reaction to* some existing set of constraints — which

may themselves, viewed and treated another way, become affordances. And it intersects with, loops back upon, a telling definition of *art*: "Art is play within constraints" (Berryman 2017).

If Henry Jenkins, in 1992, was right to hearken back to de Certeau's tactics and usages in describing fans' textual creativity as practices of "poaching," then surely digital technologies and especially the streamlined, heavily automated and therefore supremely user-friendly software interfaces concomitant with Web 2.0 have made the practices of textual "poaching" easier and more readily accessible than ever. I wish to propose an update and adjustment to Jenkins's metaphor. If media texts are the raw materials fans "poach," then media platforms — like Tumblr — are the digital forests and parks and manor estates (and disputed commonses) on which, as a custom operating without the benefit of legal protection, the "holders" mostly let small "trespasses" go with a wink.

We may regard these largely informal, but culturally significant and strongly rooted, practices as analogous to the "customary usages" E. P. Thompson has described in early modern England. Such tolerance is supported, in the digital era, by the ubiquity of "quotation culture" (Newman 2013), and especially of GIF-making. GIF-making and other forms of vernacular digital media uses rely heavily on the manipulation of what Rodney C. Jones has termed "technologies of entextualization" (Jones 2009). In proposing this term Jones develops, and trans lates to digital contexts, a concept from linguistic anthropology. Entextualization, defined by Richard Bauman as

the organization of a stretch of discourse into a text: bounded off to a

degree from its discursive surround (its co-text), internally cohesive (tied

together by various formal devices), and coherent (semantically

intelligible) (Bauman 2004: 4)

is central not only to online fan cultures, but to digital vernacularity across many other

areas of topical interest for which digital spaces serve as the transient camping grounds.

And there is always a potential for mutual influence between digital and participatory

culture; indeed the separation between them is often collapsed. If Booth is correct in

noting that "many creative fan practices rely on characteristics of the digital" (2017: 10),

it is equally true that the textual productivity and intertextual relationally characteristic

of participatory culture has served to shape our collective experience of the vernacular

web. The very prevalence of the practices makes them hard to police. And the corporate

producers and copyright holders of media texts have little incentive to "crack down" on

fans' activities. Few audiences are more avid consumers, or more dedicated

proselytizers, than those who willingly pour their time and efforts into the crafting of

additional texts for contribution to the ever-growing shared archive (Derecho 2006).

Understanding & Analogy: Digital Tenants & 21st Century Usages

I do not want to lean too heavily on argument by analogy. For one thing,

SuperWhoLock fandom on Tumblr in the 21st century is for obvious reasons a vastly

different animal from the agitations and customary perquisites of British commoners on

landed estates in the 1700s. For another, reasoning by analogy lends itself a little too

easily to simple exercises of comparison and contrast: "Look! See how these two things are alike! But wait! Over here, they are different!" At the same time, E. P. Thompson's richly contextualized description of power relations and manipulations between the elite and the masses, the gentry and the crowd — what Thompson calls the relation of "patricians and plebs" (Thompson 1993), organized in his telling by a "field of force" metaphor, with filings distributed throughout but concentrated at either pole — has light to shed on some of the theoretical difficulties that arise as we attempt to make sense of power relations that are always present, but often obscured — sometimes by the very performances of lip-service that serve as disguise.

It is important to keep in mind that fans (one tentatively assumes) are "there," on Tumblr, blogging about SuperWhoLock, mainly to have a good time; they are, by and large, interested in and attentive to the concerns of structural power relations and how these may be negotiated and maintained, legally and discursively, only insofar as these questions and their answers seem likely to have a more or less immediate impact on their own activities. In other words: the questions of resistance or complicity that have so pre-occupied fan studies scholars are only exceptionally a present concern for the fans engaging in practices that scholars read as resistant or complicit.

From the perspective of longstanding disciplinary concerns in Cultural Studies regarding the nature of "complicity" vs. "resistance" in the post-industrial mass-as-popular culture that emerged over the course of the 20th Century, it is especially important to recognize the casual disregard with which inhabitants of digital platforms treat the reality that they are both a given platform's content producers (user-generated

content earns a more detailed discussion in Chapter Two) and its product (a significant source of revenue for online platforms from Tumblr to LiveJournal to Facebook is the sale of advertising space, whose value is calculated based on the number of eyeballs the user-generated content hosted there reliably attracts). This economic recuperation of what I term digital play/work — that is, creative work that is produced in and through practices of play, but which nonetheless generates value for entities *other* than the producers and their immediate audience (elaborated in more detail in Chapter Four) — helps to frame and sustain the general attitude of "tolerance" media companies exhibit toward vernacular usages of media texts online. As a result, not only media copyright holders but also the owners and maintainers of the digital platforms in which fans congregate to share and circulate their texts have for the most part been, if not entirely absentee "landlords," then at least strategically blind — both to the casually ubiquitous practices of entextualization that freely ignore the whole concept of copyright law and to the tactical "workarounds" (with or without the assistance of third-party enhancements) Tumblr users employ to manipulate the platform's basic affordances to better suit their own communicative preferences. In the most recent years, some participants in media production (notably the *Supernatural* cast, and particularly Misha Collins) have made it a point to acknowledge the existence of online participatory cultures, especially within the Tumblr framework, and to make a sort of theatrical game of winking at their more outré practices.[7]

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[7] Participating to a degree in the notion of political theater and performance as described by Thompson (1993).

An important point in Thompson's examination of 18th-century understandings of "commons" rights and usages is that the maintenance of the social relations between "patricians" and "plebs," which served to assert or curtail such rights, of usage or passage or, on the other hand, of enclosure, was to a large degree a matter of performance, of political theater and counter-theater (1993) as much as, indeed at times more than, one of force, whether by troops in the name of the law or by "the crowd" in the name of their own rights and perquisites. One can see something of that same dynamic — a differential access to power in the legal and enforceable sense; a mutual attachment to the language and concept, if not always the substance, of a relationship structured by reciprocity; an investment in the forms that acknowledge or pay lip service to ideals of gratitude and loyalty — in the interaction between Steven Moffat and fans of *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, for instance.

When Steven Moffat offers up a sound-byte "blessing" fans with their "mad theories," he is performing a role by now well-established for producers of "cult" television series and cinema, expressing gratitude toward the core fan base whose avidity makes viable the continued production of "his" media text (and therefore his continued, lucrative employment) in the notoriously competitive and capricious world of ratings and audience markets. Meanwhile even avowedly political fan projects like the *whovianfeminism* and *stfu-moffat* Tumblr blogs habitually couch their articulations of critique in terms of their "love" for, and loyalty to, "the show" — understood somewhat nebulously as an entity which supersedes not only the intent of its authors/producers but even the explicit content of the finite media text as it has been actually produced and

aired to the viewing public. It is loyalty to the spirit of this Platonic ideal of "the show" that ostensibly drives much of fans' criticism and their demands for what they see as "improvement," usually in the form of casting decisions and narrative interventions more closely aligned with contemporary progressive politics, broadly understood.

Such performances are neither unidirectional nor reducible to a single meaning. Analyzing the political theater of elite/crowd relations in the British 18th century, Thompson explains:

> But there are few social phenomena which do not reveal a new significance when exposed to this dialectical examination. The ostentatious display, the powdered wigs and the dress of the great must be seen also — as they were intended to be seen — from below, in the auditorium of the theatre of class hegemony and control. Even 'liberality' and 'charity' may be seen as calculated acts of class appeasement in time of dearth and calculated extortions (under threat of riot) by the crowd: what is (from above) an "act of giving" is (from below) an "act of getting". So simple a category as "theft" may turn out to be [...] evidence of protracted attempts by villages to defend ancient common right usages, or by labourers to defend customary perquisites. And by following each of these clues to the point where they intersect, it becomes possible to reconstruct a customary popular culture, nurtured by experiences quite distinct from those of polite culture, conveyed by oral traditions (1993: 72).

The significance of theater, of staging relative positions, translates surprisingly well to the context of fan/producer relations.

By "performance," we need not mean "deception." As Thompson explains for the complex, continually negotiated tensions between "patricians" and "plebs":

Agrarian custom was never fact. It was ambience. It may best be understood with the aid of Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" — a lived environment comprised of practices, inherited expectations, rules which both determined limits to usages and disclosed possibilities, norms and sanctions both of law and neighborhood pressures. [...] Within this habitus all parties strove to maximize their own advantages (1993: 102).

Thompson's framing provides a lens through which we may make sense of the way that SuperWhoLock bloggers simultaneously participate in the "always reblog daddy" rule, by which Tumblr users before the platform's 2013 sale to Yahoo demonstrated their loyalty and deference toward Tumblr's creator and initial owner by habitually reblogging any of his posts that crossed their own dash, and hijacking the tagging system for the plainly unauthorized use of personalized, hyperlinked marginal commentary — to say nothing of the much more closely scrutinized and often discouraged practice of installing third-party browser extensions (and, as the use of handheld devices grew more common, third-party software apps) to manipulate and customize the Tumblr platform according to their own preferences. The key here is that there is no political decidability, no determinate relation of Tumblr user-inhabitants to the holders of the digital estate; relations between the owners of digital platforms and the

"users" who inhabit them and produce their value are not a status but a process: always under construction, always undermined and reinscribed, always in play.

Notably, too, the concept/construction of play with which we are working (Booth 2015) intersects here: The system, digital or agrarian, imposes elastic limits; in so doing, it also offers a resilient surface against which to push, rebound, gain lift. Thus whovianfeminism's maintainer couches her regular "feminist review" postings for each new episode of *Doctor Who* as part of her practice of being a fan: analogous also, in certain limited ways, to the animating ethos behind the oft-repeated (in the U.S. context) claim that "dissent is patriotic" (American Civil Liberties Union 2017).

At a profound level, we can see a continuity from the vernacular, unofficial culture of early modern England, to the urban inhabitants of rented dwellings in the corporatized, post-industrial capitalist context of the late 20th century (de Certeau 1984), to the diffuse, "individualized" (Booth 2017: 8), pervasive yet atomized conditions of Web 2.0 in these first two decades of the third millennium. And though we have attempted to draw some crude parallels between two widely divided conceptions of power, ownership, and authority (on the one hand) and dependence, loyalty, and permissiveness (on the other), the continuity in "art[s] of using" (de Certeau 1984) is essentially a continuity in vernacular perspectives, ways of understanding and inhabiting systems not designed for their benefit — practices of playing with, and within, inherited frameworks.

The power of digital "speech" is that, like other speech, it proves highly adaptable and responsive to the communicative intent of the speaker; thus some "speech

genres" (Bakhtin 1986) in digital spaces are highly formalized and partake of what we might call an "elevated" register, while others correspond to the informality of conversation among friends — exactly as a plenary address at an academic conference differs from chatting with a friend over coffee. What is remarkable about *digital* vernacularity is the degree to which the constraints of the medium have been integrated into linguistic play, such that the affordances of Tumblr as a digital platform become, like grammar and syntax, incorporated into the system of "rules" within which play occurs; and, as Booth reminds us, "Play only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (2015:15).

It is all too easy for us as researchers and analysts to read as inconsistency signs that are in fact the textual traces of personal and social complexity: SuperWhoLock fans do participate in many forms of textual play, especially in creative transcontextualizations (*Johnlock* "movie posters" based on the visual stylistics of the *New Moon* promotions; the collection of ironic SMS/image juxtapositions hosted on textsfromthetardis) and ironically staged self-parodies ("I Didn't Choose the Fandom Life"). But SuperWhoLock fans are also neoliberal subjects of a late-capitalist, globally encompassing regime operating through the diffuse, laterally circulating regulatory effects of governmentality. Though they may enjoy retreat to Tumblr as a space of leisure and of play as not-work, it is in the character of digital diffusion and the interpenetration of work and leisure space and time, via the digital devices at the tips of our digits that there is no clear boundary between the spatial and temporal configurations of work and the space-time of play.

There is not a "working" subject and a "fandom" subject; rather, there are varied and complexly negotiated instantiations of identity, performed self-reflexively on the spot in response to the interplay of individual intent (as conditioned by habitus and at times constrained in its exercise by the disciplining effects of power) and the demands of the interactional context. I use Akane Kanai's work on Tumblr as a space for the construction of digital identity and communal regulation of affect among young women to explore how SuperWhoLock fans negotiate social expectation and community formation through practices of self-parody, making themselves the butt of their own joke. SuperWhoLock fandom, taken as a composite of multiple texts, presents a picture of both communicative practice in immediate, playful action, and the recuperation of both self-presentation and aesthetic production into corporate value.

"You Keep Using that Word": Why *Orality* Isn't Quite Right

While the broad tendencies Soffer describes for digital interactions, especially those taking place within relatively small groups (Soffer 2010: 388) still remain largely accurate and relevant nearly a decade on, the term *orality* sits uneasily for use with "speech" norms that, as Soffer himself points out, are distinctly neither oral nor aural:

A major aspect of both residual-manuscript and secondary orality is the transformation of written texts into the vocal sphere. However, this conversion does not occur in digital orality. The texts of CMC and SMS are usually manifested *silently*, in spirit of modern print tradition. In a distinct way, digital orality affects only the writing itself (2010: 395).

Soffer's points with respect to the rapidity and informality of digital discourse, and its (usually) relatively limited audience as compared to the broadcast (and, later, cable or satellite) audiences of "secondary" orality (Soffer 2010: 396), are well-taken, and certainly these traits do more closely parallel the kind of language traditionally ascribed to spoken-word, face-to-face communication than the norms of formal writing and publishing. But to call such platforms — of immediacy and informality — "orality" because they appear more often in oral contexts than in written ones substitutes poetic metaphor for analytical precision. It is more accurate to refer to the characteristics of "silent orality" that Soffer ascribes to "digital oral features" (2010: 387) or "digital orality" (396) by the name digital vernacularity.

Digital vernacularity recognizes the significance of medium, and is flexible enough to also accommodate the notion of the digital as space. "Digital vernacularity" also shifts the descriptive term from the *means of delivery* (by mouth, which in the case of the digital communications Soffer describes can *only* be metaphorical) to the *interactional context* that informs participants' linguistic choices and fosters the development of specialized discursive norms shapes by the Tumblr platform's affordances in interaction with participants' preferences of content and selectivity of self-presentation.

I conceive of "the vernacular" here not only in its ethnographic meaning as referring to the non-elites of any society but also in its linguistic one, referring to the language of unofficial communication (traditionally, the term was used to distinguish the non-Latin language of "ordinary" people and familiar conversation; the basis for

differentiation is no longer Latin, but the distinction not only still applies, but perhaps becomes newly relevant in context of emergent digital dialectology).

Digital Vernacularity & Unauthorized Archives

The development of the digital vernacular marks a radical shift in the discursive locus of "everyday life" (de Certeau 1984) — no longer in physical but in digital space. Whereas Henry Jenkins in 1992 used Michel de Certeau's description of unauthorized but ubiquitous practices of "making-do" as a launching point from which to develop his own now-famous analogy of fans' practices as "textual poaching," I instead consider new meanings of "space" in the digital era, and compare the Tumblr platform not to the type of urban environment that attracted de Certeau's attention but to the older model of a manor estate with accompanying village.

I do not, however, follow Jenkins in reading media texts as "poached" from their copyright holders. Rather, I consider the entire digital to be an estate space with tenants and landowners. This analogy, while rough, provides us with a framework for understanding the unpaid labor of user-generated content, and the often uneasy, yet economically necessary, relations between the producers of media texts, the owners of digital platforms, and the media fans who inhabit digital spaces and provide their value via the creative productive of what, following Abigail Derecho (2006) I call "archontic" texts: texts that participate in a conceptual archive of all intertextually related works — and which, importantly, are never *subtractive* (i.e., "used up"), but always additive and accretionary. Such an understanding helps us to see beyond the questions of

"heterarchical" organization vis a vis "hyper-exploitation" (Brown 2014) or "digital alienation" (Dainow 2015) to understand the digital vernacular as process; in the rapid circulation, production, and reinvention of texts, digital culture is always-emergent.

E. P. Thompson's *Customs in Common* provides a useful lens for focusing the discussion at points when we have need to address the tensions and frictions at the boundaries between all of these groups and their sometimes-competing, always mutually-structuring, interests. Of particular importance is Thompson's treatment of *performances* of fealty and obligation, which map usefully onto the fans/producers/owners network of relations. As Thompson describes for "agrarian" culture and its customary usages and perquisites, on the one side, and the theater of "pomp and circumstance" on the other, fans and producers share a *habitus* that operates as the "more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) against whose framework each party may leverage the established rules of the "game" — at times — to their own advantage (Thompson 1993).

Poetics, Performance, & Pragmatics: Action & Meaning in Digital Space

If Richard Bauman's work served to define *performance* for a generation of folklorists, linguistic anthropologists, and ethnographic researchers, as the 20th century drew to its close the broader concept of *performativity* gained significant purchase in cultural theory as a way for scholars to talk about, and continue to interrogate, the complex and socially contingent sets of actions which serve to signal subject positions in

relation to culturally contingent yet commonly accepted metrics of identity: gender, class, religious affiliation, and so on.

Antti Lindfors describes this late-century scholarly interest, and charts the (sometimes) close relationship between performance and performativity, in pursuit of a technical vocabulary that will prove more adequate to describe instances of what he calls "communicative sign behavior" (Lindfors 2017: 171) that partake of "the principle of performativity" (171) — understood as "repetitive practices within historical, social, cultural, political, and other constraints" (170) — but that do not meet Bauman's criteria for a performance in the ethnographic sense of the word, a communicative mode in which the speech act (or other signifying action) is marked out for the evaluation and enjoyment of an audience, to whom the performer assumes responsibility for an effective and aesthetically pleasing display.

As Lindfors explains, the concept of *performative enactments* helps us to parse the necessarily disembodied, yet often highly staged, communicative actions presented in digital spaces:

> The significance of generating an intermediary, heuristic term of
> performative enactments is to leave open the resilient and culturally
> loaded questions regarding the level of intentionality, agency,
> responsibility, situational emergence and markedness, as well as aesthetic
> value associated with various deployments of performativity, which seem
> to function as primary qualifications of performances proper in the
> folkloristic tradition (Lindfors 2017: 171).

Although performance theory in linguistic anthropology already allows for "the variability of performance as a frame" (Bauman 1977: 11), Lindfors's conceptualization of "performative enactments" provides a technical vocabulary for considering the tightly codified, carefully staged actions taken by users in SuperWhoLock fandom, from "keyboard smash" typographical expressivity to the citational use of "reaction" GIFs. Notably, the interpretation of a given communicative act as a "performative enactment" is not mutually exclusive with its reading along other lines of analysis: for example, parody, affect management, the negotiation of social relationships. Rather, by contrast to a performance in the ethnographic sense, marked to some degree as notionally separate from its immediate interactional context, performative enactments often make use of the techniques of performance to signal meaning — especially pragmatic meaning — integrated within the interactional setting.

Per Lindfors, "the notion of enactment can be particularly useful in approaching communicative events in digital environments that inscribe (verbal) communication as durable, visual trace to be apprehended by interlocutors" (171) who do not share the interactional event as a single juncture of time and space inhabited by all parties, but on the contrary are in all probability physically distant from the other denizens of the digital space, and by virtue of the platform experience the interaction asynchronously, as an exchange of (written) texts. The effects of this asynchronicity on the formation of interactional texts has been labeled *serialization* (Buccitelli 2012). In addition, *enactments* helps to frame the use of "communicative sign behavior" that is encoded to convey not narration, nor even a "speech turn" as the concept has been understood in

traditional linguistics, but the pragmatic data that is integral to face-to-face interactions and yet often not readily available in digital (primarily written) communication.

In Lindfors's theoreticization, the "affordances" of digital platforms encourage the development of a particular digital poetics. His model, which builds in part on Anthony Buccitelli's understanding of "'serialization' as one of the characteristic principles of digital discursive interaction" (Lindfors 2017: 173), is aimed at describing poetics and especially repetitive patterning as a meaningful feature in digital communication broadly; it bears stating, however, that the nature of the concept of "affordances" inherently implies a susceptibility to platform-specific permutations. On Tumblr, a few obvious examples of such structuring affordances include the reblog format, the tagging function, and the early and easy support for inserting GIFs into otherwise written chunks of communication.

It is by now relatively non-controversial to claim, as Lindfors does, that "identities in interactive social media [...] are inexorably managed and thus performed" (2017: 174), though the degree to which "impression management" (Soffer 2010) and performativity are heightened in digital space, vis-a-vis in face-to-face interaction is debatable and highly variable across physical as well as digital contexts. The inherently deliberate character of social interactions online offers the potential for enhanced sharing and intimacy (Gilding and Henderson 2004), but may also be experienced as imposing a burden of performance (Lindfors 2017: 174). The anticipation of future posts and the documentation of real-time social experience for digital sharing has the potential to structure behavior in face-to-face interactional settings (Jones 2009) and to inform a

blogger's choice of offline activities (Kanai 2017a: 299). Such choices, and the inevitable awareness of them, also serve to structure the neoliberal digital subject in terms of the expectation of textual production and the consumable Self-as-Text.

On Tumblr, pursuant to the primacy of the reblog function, the experience of content access as structured by the Tumblr "dashboard," and the real-time construction of a user "archive" readily available to other users or, indeed, casual web-surfers as an overview of a blog's content in thumbnail grid, they are also, per Paul Booth (2017), more or less tightly *curated*. Not only the content one creates, but the content one *shares* — the messages one chooses to relay or amplify — becomes constitutive of a personal (digital) brand, whose consistency is directly related to the perceived value of both blog and blogger, "converting personal experience into exchange value through digital circulation" (Kanai 2019: 64).

The ability to consciously (reflexively; see Berger and Del Negro 2002) craft a digital/textual Self may offer up opportunities for exploration and experimentation not readily available in the physical space framed by immediate proximity to family, colleagues, and figures of authority, especially for young bloggers or those with marginalized gender or sexual identities, for whom face-to-face self-disclosures might carry significant personal, social, and professional risks. Yet such virtual self-creation comes with all the burdens inherent in consciously crafting and maintaining a Self that is simultaneously a text presented for consumption, if not precisely for evaluation.[8] If the

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[8] See Bauman (1977) on the dimension of evaluation in performance, and Berger and Del Negro (2002) on the influence of this evaluation in the dialogical construction of reflexive subjectivity during the performance event.

label "attention whore" has become the default pejorative for any woman — but especially any *young* woman — who too obviously courts digital affirmation in the form of likes, clicks, views and shares, then we have to ask ourselves if, to whatever degree we find ourselves watching our feeds and waiting for a response (Buccitelli 2012), we have all become one another's *entreteneuses*, the courtesans of the digital age.

To a large extent, this body of curated material is itself presented as "subject to evaluation" by the audience for the skill with which it is executed (Bauman 1977) — i.e., the effectiveness and consistency of the curatorial work done 'behind the scenes" — raising the question of whether, and how, curation may participate in performance as a specialized mode of communication (Bauman 1977; Lindfors 2017; Booth 2017: 236), either contrastive with or complementary to more traditional models of textual transmission through successive performances of received texts.

Curatorial choices also provide suggestive data from which the user's subject position may often be closely inferred, without the social risks normally incurred in articulating one's own position explicitly — as when, for example, stfu-moffat shares a post featuring contrasting fan perspectives on the *Sherlock* character Donovan as a clear endorsement of the most recent contribution to that thread.[9] SuperWhoLock fandom, like other digital communities on Tumblr, makes use of this facet of the reblog feature both to share potentially vulnerable positions without culpability and, contradictorily, to

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[9] Here as elsewhere, the affordances of the Tumblr platform interact with the speaker's communicative intent to structure the utterance as a practice of play, conceived once again in the sense of "free movement within a more rigid framework" (Booth 2015: 15).

claim the communicative skill and aesthetic excellence of reblogged posts as part of the user's own curated presence.

The accomplishment of communicative acts in digital spaces, the curation of a mixed-media "Self" combined of one's own and others' texts, and "the sort of small-scale reflexivity apparent in all interactions" and the "staging [of] discrete texts as public expressions of seemingly authentic selves, which further take part in social practices of interpersonal evaluation and attention management" (Lindfors 2017: 174), are all situated and complicated by the bounding of SuperWhoLock as a community within Tumblr's functionally unbounded space. Individual users' facility with conventionalized codes, including lexical/syntactical constructions as well as the contextual cues properly considered under the rubric of pragmatics, plays an important role in a fan's ability to constitute herself as an intelligible subject.

Chapter Two: Digital Tenants, Digital Estates

Following close on the hills of a brief digital utopianism exemplified by such idealistic efforts as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Web 2.0 emerged with Facebook to re-situate social activity as content production. Since Facebook abandoned its initial university/institutional locus to invite the general public, social media has become all but synonymous with "the Internet," and its use and misuse constitute a major source of social concern (Tannen 2013) and of political anxiety. I review some of the relevant literature in digital culture studies, paying special attention to Marxist arguments that seek to situate the proliferation of "user-generated content" as unpaid labor. I argue that understanding textual production as the play/work of "tenants" within a digital estate

offers a model that helps us to better understand social media "users" (who are really the estate's laborers and artisans) in their relation to digital platforms' owners, while also establishing a framework in which to conceptualize the development of digitally-specific communicative practices as these emerge in interaction with technical affordances/constraints.

Chapter Three: A Primer in Digital Vernacularity

The affordances/constraints of digital platforms render many of the expressive possibilities of face-to-face communication unavailable. These expressivities are especially concentrated in the area of communication linguists call *pragmatics*: all of the non-verbal, or extra-verbal, communicative data that comprise part of a face-to-face interaction and yet is not reducible to syntax and vocabulary. In face-to-face interactions, pragmatics encompass the social status of the speakers, their relation to each other, and a host of other factors; and participants in an interaction navigate these concerns by their tone of voice, their physical distance/proximity, their readiness to touch or make eye contact or let the end of a sentence trail away.

Digital replacements, workarounds, and adaptations to make up for this absence have been widely documented (see Soffer 2010; Bucitelli 2012; Tannen 2013; Virtainen 2013; Lindfors 2017). The prevalence of affectively attuned digital discourse, with attention to the management of personal feeling and interpersonal relationships, has also been widely documented (Tannen 2013; Kanai 2017a; 2017a; 2019). However, no existing study has attempted to combine an understanding of digital sociolinguistics with an analysis of creative textual production aimed at "verbal art" (Bauman 1977). I

therefore examine a set of texts selected from SuperWhoLock fandom in order to identify relevant protocols in digital sociolinguistics, particularly the uses of non-standard verbiage and typography, in order to provide the basis for a more contextualized analysis of Tumblr texts.

I demonstrate that deviations from "standard" typography are not random, but highly structured; I show that a particular set of deviations in fact corresponds closely to the interactional practices of young women for management feeling and interpersonal relations in digital communication elsewhere; and I establish that the structuring of SuperWhoLock texts through these sociolinguistic means works to situate the texts within the larger Tumblr culture, as well as to presage/precondition the pragmatics of irony and the potential for parody. Community-specific language practices serve simultaneous actions as play, in manipulating Tumblr's affordances to creative effect, and bounding, as comprehension of the emic codes requires the development of a specialized communicative competence.

Chapter Four: Playing with Our Selves & Others

Affective expressivity emerges as a central concern for SuperWhoLock fandom and an area of intensive lateral management among young women, who make up a preponderance of both Tumblr and SuperWhoLock fandom, such that SuperWhoLock fandom becomes a notionally homosocial feminine social space. Working with Akane Kanai's discussions of the "girlfriendship" blogging whose popularity helped bring Tumblr to popular attention and further developing her explication of "relatability" as a self-reflexive understanding of shared affect, I examine how SuperWhoLock fans

foreground affective concerns through their textual productions. In addition, the digital genre of "relatability" posting itself, as well as the construction of "girlfriendship" as a frame for social relations, both offer examples of "a more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) against/with which SuperWhoLock fans play. That both SuperWhoLock fandom and Tumblr are encoded as presumptively feminine social spaces (as contra a default masculine subject in the prevailing patriarchal context offline and in many other spaces on the Internet) presents a set of social-relational assumptions, as well as a range of affective and identitarian possibilities, which structure fans' textual play. I demonstrate that the mediation of affect within SuperWhoLock is organized implicitly around the practice of playing with/against normative subjectivity, while fans' individual Tumblr blogs work cumulatively to produce digitally curated, composite and collectively authored Selves.

Chapter Five: Ricochet/Play

The notion of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Booth 2015) rhymes with parody as "repetition with difference" (Hutcheon 1985) and with the conceptualization of art as "play within constraints" (Berryman 2018). In all these formulations, the key to creativity, to motion, is the encounter of a barrier or, alternatively, a lever: something to push *against*, but also something to push *off of*. Inherent in this neither/both status is the possibility of transposition itself as play. I therefore examine a set of selected SuperWhoLock texts that play with what Linda Hutcheon has called "ironic transcontextualization" (1985) and the concept of a poetics of substitutionality. I argue that the pleasure of these texts — as reader and participant

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— derives partly from their determined *undecidability,* their refusal to settle into a fixed interpretation. SuperWhoLock parody, I suggest, works by sustaining the moment when the ball is *in the air*.

CHAPTER TWO: DIGITAL ESTATES, DIGITAL TENANTS

In this chapter, I employ some of the leading concepts from contemporary Marxist digital studies to establish a frame of labor/power relations in which to better situate our understanding of participatory cultures and the current discourse in fan studies. I suggest some adjustments to necessary but sometimes reductivist questions of alienation, exploitation, and resistance, and demonstrate instead how the digital estate model serves as a framework in which to more closely parse the complexities of digital cultures, comprised of neoliberal subjects engaged in multifarious practices of textual production, in relation to digital estate owners who are also, importantly, embedded in the contemporary neoliberal historico-social context.

Although both fan studies and new media studies share significant influences from Cultural Studies and the broad heritage of Marxist thought, scholarship that links the underlying Marxist tendencies of fan studies with the small, but rapidly expanding, body of scholarship in digital Marxism has however been slow to emerge. From one point of view, this lack of connection is easily explained as the result of disciplinary boundaries and divergent scholarly interest: one person studies fan cultures; another applies Marxist critiques to digital cultures; unless their scholarly interests share considerable overlap, they may not be aware of each other's work.

At a deeper level, however, the Marxist motives in fan studies and those focused on digital cultures and new media produce an inherent tension, which perhaps makes them uneasy bedfellows. The Marxist inflection in fan studies has been directed primarily toward questions of cultural authority and textual ownership: who has the "right" to read, re-read, challenge, distribute, and make play with, media texts? Meanwhile the Marxist concerns that inform left-leaning scholarship on digital cultures and technologies show a tendency to organize around questions of labor: who produces "content," and who benefits from its value?[10] From this perspective, the irreverent "poaching" practices of participatory culture whose political possibilities animate much of the Marxist spirit in fan studies constitute precisely the work of unpaid labor, benefiting corporations and capitalist shareholders, that digital Marxism is at pains to problematize and critique. It is easy to see why neither field might have much to recommend itself to the other.

Inconveniently, this tension does not arise out of an oversight or misunderstanding, which my project could then, as part of its contribution to the scholarly debate, offer to resolve. The divergence is not only real, but anchored by thoughtful scholarship and genuine insights at both its conceptual "poles"; and it emerges not out of shallow, reductive glosses but from the inherent complexities — at times outright contradictions — of digital life and culture in the first quintile of the 21st century.

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[10] For example, Brandt Dainow's examination of "Digital Alienation as the Foundation of Online Privacy Concerns," which challenges neoliberal constructions of anxiety over the ownership and value of "user-generated content" in a networked world (2015), or Brian Brown's "Will Work for Free: The Biopolitics of Unwaged Digital Labour" (2014), which aims to re-locate the biopolitical construction of digitally-mediated subjectivities as the seeds for "heterological" organization and political action.

I propose, therefore, that as a starting point we may begin with the premise that human activity is already, inherently, riddled with contradictions; this is not exceptional, but characteristic, and the study of human activity frequently requires the researcher, like Carroll's Red Queen, to "believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast" (Carroll 1871). Thus SuperWhoLock fandom may be both a quasi-anarchic revelry in textual appropriation, and a significant source of value for Tumblr's parent company; and it is in this sense no more politically fraught than a DIY knitting project that refuses factory-made finished clothing and yet purchases its needle and yarns from Jo-Ann's Fabrics and Crafts. I hope, however, that we can make better sense of some of SuperWhoLock fandom's complexity, and even its internal contradictions, by understanding the Tumblr platform as a sort of digital estate, with many tenants, within which SuperWhoLock fandom sometimes beguiles and sometimes bedevils its neighbors — and within which, too, all vectors of social relation are subject to constant negotiation, articulation, and (re)construction.

Digital Estates, Virtual Tenants: The Significance of Vernacularity

"The vernacular" has its roots in the pre-modern era; the term emerged as a way of distinguishing the language of the common folk and informal discourse from that used by educated people in formal contexts: that is to say, from churches and courts and the Latin used to conduct and document official proceedings.[11] In this sense, then, "the

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[11] One notices the close correspondence, in this relatively limited sense, between "the vernacular" and Bakhtin's "the language of the marketplace" (1984); however, I do not wish to stake the rather broader

vernacular" is inherently a linguistic phenomenon and a property of discourse; vernacularity, by extension, refers to the characteristics one might reasonably associate with use of the vernacular language: informality, intimacy, social custom specific to a limited group or to a particular place; often a reliance on oral or material customs over written documentation. Also, while vernacular cultures certainly do change and shift over time, with new formations emerging and familiar ones fading into memory, such changes tend to happen slowly, through gradual processes across generations rather than the abrupt, structural changes we associate with the passage of new laws or the issuance of edicts. "The vernacular" bears a close, but not identical, relationship with the five qualities

> Folklorists generally associate [...] with true folklore: (1) its content is
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> oral (usually verbal), or custom-related, or material; (2) it is traditional in
>
> form and transmission; (3) it exists in different versions; (4) it is usually
>
> anonymous; and (5) it tends to become formularized (Brunvand 1998:
>
> 12);
>
> unsurprisingly, then, vernacular language and custom are subject to the "dual

laws" of "dynamism and conservatism" famously ascribed to folklore (Toelken 1996).

If the distinction between folklore and vernacularity seems a bit fudgy, this is because cultural texts and cultural practice do not abide by neatly designated lines of categorization for the convenience of scholars. One useful point of reference for clarifying the relation between "the vernacular" and the material encompassed by

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claims Bakhtin makes for the marketplace and its speech as concerned with the grotesque, with the bodily lower stratum, with appetite and excrement.

folkloristics is folklore scholar Jan Brunvand's chart identifying three main categories of culture: Folk, Normative, and Elite.

Per Brunvand, a "serious novel" would constitute an example of "elite" culture, while a "popular romance" would be "normative" (Cultural Studies scholars might be more likely to describe it as an example of "mass" culture, but the "normative" designation does arguably serve to underscore the structuring, and not merely widespread, character of such artefacts), and a "tall tale or joke" would be an instance of folklore. Within the realm of custom, a doctor's cure is "elite," or official; an over-the-counter medication is "normative"; a home remedy belongs to folklore (Brunvand 1998: 10). But this is only part of the story; doctor's scripts and popular romances are of course subject to all manner of unauthorized, often unanticipated, usages in actual practice: they become vernacularized as they are woven into the "practice of everyday life" (de Certeau 1984).

For simplicity's sake, we may say that all folklore is vernacular, but not all vernacularity would be considered "folklore," by folklorists. Thus while the field of folkloristics has yielded a number of insights that are useful in examining vernacular digital texts — recent work has even begun to explore and analyze digital folklore[12] — traditional definitions of folklore do not adequately account for the proliferating sprawl of "playful" (in the sense of reaction to rules/structures) usages of digital technologies. "Vernacularity," on the other hand, provides the needed distinction from "official"

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[12] For example, Trevor J. Blank has edited not one but two collections of essays on the topic: *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (2009) and *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* (2012).

forms of culture (whether commercial, religious, or legally codified), without assuming the inherited restrictions that come with the label *folklore*.

Applied to digital cultures, conceiving of vernacularity as the "default" case or native state as suggested by Robert Glenn Howard in his corrective narrative of early Internet history (2012) essentially inverts the set of contemporary assumptions under which we have come to conceptualize, and analyze, online discourse. We are more likely to speak of digital activity in terms of the commercial platforms on which most digital communication is hosted than in terms of any of the various intentional communities — knitting enthusiasts, news junkies, SuperWhoLock fans — who inhabit those digital spaces and make use of them.

Howard's contention that the "original" character of digital discourse was vernacular and not official, arising out of the DIY (Do-It-Yourself), counterculturally-influenced, computer "hobbyist" practices of the 1980s before becoming susceptible, and vulnerable, to commercialization in the early 1990s (Howard 2012), has important implications for the set of operating conditions we accept as given. But just as a set of broad assumptions, implicitly based in capitalist understandings of ownership, entrepreneurship, and cultural authority, frame (and foreclose) our understanding of digital discourse and digital communities in the contemporary U.S. context, communities in digital spaces operate with reference to distinct sets of "local" assumptions, some of which are specific to the particular platform they inhabit. The relations between digital communities, technological affordances, and prevailing cultural

assumptions are complex and shifting, subject to continual (re)construction; always "in play."

This quality of digital social relations presents some particular challenges with respect to any analysis that attempts to decipher the greater political meaning of vernacular digital activity. This may be especially true with respect to the notoriously messy context of Tumblr (Booth 2017) and the multifarious realm of SuperWhoLock fandom ("And in a Cup of Loneliness…"). Moreover, fan studies already occupies an ambivalent position in that the textual activity of participatory culture constitutes both disavowal of cultural authority and complicit consumption of "normative" (in both Brunvand's sense and the more common, sociological one) media texts. It is here that grounding analysis in a conception of Tumblr as a distinct digital "estate," with its own localized rules and customs (Thompson 1993) can help us to understand SuperWhoLock as a sort of microcosm of digital relations.

"User-Friendly" Affordances

One of the most useful concepts in helping to contextualize the often competing social and political factors at work in participatory cultures within digitally mediated contexts is that of *affordances*. Affordances, in the digital context, are the range of actions available to users of a platform/program/system. Affordances may be paired against constraints (Jones 2009); indeed, constraints serve to structure the recognition of affordances in much the way that banks define a river or rules make it possible to play a game. In the natural world, of course, both affordances and constraints are immanent in

the environment: hills, forests, open water. In the virtual world — as also in urban architecture — they are implemented by design.[13]

The relationship between technical affordances and an individual user's control over his or her immediate digital environment and interactional possibilities is never static; this variability has some implications which merit stipulation in order to better understand how posting "works" within the Tumblr environment. From a theoretical point of view, two points are of special inerest: 1) the relative degree and type of skill involved in participation within SuperWhoLock fandom and 2) the structuring of a distinctive digital poetics emergent from the interaction between communicative intent and the "rules" of the Tumblr systems. At the practical level, however, these two points cannot be separated; the development of skill in manipulating Tumblr's affordances is the development of communicative competence in the vernacular of the digital estate, and the attainment of notable communicative competence (such as permits, for example, digital performances) is also the acquisition of technical skills in managing the relationship between what one intends to say and the means of expression available for doing so.

To draw a very broad generalization: the easier a Web 2.0 platform is to learn and use, the fewer its options in terms of user customizability. It is in this sense similar to the increasingly simple, yet decreasingly flexible, iterations of smartphone operating systems that have led some users to "jailbreak" their phones. Conversely, the more

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[13] Though the designers' choices are themselves to some extent constrained by the vagaries of local landscape or the limitations of available material and/or hardware.

options a user has for applying her own preferences within the digital system, the greater

the level of skill required to manage those options effectively.

Tumblr offers something of a middle ground in terms of "user-friendly" design

and customizability: Like LiveJournal, it gives users several options for applying various

pre-set (but often themselves to varying degrees customizable) "themes" to one's

individual blog; these themes govern such aspects of blog appearance as color scheme,

fonts, image headers, sidebars, and so on. More skilled users may also develop and

apply their own themes via CSS (Custom Style Sheet) coding. Like Facebook or

Twitter, however, Tumblr structures each user's "dash" feed according to a single,

platform-specific style not subject to manipulation or customization by the users

themselves. This particular constraint makes it possible for Tumblr to integrate

"sponsored" content (i.e., paid advertising) into users' feeds, regardless of their

preference settings.

This "intermediate" level of difficulty and flexibility has some further

implications for Tumblr's usage beyond the appearance of individual blogs on the site: It

means that very little technical skill is needed to create a Tumblr account and page, but

leaves open the possibility for users with even minimal web design expertise to

customize their own Tumblr blogs to reflect their own interests and activities.[14] Users

with graphic design skills, for example, often create and use fandom-related blog

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[14] A common customization that requires no HTML or CSS skills — but finely developed skills in the extraction and manipulation of meaningful chunks of discourse — is the alteration of the default link text for standard blog functions, such as tags displays, archive access, and especially the "Askbox" (Tumblr's messaging system). Within SuperWhoLock fandom, it is de rigueur to change the default link text for the Askbox (the default text is simply "Ask") to a quote from one of the constituent fandoms which references the basic function of questioning or communication: e.g., "Silence will fall when the question has been asked" (a Doctor Who reference).

backgrounds as well as header images and sidebars. deductingthroughtimeinanimpala has a repeating image of the TARDIS as the background for her Tumblr blog; soufflesforgallifrey presents an image of *Doctor Who* alum Jenna Louise Coleman as the header to her sidebar, with the actor entering a door almost as if stepping into the main space of the blog; gallifreyshawkeye has a message written in Gallifreyan Circular[15] along the sidebar on her homepage.

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[15] An "alphabet" developed by fans on the model of alien script appearing in some of the early *Doctor Who* episodes.

Figure 1 Image: gallifreyshawkeye.tumblr.com

green-eyed-hunter-in-my-tardis actually features a fully-fledged SuperWhoLock header graphic:
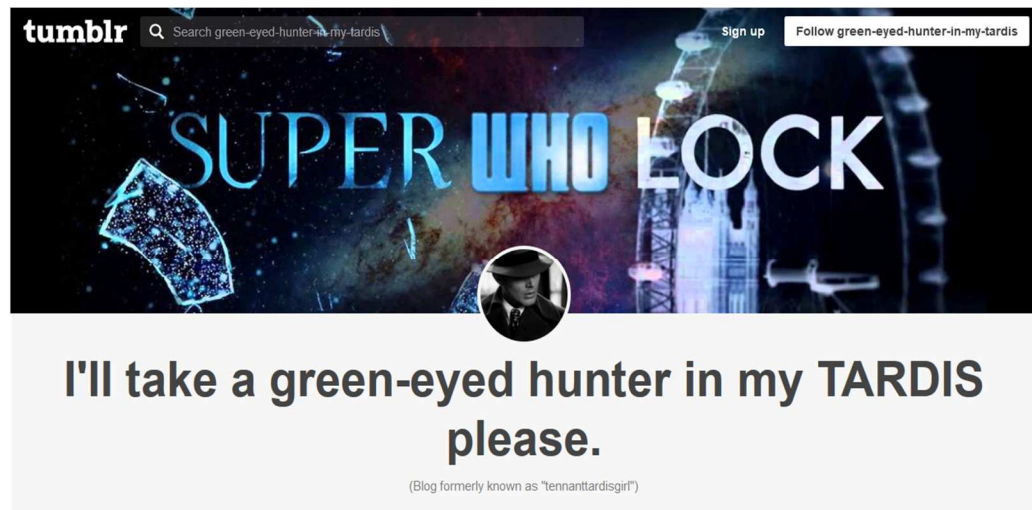
Figure 2 Image: green-eyed-hunter-in-my-tardis.tumblr.com

Affordances/Protocols: Visual Narrative

The same basic notion of affordances underlies much of the existing work on digital cultures: If, in the digital context, affordances are the range of actions, communicative or otherwise, that are technically possible within a particular system, then the limits on those possibilities constitute constraints. Such constraints may be relatively "neutral" limitations on the types of data that can be encoded and transmitted given bandwidth and software architecture; early message boards, for example, could typically display ASCII text but did not allow for the wider range of formatting options possible in HTML. Constraints may also be the structural result of conscious choices by developers, as in a Tumblr user's inability to "opt out" of seeing sponsored content within her dashboard stream.

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Tumblr's affordances early on served to make it an attractive platform for the activities of participatory culture, although — strikingly — Tumblr's post layout did not lend itself well to the posting and sharing of fan fiction. Long-form, multi-chaptered fan fiction, such as that once common on LiveJournal and still widespread on fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own, seems never to have gained much of a toehold there (of the several thousand posts reviewed over the course of research, perhaps two dozen would meet that description, with a sprinkling of posts simply linking to fan fiction archived elsewhere, principally on Archive of Our Own). Far more common, on Tumblr, SuperWhoLock fans have made use of the site's "photoset" function to create transcontextualized visual narratives, as discussed by Booth (2015).

The concept of intermixing storylines, characters, and worldbuilding from distinct media texts is not new within participatory cultures. Fan fiction that transposes characters from one media text into the fictional universe of another is called "crossover fic," and it is one of the oldest and most cherished genres in media fandom. Until recently, however, "crossover fics" were generally texts not only in the broad Barthesian sense but in the narrower one of common usage: they were *written* works, produced as prose narratives of varying length. A few might be rendered as visual art: sketches or paintings. Regardless of medium, crossover works were primarily constructed from the writer's own invention: they drew on familiar settings and personalities and prioritized writing that audiences would perceive as consistent with the characters as these had already been established within the media text, but the texts themselves consisted primarily of "new" material.

GIF narratives in SuperWhoLock fandom form a distinct practice because they incorporate little, if any, actually new material; as Booth explains, the captioned dialogue in the GIFs is often invented and inserted by the fan author (2015), but such invention is not obligatory to the creation of a GIF narrative. GIF narratives, relying heavily on the reader's ability to infer meaning from visual cues, especially actors' expressions of emotion, translated into alternate contexts, can in fact function quite well without any dialogue at all — much like a scene from an early, "silent" film. The crux of meaning-making lies in organizational structure, which in turn relies on readers' familiarity with orthographic convention: the images, when "read"[16] left to right and top to bottom (i.e., in the sequence normative for Western orthographic practice), present a series of events, dialogue, and/or reactions from which the reader can readily construct a narrative. In this visual arrangement, and in the level of engagement required of the reader, SuperWhoLock GIF narratives follow conventions closely aligned with those of comic books or graphic novels (Booth 2015).[17]

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[16] Though GIF narratives are of course comprised largely of non-verbal material, I prefer the term "reading" here to any of the readily available alternatives: "Viewing" suggests a passive activity, merely taking in the scenery; "decoding" suggests that there is a single fixed, finite meaning that will be revealed or not, based on the straightforward application of a code key. "Reading," on the other hand — while admittedly imperfect — has a well-established history of application to the interpretation of cultural "texts," broadly construed, that are not strictly verbal/lexical: see for example Linda Hutcheon's discussion of engaged reading (1985: 32), or Henry Jenkins's elaboration of participatory culture's constitutive practices of reading and re-reading (1992: 51-87; 88-121). In addition, the similarity of GIF sets' visual presentation to those of comic books/graphic novels, already remarked by Paul Booth (2015: 26), commonly applied to the consumption and interpretation of comics or graphic novel texts, may by extension be considered to apply to the organizationally and aesthetically similar multimedia visual texts pretend by GIF sets using Tumblr's photoset affordance.

[17] Booth devotes an entire chapter of *Playing Fans* (2015) to SuperWhoLock GIF narratives; curiously, although this is the same book in whose introduction he establishes the relationship between participatory culture and the construction of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" that "only happens with rules in place, as a response to those rules" (2015: 15), the SuperWhoLock chapter is concerned far more with manipulation of the semantic content of the media texts and their transposition than with the

The image-ready affordances of Tumblr as compared to, say, LiveJournal or fanfiction.net encourages the development of visually-centered fan texts, which are not constructed in a vacuum but rather built by authors and readers who are already familiar with other forms of visual storytelling — not just with comic books but with movie posters, the staccato content delivery of movie trailers (short on dialogue, long on music and scenery) and branding logos. The header image from green-eyed-hunter-in-my-tardis, above, offers a SuperWhoLock example of the latter; this example, in a series of screen shots from deductingthroughtimeinanimpala, uses orthographic convention (top to bottom) to create a parody whose construction of visual narrative falls somewhere between a movie poster and a montage:

manipulation of Tumblr's technical affordances that make this particular form of fan art popular within, and distinctively characteristic of, Tumblr as a culture and community.

mu5icliz:

mycroft-queenofcake:

bennyslegs:

mycroft:

omg but what if s3 opens up and they just show john sitting in his chair from october-december like in new moon

October

Figure 3

Figure 4

#about three things i was absolutely positive #first sherlock was a sociopath #second there was a part of him #and i didn't know how dominant that part might be #that thought i was an idiot #and third i was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him
LDASOFGSDODS LMAO

Figure 5

Figure 6 Images: https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/53153150412

Over the course of three separate interventions, all by distinct Tumblr users (four, if we count the unnamed third party whose tags are copied and added by bennyslegs), the post develops as a set of panels with subscript to indicate the passage of time, explicitly invoking the montage that opens *New Moon*, the second installment in the *Twilight* film series (based on Stephenie Meyer's books of the same names). Someone (presumably someone followed by bennyslegs) adds a series of tags, which do not conform to the authorized usages established for Tumblr's tagging system but instead perform a riff on one of the most recognizable passages from the first *Twilight* novel; bennyslegs copies these tags and adds them,[18] turning a primarily visual narrative into a distinctly multimedia one. mycroft-queenofcake adds a "poster" that extracts images of the two principal *Sherlock* actors (Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman), repositions them to mimic an iconic still from the *Twilight* film series, digitally blurs the surrounding background into a haze of romantic nothingness, and superimposes two pieces of dialogue extracted from the *Sherlock* media text, accompanied by a month and year as often found on film posters.

The hyperlink functionality of tags excepted, all of these textual operations would technically have been possible before Tumblr — even before Web 2.0, or by hand with scissors and glue sticks and a careful attention to analog detail. But storytelling by image panels and the creation of "movie" posters only became a prominent genre in the

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[18] Both the distinctive affordances of tagging and the social significance of copying other users' tags are discussed in more detail below.

context of a hypersaturated digital environment whose affordances encourage the use of visual over written media.

Affordances: Digital Groundskeeping

One one level, the point I am making here — that the affordances of any digital platform structure the habits of usage and textual production that develop within its virtual environment — may seem obvious. The ancient Egyptians made paper out of papyrus; papyrus being not available, rice paper emerged in Japan. We use, in other words, whatever is available to us. "Art is making what you want out of what you have" (Berryman 2017).

Unlike rice or papyrus, however, digital affordances are not natural features of the landscape, politically neutral realities to which all are subject. The digital landscape, like the urban landscape, is not discovered but designed. Thus while "[t]he concept of affordances originates with James Gibson's conceptualisation [...] of how animals perceive and understand their environment," Brandt Dainow argues that in the digital context "We may see [...] see affordances as a field of competition in which the owners of a technology compete with the users of that technology for domination of the affordances dictating how that technology is used and understood" (Dainow 2015).

Dainow raises an important point, but "competition" is perhaps not the most accurate descriptor for understanding the relationship of SuperWhoLock fandom to Tumblr's owners. For one thing, in actual usage *competition* generally refers either to a game environment in which all parties are subject to the same set of predetermined

rules; or, in the "natural" world, to attempts by one party to secure for itself control over limited resources. Neither set of conditions corresponds with exactitude to the power relations and habits of usage prevailing on Tumblr, where the "rules" are to a large extent determined by the platform's owners (this is indeed at the heart of the power imbalance Dainow seeks to problematize) and the "resources" may be understood as either the body of user-generated content or the attention of the users themselves: that "users" are at once labor and product is the central problem in theorizing not just fans' textual play/work but all the forms of what we might call "leisure labor" across social media. The digital estate model, based on Thompson's exploration of customary rights and usages in early modern England (1993) is helpful in part because it provides a frame in which to account for the (sometimes) competing interests of digital platform owners and users without reducing the complexity of their social relations to a model of direct, head-to-head competition.

The specific affordance of Tumblr's tagging system offers an elucidative example. In this post, from whovianfeminism, tags are used in their official, "authorized" Tumblr function: they identify the posted material by topic in order to make the content easily searchable on the blog. For original posts (but not for reblogged posts), the first five tags listed will also add the post to Tumblr's continually refreshing list of posts with each of those tags; this particular affordance is closely associated with

the "tracked tags" function, which allows users to maintain lists of tags they frequently

visit so that they can readily see when new posts have been added with those tags.[19]

(or color). Intersectionality is important.

Actually, no, I mean all women. I've always placed a great focus in this blog on being intersectional. You'll notice in this post I specifically mention race *and* gender when I discuss why Moffat immediately thought of casting Peter Capaldi, a white man, as the Twelfth Doctor. I focus more on gender, given that this is a feminism blog, but race is also a major concern of mine.

This single post, removed from the context of my blog, might not make that clear, but if you go back through the Time Lady Project, which I was running up until today's announcement, you'll see that I've been promoting several WOC as potential candidates for the Twelfth Doctor. These include Zawe Ashton, Naomie Harris, Parminder Nagra, Nathalie Emmanuel, Amara Karan, and Sophie Okonedo, among many others.

(via irresistible-revolution)

🌐 *Aug 4, 2013 7:04 pm*   💬 *Whovianfeminism*   ✏ *504 Notes*

🏷 DOCTOR WHO   FEMINISM   INTERSECTIONALITY   TWELFTH DOCTOR   FEMALE DOCTOR   WHOVIAN FEMINISM   THE TIME LADY

👍 Like 0   🐦 Tweet   tumblr.

Figure 7
Image: https://whovianfeminism.tumblr.com/post/57372956031/this-is-how-everyday-sexism-works

Within the blog, clicking any of the tags allows visitors to access a list of all

content the blog has shared with that particular tag. Someone who is curious to see, for

example, what else whovianfeminism may have had to say about intersectionality, for

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[19] Not a useful function during the data collection period, as the sheer volume of posts added in any given day — often even within a single hour — in the most active tags was consistently orders of magnitude greater I could hope to retrieve and process; posts multiplied far faster than my Internet connection could load them, even without accounting for the sporadic influx of irrelevant, "spam" posts attempting to take advantage of the #SuperWhoLock tag's popularity.

example, can click on the #intersectionality tag to scroll through every post on whovianfeminism.tumblr.com that uses the #intersectionality tag.

SuperWhoLock fans have made liberal use of the tagging system for its official or authorized function, very much as shown in the post above. It is therefore not quite accurate to say that the affordance of the tagging function provides no benefit to Tumblr's users, or that its structure is fundamentally at odds with their interests. Yet the tagging system also facilitates the exploitation of Tumblr's digital user-tenants. Using tags in the officially intended manner yields significant quantities of data regarding the frequency of individual tags, the emergence of new "trending" topics as identified by their related tags, and the preferences of individual accounts, especially when they also choose to make use of the "tracked tags" function. As a general rule, any action that can be "saved" by the system is (necessarily) tracked by the system, and any activity that is tracked by the system generates user data, which can then be collected and analyzed, or sold to third parties.

This prolific generation of data is not unique to Tumblr, but is a property of all digital systems, and to some degree it is inevitable: from the point of view of any digital system, an action initiated by a user within that system does not merely produce information; it *is* information, typically rendered as a set of instructions that tell the system to retrieve other pieces of data and organize them in particular ways. The ability to create a post, save changes to a blog theme, or send a message unavoidably depends on the storage and retrieval of data.

But the data, once generated, is susceptible to uses other than those intended by the user who clicks a link or taps a keyboard. A major use of such data is in the creation of user profiles. Tumblr lagged behind other other digital environments in its integration of targeted advertising, enabling sponsored content in 2012 for desktop browsing (then dominant) with mobile app support in early 2013[20] (in time to take advantage of what I take to be the most intensive period of SuperWhoLock activity, from roughly mid-2012 through late 2014, with literally hundreds of posts across the #SuperWhoLock and #superwholock tags, as well as many of the related tags from constituent fandoms, each day).[21] Across all social media, however, the basic premise of sponsored content remains the same: "Users are presented with 'personalised' choices, links and content based on the results of covert surveillance as much as on the content they produce" (Dainow 2015). One feature of Tumblr's lackluster performance as a trendy new "market" of consumers has been its inability to convince users to accept an ever-increasing frequency of "sponsored" content within the dashboard landing page; yet the regular appearance of "suggested" blogs to follow and tags to click suggests the tracking and application (successful or otherwise) of personalized data profiles.

Tumblr users also, however, manipulate Tumblr's affordances to use tags for other than classificatory purposes. Here again is the screen shot showing the tags copy/pasted by bennyslegs as a contribution to the "Johnlock"/*New Moon* parody:

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[20] https://www.pcworld.com/article/2036166/tumblr-ads-go-mobile.html

[21] The strategy seems not to have boosted Tumblr's revenue much; after the 2013 sale to Yahoo the platform never managed to make good on its (financial) promise, perhaps in part because — anecdotally, at least — much of its user base has been young and either unemployed or chronically underemployed.

Figure 8
Image: https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/53153150412

Adding another user's tags to a post has implications for performance roles and

the management of social relationships, which I discuss in Chapter Three; here, I want to

mark the divergence of this particular usage from the site developers' intent. This is an

instance in which the inadequacy of *competition* as a descriptor for the relation between

owners and users comes into play: adding a previous user's tags to a reblog has nothing whatever to do with the official function of tags as designed by Tumblr's professional developers, yet neither can it reasonably be said to directly contravene their intent or their interests.

Dainow's own analysis suggests this more complicated view: what is at stake in the use of pasted tags is precisely the divergence (but not the opposition) he describes between the "user model" and the "design model" — both of which are conceptually present in the actual usage of any technology (2015). As Dainow explains, "The design model is the conceptual model held by the designers when they built the technology and in accord with which they try to construct the artefact. The user's model is the conceptual model users have of that same technology" (2015). Thus in the screen shot from whovianfeminism shown above, the user model in operation is congruent with what I infer to be the design model of Tumblr's development/software engineering team. The Johnlock/*New Moon* parody tags, on the other hand, show a user model at work which, though not directly contrary to the design model, certainly deviates from it.

In fact, the second screen shot shows not one but two divergences from the design model. The first, of course, is copying another's tags and adding them to the body of a post as hyperlinked text; this "unauthorized" usage of the tagging system is analogous in some ways to the widespread practice of prescribing "off-label" uses for pharmaceutical drugs, on the premise that they are effective for some purpose other than that of their original formulation. The second is that the copied tags themselves subvert

the affordances of the system by using the tag function not for classification of content, but as a digital margin in which to scribble hyperlinked glosses.

I use the term *subvert* advisedly here. Part of the tension Dainow sees, and the potential for exploitation of which he warns, arises because "[t]he user model conceptualizes the Web 2.0 services people use to express their digital personas as private, unmediated, and natural" and thereby "fails to recognise the degree of surveillance and the degree to which their activities are mediated through a technology designed for data gathering and communication" (Dainow 2015). The hypermarginal use of tags not for categorization and classification but as commentary and creative glossalia fails to yield usable data in the form of predictable user behavior which can then be used to facilitate targeted advertising campaigns.

Stretching a bit, one might make the argument that pasting a previous user's tags into the body of a reblogged post as hyperlinked text makes them available for recuperation by capital because they now represent value in the form of user-generated content in circulation. Though a Tumblr user may restrict her display of communicative competence (Bauman 1977) to the tags rather than assuming the stage by placing her "verbal art" (Bauman 1977) directly into the body of the post herself, and thereby to some degree elude Tumblr's digital surveillance, once added to the post her tags have the potential to incite engagement and generate an increase in traffic — an outcome with benefits Tumblr's owners and shareholders. However, not all instances of hypermarginal commentary are transposed to the body of the post by future users. Most, in fact, are not; and the social "rules" governing which tags are added, and when, form part of

SuperWhoLock's community-internal practices of governmentality but are, also,

constructed in interaction with the affordances of the digital environment — as are the

communicative protocols that govern Tumblr's digital poetics of tagging.

CHAPTER THREE: A PRIMER IN DIGITAL VERNACULARITY

A core tenet of this project is that digital cultures comprise the new

vernacularity; "folk" transmission is no longer presumptively oral, but frequently digital,

and the transmission and manipulation of texts takes place in a highly mediated context

structured not by the power of life and death held by king or nobility[22] but by the

affordances and constraints of the various digital environments — the vast territory of

the Internet, divided into virtual "estates" — in which "the people" work, play, and

communicate. Within each estate, vernacular usages develop in interaction with the

"rules" particular to that platform. These usages help to form the *lex loci* — the "subtle

and sometimes complex vocabulary of usages" (Thompson 1993) which shape the

norms of interaction between users and also, sometimes, the interactions of owners with

the user-tenants who generate the platform's content.[23] In addition, the communicative

norms that emerge out of users' practices of play — understood as "free movement

within a more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) — with the estate's rules come to

influence communicative practice outside the immediate platform as those who

participate in the "local" protocols come to see them as part of their everyday

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[22] See Foucault (2003) on "sovereign power."

[23] True not only of Tumblr in its various changes of legal ownership, but of digital platforms in general; see for example Brandt Dainow's brief but telling recount of a quickly-retracted Instagram Terms of Service update that would have entitled the platform to freely repurpose users' photos in its own adds, or the periodic privacy "tips" Facebook sends out during periods of widespread criticism and user discontent.

communicative repertoire. Better grasping the nature and practices of what I am calling "digital vernacularity," then, is an important step toward understanding the political and cultural world we now collectively inhabit, as well as the often elided economics of user-generated content.

In this chapter, I identify a non-exhaustive series of sociolinguistic protocols which appear regularly in SuperWhoLock texts and which appear to be in widespread use across the Tumblr platform (based on the frequency with which, during data collection, the same patterns repeated in posts not directly related to SuperWhoLock fandom). I illustrate these protocols using a set of texts selected from SuperWhoLock fandom and attempt to situate their analysis within a discursive context framed by an awareness of social-affective norms (Kanai 2019) in online fan cultures and with attention to the structuring effects of Tumblr's constraints and affordances. Using the definition of *play* cited in my Introduction (above), I further attempt to contextualize these practices/protocols in terms of reaction to rules, reading fans' "verbal art" (Bauman 1977) as "play within constraints" (Berryman 2017).

Speech/Community

The notion behind the concept of constraints and affordances as formative in digital interactions is that the specific technical operations, for browsing or posting or sending messages, that a platform affords will encourage user behavior in some directions and discourage them in others (Bucitelli 2012; Jones 2009; Lindfors 2017).

Affordances and constraints structure the path of least resistance; they also provide resistance, a framework against which users can play.

Any digital platform's unique combination of constraints and affordances becomes a virtual landscape of sorts, a climate and topography which structure how those who "inhabit" that space behave. Communities online, like communities anywhere, develop collective habits in interaction with their environment: the hill you always pass by on the west because the ground is easier there; the alt + reblog to skip tagging.[24] And groups of people who interact regularly and intensively — whether in physical proximity or not — will tend to develop shared norms of expression: inside jokes; emic jargon; a set of shared expectations for the verbal forms that signal upcoming content of particular kinds and cue the appropriate interpretive frames. At a fundamental level, speech communities are constituted simply as groups of people who understand one another's speech in these terms — not just semantically, as "the meaning of the words as they would be decoded by a dictionary and a grammar" (Tannen 2013: 101) but pragmatically, in the richness of interactional context and within a shared set of protocols for interpreting one another's implicit signals of communicative intent: playfulness, scolding, distancing, and so on.

Tumblr's dash plays an essential role in structuring not only its users' experience of the platform, but the way their speech norms take shape and, crucially, spread. The "dash" (sometimes also called the "dashboard") is roughly equivalent to Facebook's "newsfeed" or DreamWidth's "reading list": It functions as a landing page of sorts, the

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[24] As noted in the previous chapter, within the context of Web 2.0 the "landscape" is complicated by the groundskeeping practices of virtual landowners.

first page one accesses on login, and it displays all of the content from all of the blogs the logged-in user follows organized into single file by reverse chronological order (most recent first, interrupted on occasion for sponsored content); a header and a sidebar provide additional options for accessing account settings and customization, and flag incoming notifications for messages, likes, or reblogs of a user's own posts.

Unlike Facebook or the somewhat earlier models of LiveJournal, AOL "chat" rooms, or any of the various message boards, there are no "groups" or "comms" or other shared spaces within Tumblr that users might "visit" in order to participate with other users; content comes to the user, undifferentiated by topic or theme or cluster of relationships. Any user can navigate to another user's individual blog, but other than the initial act of selecting a blog to follow, or for the purpose of sending an "Askbox" message, there is little reason for doing so.[25]

This integrated experience means, as Booth explains, that

the notion of 'community' is uncertain on Tumblr. Hillman, Procyk, and

Neustaedter note that "the concept of belonging to a fandom on Tumblr is

fuzzy. Unlike Facebook, you do not get accepted to groups. You are part

of the fandom when you think you are" (Booth 2017: 235)

— or, perhaps, when you participate and discursively position yourself by performing enactments (Lindfors 2017) intelligible to other SuperWhoLockians as signalling fan identity.

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[25] Tumblr is distinct from most of the other digital loci of fandom activity, but it is not wholly unique in this respect; Twitter follows a very similar schematic for organizing accounts' relations to one another.

I must disagree, however, with Booth's interpretation of the result as one in which "Communities of interest form, but these communities are not formalized through the participants themselves, but rather organized by the topics generated by the community" (2017: 235). Communities are not formalized through technical means. They are, however, discursively constituted through the speech of the users themselves. Articulating what it means to be a part of SuperWhoLock fandom becomes a central activity of SuperWhoLock fandom and a constitutive practice of membership.

Just Us Girls

One of the curious features of SuperWhoLock fandom is how consistently its participants define their community as one composed by and of women. Although I conducted research on *Star Wars* fan fiction writers within the "estate" of LiveJournal in 2010-2011, and although each writer whose work I read self-identified on her blog as a woman, references to the gendered character of the fan community did not constitute a major element in fandom discourse (I am hard-pressed to think of a single example). Other literature examining communities of participatory cultures online seems to corroborate my own research experience: overwhelmingly, scholars describe online fan communities engaged in textual production as constituted primarily of female-identifying subjects; the discursive reiteration of femininity, by participants, does not emerge as one of the terms of research (as one would expect it to do, if this constituted a major feature of in-group communication).

Always granting that there are necessarily multiple influences "at play" in any speech community's self-definition, I think the repeating motif of fandom gendering may perhaps best be understood in light of Tumblr's unbounded interior space: the integrated dash, and the atomized structure of visiting other individual blogs absent shared spaces for virtual congregation, on the one hand; and a general prevalence of female-identifying subjects on Tumblr's digital estate, on the other. Hard data regarding the gender identity of Tumblr's user base is as difficult to find as one might expect for a category as fluid and individually inflected as gender, yet in some sense — in terms of the social construction of SuperWhoLock fandom as a community — it may not matter: what matters is that SuperWhoLock fans *think* Tumblr is populated by (other) women.

We see this assumption reflected not just in the frequency with which many SuperWhoLock bloggers share non-fandom content related to "the affective difficulties of postfeminist individuality, requiring the selective acceptance of certain forms of social value while disavowing their influence in personal decision-making" (Kanai 2019a: 62), but in the persistent recurrence of gendered subjectivity as an element in posts that articulate what it means to be — crucially — not just a fan, but a "fangirl."

On Tumblr, in the context of a prevailing assumption that the site is populated primarily by female-identified subjects, SuperWhoLock fans differentiate themselves from the larger community of Tumblr as a whole not just by asserting their distinctive preferences in and relation to media texts, but by articulating this distinction as a relevant factor in their construction of femininity. Whereas in a multi-gendered context such as a (physical) fan convention or certain other digital spaces (Reddit, or the now

mostly-defunct message boards) the term "fangirl" might be taken as a marker of gender, often dismissive or pejorative, that distinguishes a fangirl from the default, male fan,[26] within Tumblr the marking term is flipped: the person to whom it is applied is not a fan (who is a girl) but a girl (who is a fan).

It may help to transcribe the distinction visually, this way:

General Usage

(most offline and many online contexts): fan[girl]

<u>Tumblr</u>

(particularly among fandom bloggers): [fan]girl

Figure 9 Image: <u>https://soufflesforgallifrey.tumblr.com/post/50735208200/the-two-halves-of-tumblr</u>

In practice, the latter usage looks like this:

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[26] The term "fanboy" is used in both multi-gendered and default-masculine contexts, and is almost always a pejorative.

i-o-u-an-assbutt:

in tumblr we don't say "I love you" we say "*AHADSKJLHDSK I FUCKING CANT I HATE YOU SO FUCKING MUCH I WANT TO SMASH YOUR FACE REPEATEDLY WITH A SHOVEL MADE OF THE BONES OF MY ENEMIES SO YOU TRY AND FUCKING EXPERIENCE WHAT YOU'RE DOING TO MY GOD DAMN OVARIES YOU MOTHER FUCKING FLIP SHIT*" which is really quite beautiful i think

posted Apr 28th at 4:51 from a-mind-occupied-by-tennant © yafpot with 30,900 notes
#we're all special here on tumblr

Figure 10
https://soufflesforgallifrey.tumblr.com/post/49126410217/i-o-u-an-assbutt-in-tumblr-we-dont-say-i-love

Fan 1: AKJSHDKJAHSDKJSA
Fan 2: I know. I know.

posted May 7th at 5:30 from manicpixiedreamwyn © laughingzone with 338,638 notes
#about me

Figure 11 Image: https://soufflesforgallifrey.tumblr.com/post/49885168725/how-fangirls-communicate

And, last but not least, this example in which the gendering of "Fan 1" and "Fan 2" is legible (Kanai 2019a) not by any indications within the text of the post itself, but marginally, in the URL under which it was posted: the original poster offered this observation on the curiosity of intra-fandom linguistic expression under the heading "how fangirls communicate":

The fact that femininity can operate as a default assumption — that, as the unmarked case for SuperWhoLock fans, it need not be specified in most intra-Tumblr

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discursive contexts — has important implications for the structuring of SuperWhoLock texts because it removes gender discursively from the range of concepts needing articulation and places it instead as part of the "more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) of assumptions against/on/with which fan texts play. The opportunities for transgression, subversion, manipulation, and textual ricochet are thus differently configured in SuperWhoLock fandom vis-a-vis the context of dominant patriarchy.

For example, the first post cited above is identified in its URL as "the-two-halves-of-tumblr." This framing places the point of differentiation not between "fans" and "fans who are girls," nor between "fanboys" and "fangirls"[27], but between "hipsters" and "fandom." Instead of defining SuperWhoLock fandom against masculine norms, fans are free to mark their distinctiveness as contra "hipsters" and to treat as essential qualities of fandom the interests and practices of "fangirling": attentiveness to affect, hyper focus on relational concerns (both in media texts and among participants). The need to stipulate feminine-gendered practices of fandom[28] takes up neither discursive space nor attentional energy.

When stipulating gender is unnecessary, other measures of identity emerge and are constructed along lines not marked for gender. Among these, reference to and manipulation of the norms of "girlfriendship," which Kanai describes as "the ideas of postfeminist sisterhood that […] rest on assumptions of normative feminine

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[27] The two terms carry widely divergent social and affective connotations apart from their gender difference.

[28] Construed, again, as affective engagement/intensity; "shipping" as an intensive focus on specific, preferred relationships; the participatory practices of reading and textual production commonly described by scholars studying fan art and fan fiction.

homogeneity" (2017b: 293-294) become important pieces of the "more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) within which fans' textual play emerges "as a response to those rules" (Booth 2015: 15).

Keyboard Smashes

One effect of the gendered set of operating assumptions under which SuperWhoLock fans produce their texts, then, is the tendency to discursively bound their community not by relation to a multi-gender fandom in which femininity is a specialized category, but by their differential, fan-inflected relation to normative femininity within the Tumblr context. This dynamic has implications for the organization of social relations and the management of affect; most obviously, at the level of emic textual genres (Dundes 1962; Bakhtin 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1992; Bauman 2004) it facilitates the production of texts constructed in alterity to the norms of "girlfriendship" blogging (Kanai 2017b; 2019a; 2019b), as we shall shortly explore. But texts are assembled into recognizable genres on the basis of much smaller semiotic units; and the ease with which these units are separated and interpolated into social scripts and communicative practice across multiple discursive contexts makes it easy to elide to the degree to which these protocols are themselves shaped by social norms already coded for gender and generation (Tannen 2013). In this section, therefore, I outline a non-exhaustive set of communicative protocols which see frequent usage in SuperWhoLock texts, and I attempt to situate these protocols in relation to a broader set of

communicative protocols distinctive to "digital discourse" (Tannen 2013) among young

women, in which SuperWhoLock texts participate.[29]

asdfjadksf: keyboard smashes

One of the most striking elements in Tumblr's distinctive digital dialect is

already identified in some of the posts extracted above. Given the ephemeral nature of

digital texts and the well-documented difficulties of establishing the "origins" of memes

and other transient digital texts (Pearson 2012), I would be wary of asserting with

absolute certainty that SuperWhoLock fandom originated the assemblage of letters

known as a "keyboard smash" (featured in "How Fangirls Communicate," above).

However, I have not been able to locate any example of its usage that predates

SuperWhoLock fandom; and certainly by the time I first became aware of the

SuperWhoLock phenomenon, in early 2012, the expression had already become

characteristic of SuperWhoLock texts, such that the examples above (posted in 2013)

would have been easily recognizable from very early in the inception of the fandom.[30]

Thus while I want to be cautious of over-stating the role SuperWhoLock fandom has

played in originating Tumblr's textual particularities, I think we may be on firm ground

in saying that, at a minimum, SuperWhoLock fandom adopted the keyboard smash early

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[29] Key to appreciating this part of my argument is an awareness of how Tumblr's unbounded interior
space intermingles fandom with non-fandom content in user experience; any consistent user of Tumblr in
the period 2013-2015 would almost certainly be in contact with both fandom texts and young
feminist/post-feminist blogging. During the course of research, I could certainly not have avoided
exposure to multiple media fandoms beyond SuperWhoLock, or to an array of blogging thematics
foregrounding the concerns of young women and especially LGBTQ women, both socially and politically.

[30] BBC's *Sherlock* first aired in mid-2010; the three-fandom merger seems to have emerged relatively
rapidly afterward, such that by mid-2012 SuperWhoLock was demonstrably the leading "face" of
Tumblr's media fandom contingent.

and played a palpable role, through sheer prolific usage, in its transmission and normalization as a semiotic element within Tumblr.

Because a keyboard smash, at first glance, looks like nothing so much as a particularly outrageous typo or the accidental result of a cat's paw striking the keyboard, it is easy to overlook what keyboard smashes, as a distinctively digital semiotic innovation, have to tell us about communicative practice in the contemporary digital vernacular. Yet the keyboard smash represents one of the most remarkable transitions since the advent of widespread literacy in the early modern period. With the keyboard smash, for the first time, it becomes possible to reverse-engineer the concept of the onomatopoeia.

An onomatopoeia, of course, is a phonetic approximation of a wordless sound: a slap, a smack, a shriek, an *ouch*! Some onomatopoeia, like *bang* or *crash*, generally represent the sounds caused by (inanimate) physical events: a door falling shut, a twig breaking under pressure. Others represent the involuntary, non-verbal noises we all make in moments of pain or surprise or intense delight. Onomatopoeia are, in any case, attempts to represent alphabetically that which escapes verbal, perhaps even phonetic, expression.

A keyboard smash turns this premise on its head. Rather than wordless yips of excitement or growls of frustration, the keyboard smash is a spasm of tendons; the instantaneous flicker of fingers against keys. The keyboard smash may be rendered in stylized fashion, a sedate reduction of immediacy to representation: | asdfjkl; | — the straight line of fingers in their default position on a QWERTY keyboard, tapped left to

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right, just as we may bump a shin, not too hard, and say, rubbing the injured limb, "Ow." But what the keyboard smash makes possible is a wordless expressivity that is natively, innately, always-already *digital* — in both senses of that word — and that carries the immediacy not of an articulated "ow" but of a sudden shout, a delighted giggle.

It is important to notice the contrast here between keyboard smash and other, earlier iterations of digital frustration, such as $H17 or @$$. These early innovations are euphemistic (and frequently tongue-in-cheek) variations on familiar English profanities for which both an oral pronunciation and a (standard) written spelling already exist, and in which the euphemistic innovation is typically a play on the shapes of the individual letters used in transposing a common word from oral origins to written representation: The asterisks, ampersands, and so on make visual reference to the letters of the English alphabet. The keyboard smash, however, is the "out loud" manifestation of inwardly experienced frustration or excitement — and the difficulty, inevitably, is in trying to transpose this natively textual and visual expression into a vocalization articulable by the human tongue. Tumblr's writing conventions mark an entirely new linguistic process, in which writing embodies, rather than represents, the unintelligible of human experience.

Because the impetus of such embodied expression is the emotional-physiological nexus of affect (Sobchack 2004), the keyboard smash not only constitutes an entirely new iteration in human communication, but is decisively grounded within the affect-intensive concerns that inflect young women's digital interactions (Tannen 2013; Kanai 2017b) and which are frequently heightened within SuperWhoLock fandom. As Paul

Booth has observed, Tumblr's digital estate is one characterized by attention to affect, with media fandoms serving as particular sites of affective intensity (2017); within SuperWhoLock fandom, many texts are framed and presented precisely for the aim of inciting heightened affect across a range of experiential categories (typically organized in terms of the reader's response to the anchoring media text). The emergence of the keyboard smash as a legible, yet non-verbal, digital expressivity is thus intricately contingent: it emerges only at the confluence of multiple vectors of communicative intent, technical constraint, and interactive possibility.

cAPSLoCK & other eccentricities

Other elements of Tumblr's digital vernacular similarly manipulate the technical affordances of keyboards and play with the conventions of typography in order to expand the expressive range of (primarily) typed communication. Much of the creative energy in SuperWhoLock fandom's play with/against the rules of normative conventions in spelling and punctuation is oriented toward the encoding of what Deborah Tannen calls "metamessages" (Tannen 2013). Tannen proposes this term as an adaption and refinement of Gregory Bateson's more famous articulation of *metacommunication*:

Bateson's notion of metacommunication is key to his seminal concept of framing. He explains that during a trip to the Fleischhacker Zoo in San Francisco, he observed monkeys at play and wondered how a monkey knew that an obviously hostile move, such as a bite, should be interpreted as play. He concluded that monkeys have a

way of communicating the metamessage "This is play," thus allowing another monkey to correctly interpret the spirit in which a bite was intended (Tannen 2013: 101).

As Tannen's own framing suggests, scholars researching language and social interaction have long found Bateson's insight to be a useful starting point for their own investigations. Tannen adapts his terminology somewhat for the sake of charting a particular distinction:

> When I refer to messages and metamessages in spoken interaction, I am adapting Bateson's framework to distinguish meaning at two levels of abstraction. I use the term 'messages' to refer to what Bateson described as the 'seemingly simple denotative level,' that is, the meaning of the words as they would be decoded by a dictionary and a grammar. My use of the term 'metamessages' derives from his concept of metacommunication, in which 'the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers' and is overwhelmingly implicit. That is, metamessages communicate how a speaker intends a message, and how a hearer interprets a message — what is says about the relationship that one utters these words in this way in this context (Tannen 2013: 101).

Tannen's project in "The Medium is the Metamessage," then, is to elaborate several means by which metamessages are communicated in digital interaction, with special emphasis on instances of miscommunication that arise as a result of imperfectly shared sets of assumptions regarding the metamessages communicated by particular communicative uses of digital affordances.

Metamessages are of course not limited to digital interaction, and neither are miscommunications regarding their meaning. Rather, communication within digital spaces instantiates a set of expectations rooted in the affordances and constraints of the local estate; these affordances and constraints become a part of the interactional setting, in much the way that a café or a busy sidewalk constitute part of the interactional setting for face-to-face communication. And yet the digital is more completely integrated in the communication than either the café or the sidewalk; it shapes the expressive and interactional possibilities, and the poetics that facilitate the creation of structures to convey metamessages, more intimately than the background noise of traffic or the glancing surveillance of strangers taking coffee.

The need to manage metamessages by encoding in primarily-orthographic digital communication the pragmatics of the utterance, the tone of delivery and the force of the speaker's intent, leads to a number of features in young women's "digital discourse" (Tannen's term, as a descriptor which encompasses multiple forms of digitally networked textual engagement; following her discussion, I use this terminology throughout) which appear with regularity in SuperWhoLock texts. Persistent features include the reduplication of word-final vowels and exclamatory or interrogative punctuation,[31] and the related phenomenon of reiterative emphasis (Tannen 2013). For Antti Lindfors, these elements constitute "performative enactments" within a digital poetics for which reiteration and repetition emerge as a distinctive feature. Like rhyme

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[31] This reduplication is especially striking in that it is paired against the linguistically "unmarked" (Tannen 1993) omission of periods; in other words, sentence-final punctuation is retained only when it carries pragmatic data beyond the simple conclusion of the utterance.

or meter, like *kennings* or the never-exact repeating descriptions in the *Song of Solomon*, repetition in informal digital texts plays an anchoring role; but it also serves as a tool for conveying emphasis, sincerity, "illocutionary force" (Bauman and Briggs 1990); the intensity of the speaker's intent.

In Chapter Five, we will examine how reiteration serves to structure digital performance and poetics within a single, collaborative text across multiple speech turns. For the moment, however, I want to highlight some of the uses of reiterative poetics on a smaller scale.

I have selected examples which show practices of reduplication within Tumblr's tagging function not because reduplication is particularly associated with tagging in SuperWhoLock fandom (in fact the usage of reduplication and reiteration in inscribing feeling and emphasis is widespread across all varieties of SuperWhoLock discourse), but because these examples provide a useful opportunity to see how the communicative practice of reiteration emerges in play with/on the technical affordances of the Tumblr platform to instantiate a poetics that is both part of a larger constellation of digitally-mediated expressivity and distinctly inflected by the particularities of Tumblr's digital estate — a local accent and lexicon.

(Source: rosetylered)

reblog: burningupasun source: jynandor

♥ 3362 || #NOPE #NOPENOPENOPENOPE #THIS IS NOT OKAY #*sobs*
#my Doctor #*holds him tight* #wandering with the queue

Figure 12
Image: https://gallifreyshawkeye.tumblr.com/post/70011612890

Figure 13
Image: https://green-eyed-hunter-in-my-

tardis.tumblr.com/post/49307224786/quickblowsmokeuphisbottom

In each of the screen shots above, the reduplication of #nope serves an emphatic function, encoding the speaker's affective response to the text she is reblogging. Here is an instance in which Tumblr's vernacular often stymies newcomers to the site's fandom blogs. "Nope" in SuperWhoLock discourse, but not in "mainstream" non-fandom discourse on Tumblr, carries a specialized meaning of affective excess; tagging a post with "nope" signals not rejection of the content, but rather that the text has so successfully incited affective intensity that it overruns the blogger's ability to control and convey: like the frustration that precedes sexual fulfillment, the feeling of #nope is at once too much and insistently right.

gallifreyshawkeye and green-eyed-hunter-in-my-tardis thus employ a specialized, group-internal usage of the familiar expression *nope*; Tumblr's digital vernacular is in fact full of unexpectedly altered meanings of this kind (it takes a while to get used to interpreting "u lil shit" as a marker of affection). They also employ the strategy of reduplication for emphasis/enthusiasim (Tannen 2013), "mak[ing] use of the principle of performativity" (Lindfors 2017) in order to signal their intense enthusiasm for the post content and invite other fans to share their affective experience. In the process, they play with the affordances of Tumblr's tagging system. Tumblr obligatorily separates tags by commas, and will only allow a single instance of each tag — but tags are case-dependent, and spacing between words/letters allows for a great deal of play; common variations on the reduplicated #nope are

| #n o p e |

and

| nOPE |

The specific tags used by each blogger in the screen shots above are therefore structured by

a) the pragmatic demands of the communicative context, which call for a performative enactment (Lindfors 2017) that fulfills an enthusiasm constraint (Tannen 2013);

b) a lexical peculiarity of the "local" dialect within Tumblr's fandom spaces, which encodes the context-specific meaning of "nope";

c) a social norm that weighs against speaking into the body of the post directly ("Your Feelings Go in the Tags"; discussed in detail in Chapter Four),

and

d) the technical affordances of Tumblr's tagging system, which presents both difficulties in reduplication and incites a playful use of "creative typography" (Soffer 2010) through tag separation and spacing: the break after the first #nope or #NOPE, followed by the urgency of the closed spaces between its repetitions (#nopenopenopenopenope).

<u>Repetition with Variation: A Poetics of Tumblr Tagging</u>

As the above perhaps suggests, it is difficult to separate the protocols of reduplication (Tannen 2013) from the more general practices of creative typography for managing self-presentation (Soffer 2010); indissolubly, all of the above participate in an

informal, locally-inflected set of communicative practices that reflect community textual aesthetics at the same time they manage the pragmatics and social expectations of enthusiasm constraints and audience responsivity (Lindfors 2017). As Bakhtin reminds us, language only truly exists in the actual utterance (1986); to extract a text for analysis is necessarily to denude it of its "original" interpretive framing and embed it in a new context (Bauman and Briggs 1990), which despite the researcher's best efforts is never entirely neutral. The centering practice in the texts I have examined here, and one which I read as central to SuperWhoLock fandom's textual culture more broadly, is one of playing with words, technical affordances, and familiar expectations; it is also one of playing against, or off of, existing texts, the constraints of digital hedgerows and fences, the limitations of media texts and contemporary cultural narratives.

SuperWhoLock fans' communicative practices have implications for the complexity and indeterminancy of their relation to the digital "estate" they inhabit, as suggested in Chapter Two. One of the features of vernacular culture across multiple historical contexts, however, is that for the most part its daily practice(s) — the practices of everyday life, to play off de Certeau — are not concerned with questions of power or deference so much as with getting by, achieving the immediate desired outcome, artistic or expressive or socially engaged: "Making what you want out of what you have" (Berryman 2018).

At the level of communicative practice, therefore, the distinctive poetics of Tumblr — and particularly the hypermarginalia created by SuperWhoLock fans — emerge at the interstices of multiple factors, structured by the possibilities and

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limitations of the platform's software architecture — which, again, we might think of as a kind of digital groundskeeping that necessarily also shapes the paths its tenants may take and the ladders they must climb (Thompson 1993: 113). To return to the balls/walls metaphor I suggested in the Introduction, many of the habits of tagging within SuperWhoLock fandom may be understood as a textual bouncing of communicative intent against "a more rigid structure" and rebounding, keeping the project of meaning-making always in play.

CHAPTER FOUR : PLAYING WITH OUR SELVES & OTHERS

<u>Introduction & Overview</u>

In this chapter, I examine selected SuperWhoLock fan texts in order to explore

how community-identity relations are articulated, mediated, and sustained within the

context of a specific speech community (SuperWhoLock fandom) inhabiting the Tumblr

platform. I build on the notion of protocols established in Chapter Three (above) to read

fan texts as they manipulate Tumblr's affordances. In this chapter, I expand analysis

from the level of "enthusiasm constraints" (Tannen 2013) and the coding of nonstandard

capitalization and punctuation as indices of informality which serve to convey a

pragmatics of intimacy, especially among young women (Soffer 2010; Tannen 2013;

and Chapter Three, above) to examine these protocols in use as they form texts that

mediate relationships and regulate both individual affect and coded performances of

feeling. This analysis serves my larger project by demonstrating the role of play within

online fan cultures in constructing affectively-oriented communities. Within these

communities and at the boundaries between self and group, individual subjectivities are

articulated, negotiated, produced through digital texts and Tumblr's practices of curation

as self-representation (Kanai 2017a; 2019; Booth 2017) — and consumed.

Problematizing these practices of digital identity production and consumption is an

essential step in furthering existing scholarship that seeks to understand emergent,

hyper-mediated forms of self-production in a political context of neoliberal governmentality.

Habitus & Contexutality

Facebook's model set the expectations for social media constructs throughout the Western world. From 2004 on, Facebook rapidly replaced existing models of digital cultures and the "vernacular web" (Howard 2008). Facebook's domination of the digital landscape means that its structure and its technical affordances have functioned — not just for Tumblr, but throughout the social media landscape within which Facebook became the most recognizable feature — as the "norm" against which all other iterations of social media are measured and their specificities defined.

Among the most salient of these affordances and structures for my analysis of SuperWhoLock fan texts:

- Facebook encourages, even imposes, the integration of digital social networks with social networks actualized offline: biological family, workmates, classmates, local friends.

- Facebook defines privacy in terms of nesting circles of "friends": "close" friends; "friends in [location]"; "family"; "acquaintances"; and so on.

- Facebook users can set their personal profiles and timelines to differing levels of default visibility, which filter how much information is available to viewers according to their relationship (or lack of relationship) with the user. While many users are justly skeptical of Facebook's claims to prioritize users' privacy, the

company's discourse routinely emphasizes users' "control" over privacy and data (collection/usage).

Facebook, perhaps more than any other digital platform, has capitalized on the multi-tab browsing and incoming app notification possibilities of recent hardware and infrastructure developments to integrate the use of its platform into everyday practice (Jones 2009), turning "always on" Internet connectivity into a structuring condition for the emergence of digital-era social norms, which in turn are mediated by the "metamessages" encoded in the sociolinguistics of digital discourse (Tannen 2013).

In contrast to Facebook, then, Tumblr is understood to be a digital social space discursively bounded from the demands of everyday social life. Tumblr users habitually express a sense that the "semi-anonymity" of Tumblr (whose affordances for privacy are negligible in comparison to Facebook's and almost entirely reliant on the bloggers' own caution and consistency in use of pseudonyms) allows them to be and act more authentically, to become "more themselves" (Hillman, Neustaedter, & Procyk 2014). This sense of authenticity complicates a widespread belief that identities constructed online are "inexorably managed, and thus performed" (Lindfors 2017). On the surface, at least, it is similarly contrastive with Kanai's observation that many of the posts she surveyed in her study of "girlfriendship" in Tumblr's digital spaces were consciously crafted to drive likes and shares (which Kanai construes as the accumulation of digital value) through the presentation of generalizable, "relatable" situations (and the affects experienced in them).

In the digital vernacular — across estates from Twitter and Facebook to Tumblr and beyond — "relatability" is conceived and posed as a set of conditions (real or hypothetical), and individual responses to them, with which readers are expected to identify: relatability constructs the posting subject as both aspirational and self-deprecating, taking up a position in which others can imagine themselves. Relatability, successfully produced through digital texts, enables the never-met to experience the feeling of closeness with the posting subject by stepping imaginatively into her shoes.

The social structures of girlfriendship, combined with the genre expectations established by relatability blogging, present a pliant-yet-snappy framework against which SuperWhoLock fans construct a particular type of post that purports to represent paradigmatic moments/experiences integrate to fan identity — an identity which, in the Tumblr context, is typically understood as feminine and thus a specifically *fangirl[32]* identity. Posts in this genre are often, though not obligatorily, tagged #fandom life.

I want to be clear on this point: In the discussion that follows I am not assuming, much less asserting, that the now-widespread digital genre of relatability posting originated with either girlfriendship blogging or SuperWhoLock, c. 2012. While both the SuperWhoLock blogs (roughly 24-36 individual blogs, complicated by frequent URL changes that made distinct blogs a moving target) in my own study and the six blogs Kanai examines in her survey — particularly the whatshouldwecallme blog she identifies as the "founder" — certainly function as early and formative examples,

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[32] See Chapter Three, above; "fangirl" is an emic term situated within a context that assumes feminine gender on Tumblr and constitutes fandom identity in terms of affective excess and communal feeling.

I have been unable to discern with certainty whether Tumblr bloggers actually invented the "relatable" posting genre, or if they merely structured it into the now-paradigmatic situation + reaction GIF format (Tumblr was an early frontrunner in GIF culture) and adapted it to the purpose of chronicling and representing the affective experiences of, variously, postfeminist neoliberal female subjectivity or an intensively shared investment in media texts. Kanai's reportage, however, does make clear that by mid-2012 the girlfriendship blogs had become a social force — and, not coincidentally, a brand — with wide-ranging influence within unofficial digital cultures, and especially within the blogs' "native" setting, on Tumblr.

Alterity & Identity

Reading "fangirling" — participation in a set of distinctively gendered discursive practices centered around shared affective relation to a media text — in alterity to girlfriendship is important in part because the latter is, as Kanai acknowledges, available only to certain privileged subjects: White, middle-class, Western, cisgender, and "resolutely heterosexual" (Kanai 2019b: 97). Thus while participation in girlfriendship by way of a "digital intimate public" may constitute "a powerful claim to belong in the world" (Kanai 2017b: 295), its reliance on shared mediation of social normatively predicated on special conditions of class, race, gender, and sexual preference mean that its invitation to share the frustrations of ostensibly universal feminine experience is in fact wholly inaccessible to many.

I am not arguing that "fangirling," as identity or activity, is universally accessible. But in predicating participation on shared affective investment in and response to a set of widely-available media texts, fangirling does set the class bar substantially lower than the distinctively middle-class — often *upper* middle-class — situations represented in the girlfriendship blogs do. Although Kanai identifies some differences in the prototypical representations of "girlfriendly" activities represented in the founder vs. "follower" blogs, with the latter tending more toward depictions of "situations that sometimes appear indistinguishable from broader *Sex and the City* (Star 1998) type narratives where girlfriendship is synonymous with feminine consumption" (Kanai 2019b: 97), the expectations for personal achievement and social relations implicit in the blog texts she examines clearly pertain to a relatively privileged position of white middle class femininity.

In contrast to the more economically demanding activities depicted in the girlfriendship blogs, "relatable" representations of fandom experience require relatively little financial investment. Although the financial requirements of accessing media texts are not negligible, they are available to a substantially broader swath of the young, female population than are drinking cocktails (Kanai 2019b; 2019a) and attending law school (2017b). In the exemplary post below, for instance, "introducing a friend to my favorite show" requires access to a media text and therefore presumably to a device on which the media text may be displayed — depending on the origins of the "favorite show," it may also require subscription to a cable, satellite, or online streaming service.

But all of the above are accessible to significantly more young women than shopping at J. Crew (Kanai 2019b: 97).

Participation in SuperWhoLock fandom is therefore not restricted by class in the same way that the "affective invitation to understand the self as part of a public of girlfriends who struggle but manage to go on" (Kanai 2017b: 298) is. The accessibility of SuperWhoLock fandom vis a vis girlfriendship is about more than economics, however. As Kanai explains, "the emphasis on the special position of the girlfriends occurs precisely through the depiction of girlfriendship as resolutely heterosexual" (2019b: 97). To the extent that girlfriendship is an experience of belonging, rather than achieved acceptance to a group, girlfriendship is not available as an emotive and socially networked support to LGBTQ+ women. This exclusivity is especially striking in the Tumblr context, because "Tumblr […] has been noted to constitute a space of relative freedom and exploration for queer and trans users" (Kanai 2019a: 64); the hosting of these "resolutely heterosexual" depictions of women's social bonds within the Tumblr platform is therefore curious, at odds with the broader tendencies of Tumblr culture and yet enmeshed within them.

LGBTQ+ subjects are represented within SuperWhoLock fandom, and over the course of the preliminary reading/textual survey (estimated 150,000 - 200,000 individual posts; the estimate is troubled because of the frequency of reblogs) representations of LGBTQ+ characters in media texts, and the difficulties experienced by actual LGBTQ+ subjects in contemporary Western (especially U.S.) society constituted a recurring theme. Angie, the blogger behind soufflesforgallifrey, is openly bisexual on her Tumblr,

and many of her *Doctor Who* posts featuring actor Jenna Louise Coleman *allude* to this fact.

Although the objectification and sexualization of actors' bodies in SuperWhoLock fandom overall does trend toward representations of men,[33] on the soufflesforgallifrey blog, male and female actors' bodies are entextualized (Jones 2009; Bauman 2004) and presented for the community's "visual pleasure" (Mulvey 1975) with roughly equivalent frequency. While SuperWhoLock fandom encompass many demonstrations of female heteronormativity (indeed often celebrated and exaggerated), fangirling does not depend on the constitution of individual fangirls as "resolutely heterosexual" (Kanai 2019b: 97). Participation in SuperWhoLock fandom is not contingent upon the assumption or the performance of heterosexuality in the way that belonging within the "intimate public" (Kanai 2017b) of girlfriendship is.

SuperWhoLock fandom is thus open to subjects who are excluded by some or all of the conditions of girlfriendship culture. Yet "fangirling" performs many of the same functions Kanai ascribes to girlfriendship: it constructs a "digital intimate public" (Kanai 2017b) based on shared affect, which is used as a premise for establishing sameness; "feeling 'the same' as the blogger" (2017b: 298) offers the assurance of intimacy and solidarity within a digital space whose appeal as a "safe" space is predicated on a "semi-anonymity" (Hillman, Neustaedter, & Procyk 2014) which might otherwise be alienating.

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[33] Perhaps reflecting the greater prevalence of heterosexuality, even within Tumblr, or perhaps owing to a discomfort with participating in what is felt to be an overbearing emphasis on the objectification of women's bodies in official media culture already (whovianfeminism).

This point is important, and it marks a shift in the construction of "online" relationships and communities from earlier models of digital interaction. AOL "chat" rooms and late-90s message boards were framed by a fear of strangers, an anxiety about the facility with which digital self-representation might easily be misrepresentation. In the LiveJournal heyday, the affordances of "f-lists," "f-locking" and private messaging allowed for the development of "hyperpersonal" exchanges, based on users' intentional self-disclosures (Gilding and Henderson 2004). Tumblr's overlapping digital communities emerged during a period of increasing skepticism of digital "privacy," structured by repeated data breaches around the world and by the rapidly standardized career advice to assume anything posted to Facebook would be public by Monday morning.

Within this context, girlfriends and fangirls have leveraged "the way young women have been the first to understand the affordances of digital media in offering personal lives for consumption by unknown others" (Kanai 2017b: 296) — not at random, but through "offering branding as a social relationship, a set of affective practices, that structures the terms under which the self may be related to others" (2017b: 296). Drawing on gendered discursive practices which distinctively manage the social relations between speaker and audience (Tannen 2013), young women on Tumblr "structure a relationally towards […] members of this intimate public, those 'in the know' in relation to girlfriend culture [or fan culture] who 'get' the situations that are related" (Kanai 2017b: 297).

While SuperWhoLock posts are not preeminently concerned with relating the challenges and experiences of postfeminist womanhood, as the girlfriend posts are, SuperWhoLock bloggers similarly "build relations with unknown publics through affective labor" (Kanai 2017b: 296). Through the production of constellations of "relatable" situations and affects, both sets of bloggers resolve the tensions present in online communication by replacing the intimate, one-to-one personal knowledge (of the sort one might have of a classmate or a longterm neighbor, for instance) with an affective identification based on shared "feeling rules" (Kanai 2017b; 2019a).

Subjectivity in (Digital) Language: The I/You Duality

In Chapter Three, I suggested the some of the features that appear frequently in SuperWhoLock texts are best understood in terms of the sociolinguistics of "digital discourse" among young women (Tannen 2013). I used Deborah Tannen's discussion of gendered norms in the management of "metamessages" in digital communication to argue that, given the close parallels between the techniques she identifies and those recurring in SuperWhoLock fan texts, and given that SuperWhoLock fans demonstrate an assumption of feminine subjectivity within the fandom, reading SuperWhoLock texts within the pragmatics of production and reception that govern digital discourse among young women more broadly may render the texts more intelligible. At the same time, SuperWhoLock fan texts can enrich our understanding of young women's online communication by adding to the existing body of exemplary texts from which scholars can draw their conclusions. This two-way productivity is not the result of circular

reasoning, but rather an important property of both discourse analysis and of any body

of texts conceived as an archive (Derecho 2006): Every text added alters the archive as a

totality, while at the same time any text is enhanced by a contextualized reading.

Whereas Chapter Three was focused on protocols at the level of sentence and

typography and the manipulation of technical affordances, in practice most textual

activity involves the combination of many communicative protocols used together to

create an overall effect — and protocols exist too at the level of genre, in the assemblage

of smaller pieces that, taken together, we recognize by convention as signaling particular

kinds of texts. The enactment of protocols at this level also has implications for how

speakers position themselves with relation to the developing text and to their audience

and prior or future speakers.

An important protocol for this kind of contextualized, sociolinguistically

informed analysis within Tumblr is what I am calling "opposition as position." Although

the intertextual referentiality characteristic of "communicative practice" (Bauman 2004)

in what I am calling the digital vernacular has been well-documented (Booth 2015;

2017; Newman 2014), substantive analysis of the OaP protocol remains elusive, perhaps

because its communicative usage lies outside the scope of traditional rhetorical analysis.

Although the relation of present to prior text in OaP is explicitly and obligatorily

contrastive, the construction of an OaP text does not correspond to the rhetorical

functions of rebuttal or refutation. An OaP text is a response, but it is not a reply; it does

not engage the prior text as in a conversation. Rather, in an OaP text uses the prior text

(or body of discourse) the present blogger takes a prior text or body of discourse —

often, but not always, a post she is reblogging — as the premise, the literal pre-text, for articulating her own position in terms of differentiation from the perspective laid out therein.

Understanding the intended audience of an OaP text is essential to interpretation. To read an OaP text as a speech turn in a conversation with the prior text or its author(s) is to fundamentally misunderstand the addressivity (Bakhtin 1986) of the oppositional text. An OaP text is directed not at the previous author or speaker, but at the present blogger's own "intimate public" (Kanai 2017b), an audience and community constituted precisely by their collective similarity of affect in response to one or more (media) text(s). The arrival of the antecedent text (often reblogged by someone within the present blogger's own loosely structured digital networks)[34] thus becomes the occasional for a renewal and intensification of group norms and community bounding, through a practice of dis-identification: Speaking notionally on behalf of the community, the oppositional blogger identifies and calls to attention a belief or feeling that is *not* shared (and therefore not accepted), in order to articulate her own position, with which members of the intimate public are implicitly invited (expected) to identify, in terms of contrast.

(Mock) Vocatives & Identification

In the OaP model, the antecedent text fulfills a function similar to that of reported speech in many other "speech genres" (Bakhtin 1986). Although many OaP

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[34] See Booth (2017) on the nebulous construction of "community" both on Tumblr and in SuperWhoLock fandom.

texts in fact open with the vocative *you*, as if forming a direct response to the prior text (as seen below: "Then I would hope that you…"), in conversational settings involving reported speech this operation is in fact common.

Mock-vocatives (not always used for humor or for play) constitute an important tool for mediating the pragmatics of communicative contexts in which "we" expression frustration with something done or said by "them": I tell a friend about a workmate's overbearing behavior, and he exclaims, "If you don't know what you're doing, stop trying to take charge!" The *you* of his utterance is my workmate — who is not present, and whom my friend has never met. The mock-vocative allows him to respond *as if* to the absent workmate, and thus to articulate an appropriate response to the behavior in solidarity with my own expressed affect; it affirms that he has understood; he has a comeback to offer on my behalf. A friend recounting a bad date may conclude her account by demanding, "What is *wrong* with you?" — but she is not asking what is wrong with *me*, her present interlocutor; the *you* of her (rhetorical) question is the unsatisfactory date partner.

And so on. The salient point is that, although use of the mock-vocative in digital contexts seems not to have been much studied (I have been unable to locate a single monograph on the subject), in conversational usage the mock-vocative is in fact well-established, so familiar it often passes unrecognized. Notably, its use is particularly associated with reported speech and especially with *gossip*. As in many instances of "gossip," too, the pragmatics of the production and reception are primarily concerned with the relationship(s) between participants, and the singling out of a contrastive

position allows the present speaker to reaffirm the expected (shared; normative) position and feelings of her "intimate public," discursively constituting an "us" that is not "them."

While linguistic complexities of mock vocatives in online discourse open a number of avenues for analysis, one of the more immediate effects of OaP texts is the mediation of affect and the discursive pressures of affect norming within groups. Kanai reads the norming of affect in the intimate publics of girlfriendship blogging on Tumblr as the result of specifically gendered discursive practices which serve to enforce "feeling rules" (Kanai 2019a). Importantly, it is through the "metamessages" encoded in women's digital discourse (Tannen 2013) that such "feeling rules" are negotiated and maintained.

The protocol of OaP provides a powerful tool for members of the community to rein scribe the boundaries of their intimate public by "calling out" positions and feelings that do not belong, that mark the subject as one of "them" instead of one of "us."

Here, for example, littleclaudy "calls out" the animus a prior text expresses toward *Sherlock* character Sally Donovan:

Freak? It's for you.

fandomsandfeminism:

 littleclaudy:

  thescienceofjohnlock:

   celloplayingtimelady:

    One day, John may just punch her.

    I know I would if someone continually called my best friend "freak"

   This is why I dislike Donovan, it's got nothing to do with her gender, colour or how well she does her job. It's this.

Figure 14

Figure 15
Images: https://stfu-moffat.tumblr.com/post/58610660081/fandomsandfeminism-littleclaudy

The easy read, of course — the one that would prevail outside the Tumblr context — is to interpret the intervention here as a straightforward, if hostile, response to a blog post with which the second user does not agree. Within the fame of Tumblr's technological affordances and discursive norms, however, it becomes possible to read

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the post not as a direct response to the original poster, but as an enactment (Lindfors 2017) in which the reblogging user takes the existing post as the pretext for assuming the stage and articulating a contrary opinion *for the benefit of their own followers*. This rhetorical maneuver actually duplicates the strategy of the original post, which takes Sally Donovan's line (to Sherlock, out of frame) as the pretext not for elaborating the general inappropriateness of a Scotland Yard detective calling a consultant retained by her department a "freak," but for expounding on the blogger's solidarity with John Watson as a friend of Sherlock *in opposition to* Sally Donovan.

Analysis that attempts, at least, to engage with undergraduate-level readings of gender studies and critical race theory is legible in the blogger's articulation of her position; importantly, however, her post is not framed in terms of this analysis. Rather, the framing is one that seeks to discipline fans' affective response to characters represented in the media text: to Sally Donovan, a nonwhite female detective, and to Sherlock, a white male operating from a position of social prestige and economic privilege. The legitimacy with which fellow fans may lay claim to "belonging" within the affect-based community of littleclaudy's "intimate public" is predicated on the sharing of appropriate affect in the face of "problematic" media texts and narratives.[35]

Pushing off; pushing against. Leverage.

At times the oppositional text — the "you" to which the contrastive text responds — is a hypothetical, posited by the blogger in order to make her point. While this kind

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[35] Notably, during the second Obama Administration "ur fav is problematic" enjoyed considerable social currency on Tumblr as both a fandom activity and a quasi-politics: within the digital estate constituted by the Tumblr platform, among "the plebs'" (Thompson 1993) in the digital vernacular there is little distinction between political discourse, entertainment preference, and personal identity.

of rhetorical strategy is common in conversation, again, in the SuperWhoLock blogging

context it serves to activate the OaP protocol, providing a pretext against which the

blogger can articulate her own position. Such pre textual operations make obvious use of

the orienting "philosophy of playfulness" identified by Paul Booth (2015; 2017), but

often absent the spirit of lighthearted revelry in which playfulness is commonly

understood, and with which Booth (primarily) works throughout his analysis of Tumblr

fandoms/fandoms on Tumblr: here, instead, play works "as a reaction to […] rules," the

rules in this case being the parameters established by existing discourses within the

fandom and, more broadly, within the digital vernacular at large. Tumblr blogger

omfgcate postulates a "you" she accuses of "jerking off" to images of women from the

Doctor Who media text:

Figure 16
Image: https://whovianfeminism.tumblr.com/post/44418637936/stfu-moffat-omfgcate-if-you-look-at-this

Here omfgcate postulates the existence of a "you, nameless dudebro with your cock in hand" in order to critique not the objectification of female bodies within the *Doctor Who* media text, but rather to launch an attack against inappropriate feeling *in response to* that text, in contrast to which she articulates her own position and,

notionally, the position of feminist fans at large. Moreover, she sets up her argument by creating — through a process of entextualization and recombination — precisely the kind of objectifying text, a set of six close-up GIFs of women' bodies framed and brought into view for the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975), whose ostensible demand she criticizes as "normaliz[ing] the objectification of female bodies to the point that even writers and directors of family shows feel the need to put a little boob/ass/leg into the mix for no apparent reason" (omfgcate 2013).[36]

although omfgcate is even more explicit in her use of (relatively) contemporary feminist media theory than is littleclaudy, directly referencing Laura Mulvey's germinal critique of the male gaze (1975), the framing of her argument — the basis on which she stakes her claim to its relevance within fan culture — is couched in terms of affect: how viewers should or should not respond, emotionally or physiologically (Sobchack 2004) to the images presented. The regulation of affect here is not directed, as among Kanai's girlfriendship bloggers, toward the inculcation of a normative femininity; rather, in an ironic twist, intrafandom governmentality is oriented toward the production of an avowedly progressive politics that seeks to drive forward social, and therefore political, change from within fan cultures in the digital vernacular.

Feeling & Identity

It is perhaps not mere coincidence that the OaP protocol seems to be used with special frequency in posts that articulate positions the author takes to be controversial.

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[36] The shots depicted are not similarly emphasized in the context of the original media narrative.

The easy and obvious explanation should be that the presence of an immediately contrastive text already suggests the likelihood of disagreement and therefore conditions the speaker's framing of her own position as controversial. This explanation is complicated, however, by the fact that SuperWhoLock fans will occasionally frame their staking of a position in the terms of the OaP protocol even when no discrete contrastive text is identified, framing the speech act instead as a taking up of arms in the face of (notionally) powerful social and discursive forces, responding not to a single text but to a body of discourse posited by the post, with which the author assumes her actual audience (the intimate public invited to identify with her position) to be already familiar.

While reference to a whole body of discourse may confuse the outside reader, within the context of a self-limiting community it is not unfathomable; most OaP texts structured with this kind of non-specific referentiality are clearly framed in terms of an ongoing, intrafandom discussion whose echoes reverberate through Tumblr with enough force that, like passing references to "the #MeToo moment" or "Trumpism" or "the Russian probe," within the anticipated readership they require no glossing; they are both familiar and topical. More confusingly, occasionally a post emerges that makes clear use of the OaP structure but posits of a body of discourse whose existence seems highly questionable. This is the case, for example, with "I just don't see …," below; the author objects to a posited negative animus toward *Supernatural* actor Misha Collins for which I have uncovered no evidence whatsoever. It's unclear who the "you guys" in the post are meant to be, but though Collins has in fact maintained a long-running faux-feud via Twitter with fellow actor and philanthropist William Shatner (of *Star Trek* fame), that

pseudo-rivalry seems rarely to make itself felt on the Tumblr platform. Moreover, in the course of reading some 150-200k posts across roughly a dozen SuperWhoLock blogs (the latter number is more troubled, owing to both the frequency of URL changes and the notoriously muddy question of textual authorship and ownership on Tumblr particularly), I failed to encounter a single post that presented itself as even remotely critical of Collins; on Tumblr, at least, he seems almost universally beloved.

Figure 17: https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/56970680226
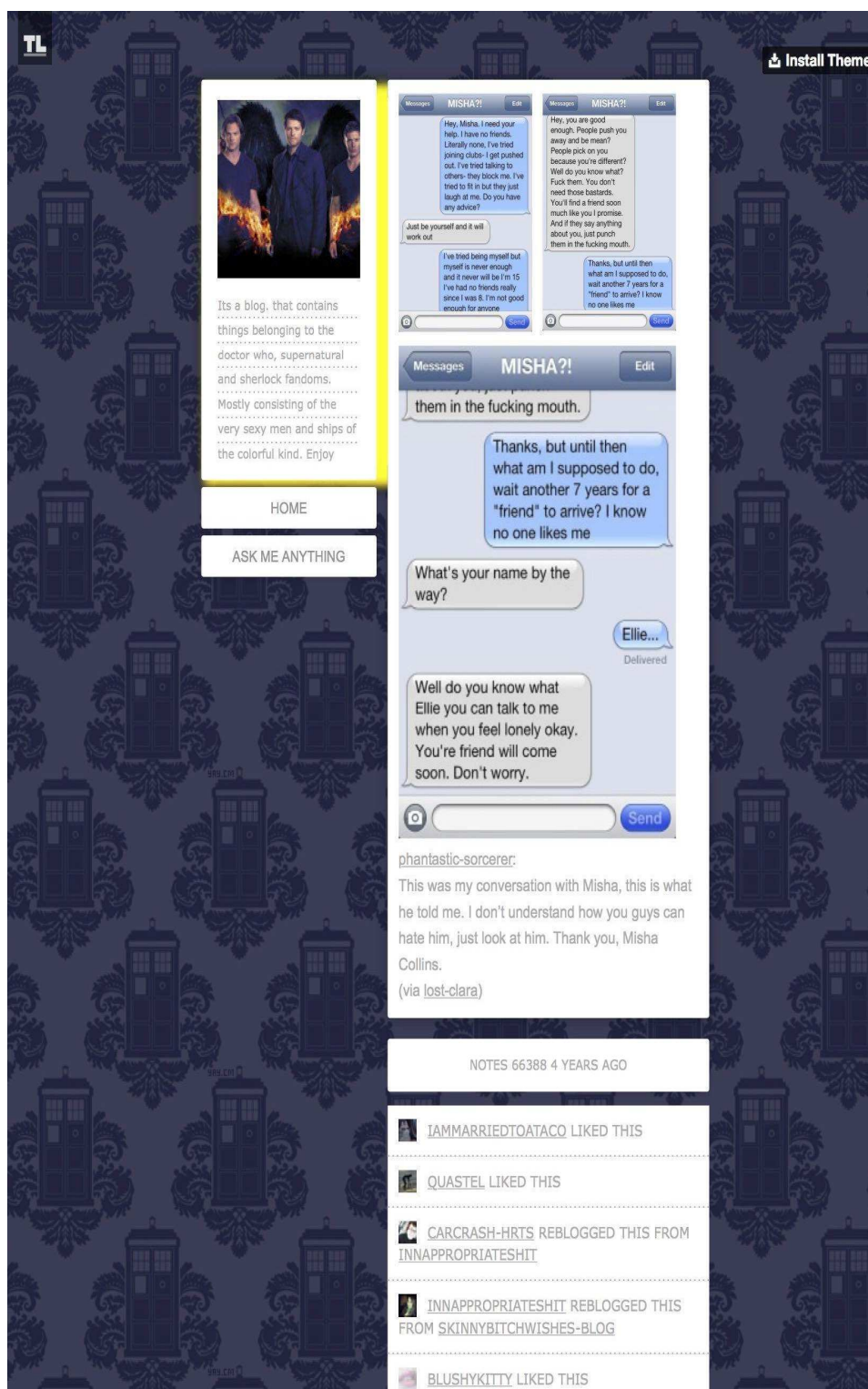
One way of making sense of such posts is to assume the presence of contrastive texts somehow not available to the blogger's general readership; the author could, for example, be responding publicly to a set of messages (presumably "hateful") received privately. Or, admitting the "hating Misha" post as an extreme example, we might simply discard it as an aberration. However, taking into account the fact that most texts corresponding to the OaP protocol seem to respond either to a discrete text immediately in evidence (typically by a reblog with commentary) or, at a minimum, to a body of texts and widely held opinions so generally recognized as to need no explanation within the SuperWhoLock blogging context, I think we can gain better traction by attempting to understand the appeal of OaP as a technique for articulating one's own position, on behalf of the community, in terms of dis-identification.

Importantly, from a technical standpoint there is no necessary relationship between the OaP protocol and affect norming. It should theoretically be possible to outline a position, and offer it for adoption by the community at large, in terms other than those of feelings. However, given a context in which digital community is — precisely as in the girlfriendship blogs Kanai surveys — already constituted as an "intimate public" based on affective identification, "feeling 'the same'" (Kanai 2017b: 298), it is perhaps not spurring that contrastive positionally should be defined in terms of affect. Thus the Misha fan's complaint, for instance, is not that anyone has attacked Collins personally or professionally, but that "you guys" allegedly "hate" him.

In creating community through "intimate publics" based on affective identification, young women have to a remarkable degree resolved the initial anxiety of digital communication: the fear of the stranger behind the screen. Affective identification offers participants a feeling of belonging that both assuages the potential sense of alienation posed by primarily digital social networks (Soffer 2010) and, at the same time, invites participants to let down the guards with which they might regulate their performances of self in face-to-face interactions, allowing them to enjoy an experience of autonomy and authenticity that would otherwise incur immediate social and economic risks (Hillman, Neustaedter, & Procyk 2014). LGBTQ+ subjects, especially adolescents and young adults not yet financially independent from their parents or other networks of face-to-face social support may particularly enjoy the opportunities afforded by Tumblr's "semi-anonymity" (Hillman, Neustaedter, & Procyk 2014), as Tumblr "has been noted to constitute a space of relative freedom and exploration for queer and trans users" (Kanai 2019a).

Yet "the pleasure of recognition based on commonality" (Kanai 2017b: 303) comes at a cost. As Kanai explains, "If belonging is based on being the *same*, distinctions must therefore be made on how to proficiently or convincingly one articulates this sameness" (2017b: 303) — or, in the SuperWhoLock context, the extent to which one can identify (internally) with an expression of (presumptively) collective affect; if "you are part of the fandom when you think you are" (Hillman, Neustaedter & Procyk 2014), then *belonging* is an inner experience. It is participation, with its concomitant potential for acceptance and rejection, that demands an articulation or an

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expression. It is in this context that one's devotion to the fandom, understood as both media text enthusiasts and a Tumblr-centered community, must be proven.[37]

To distill a complicated set of social-affective tensions to a single principle: One can only feel like (included) a member of the community if one feels like (similarity) a member of the community.

Feeling & Meaning

Kanai's work on Tumblr blogging practices centers around the construction of "relatability" and belonging with a "digital intimate public" (2017a: 294), achieved through posts (and reblogs) that "[convert] the frustrations of postfeminist regulation into funny, bite-sized moments" (2019: 60) that "synthesize the personal and the generic" "in order to amplify the affective relatability" of the texts produced (2017a: 298), using Tumblr as "a space through which the affective experiences of living in a postfeminist regulatory landscape may be circulated according to the logic of relatable value" (2019: 65). Essentially, on Kanai's reading, "girlfriendship" blogging on Tumblr works to establish and organize a community around impressions of shared feeling, developed through posts which paradigmatically present the combination of a expressive GIF with a caption that recontextualizes the GIF as the blogger's "own" reaction to a scenario her caption postulates. In appropriating the GIF, the blogger also appropriates its expression; she uses it as means of gesturing with "other hands," much as intertextual interpolations have long been recognized as speaking within, and inhabiting, a "world of

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[37] Devotion here also has implications for digital tenants' loyalty to each other as well as to the (Tumblr) estate they inhabit; performing fellow feeling participates in a wider arena of discourse that enacts social relations by performing them (Thompson 1993) and expressing their appropriate affects.

others' words" (Bakhtin 1986; Bauman 2004). Reblogging the post functions to *replace* the original speaker, while retaining the expression; in affective-relatability blogging, subject positions are interchangeable and bloggers are, literally, "the same" (Kanai 2017a: 298).

Given that SuperWhoLock posts are produced across a far wider range of blogs than the seven included in Kanai's initial study (two foundational blogs and five "follower" blogs), and that their content is thematically organized around a specific set of media texts, rather than around the more diffuse generalities of young female experience in the early-to-mid-200s, it is remarkable how closely the digital poetics (Lindfors 2017) of relatability in SuperWhoLock posts often align with those employed by Kanai's "girlfriendship" bloggers. The similarities suggest participation in a digital vernacular responsive to external conditions; a predominantly youthful culture whose "philosophy of playfulness" (Booth 2017) is nonetheless characterized by a tendency toward the striking of ironic poses that affect a "critical distance" (Hutcheon 1985: 32).

Read in light of the specific affordances of Tumblr's integrated dash as the structuring access point for all users of the platform, however, they are also suggestive of the increasing interpenetration of digital social spheres. Moreover, these similarities suggest a furtherance of Oren Soffer's (2010) conceptualization of digital "speech" as imitating, even in some sense replacing, orality as the default medium for informal communication among small groups, and of Antti Lindfors's (2017) claims for the emerging importance of performative enactments to convey affective and pragmatic data

in digital contexts that lack the affordances of normative human perception in face-to-face interactions.

This last is an especially important point. Whereas the early 2000s saw the migration of participatory cultures into digital spaces, SuperWhoLock is and always has been a participatory culture native to digital spaces, and particularly to Tumblr. Rather than transposing already familiar practices of reading and writing, and the making and sharing of visual art, as these were already known, into the digital environment, therefore, SuperWhoLock fandom developed its practices of participation — its community aesthetic, the shared understanding of posting, attribution, and genre conventions — within the Tumblr environment, in dialogical relation with the "affordances and constraints" of the platform and especially by active negotiation of its "technologies of entextualization" (Jones 2009).

Tumblr itself, much more than earlier hubs of digital fan activity such as fanfiction.net or LiveJournal.com, is itself a product of the SMS and CMC era; the norms of communication on Tumblr emerged already conditioned by the brevity and poetics of informality outlined by Soffer (2010) for rapid, short-form digital communication within relatively small-groups., rather than by the essayist tendencies of early website/blogging practices. In addition, the digital infrastructure of Tumblr foregrounds frequency of social interactivity over sustained engagement with particular content, encouraging brief posts that can be viewed in full on a handheld screen and that will provide snapshot-level easy access for reblogging. The distinction between *social* and earlier digital media is perhaps analogous to that between a city optimized for

driving and one designed for heavy foot traffic: one *can* post, and respond to, lengthy texts on Tumblr, but to do so is cumbersome; on the other hand, to post and reblog "bite-sized" (Kanai 2019) pieces of content is both easy and, in the often rapid accumulation of "likes," affectively satisfying.

The distinctiveness and consistency of the "girlfriendship" blogs' structure renders their style highly susceptible to imitation — imitation which often verges into parody, understood in Linda Hutcheon's formulation as both "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, *not always at the expense of the parodied text*" (1985: 6; emphasis mine). Important to her theoretization of parody,

> this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically
> constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes
> not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the
> reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' [...] between complicity and distance
> (1985: 32).

Imitation, like *entextualization*, "the organization of a stretch of discourse into a text" (Bauman 2004: 4) is central to "how intertextuality is accomplished in communicative practice" (Bauman 2004: 5) on the "vernacular web" (Howard 2008), where even interactions not explicitly participating in any media fandom as a structured and bounded community are still likely to partake of the discursive norms of (re)entextualization and mimicry that make up a "quotation culture" (Newman 2013).

Memes, of course, by the nature consist of imitation; the use of reaction gifs, central to the poetics of "girlfriendship" blogging Kanai examines (2017a; 2017a; 2019),

also clearly employs a similar set of skills in entextualization and repurposing of media materials by

> bounding off a stretch of discourse from its co-text, endowing it with cohesive formal properties, and (often, but not necessarily) rendering it internally coherent" so as to "objectify it as a discrete textual unity that can be referred to, described, named, displayed, cited, and otherwise treated as an object (Bauman 2004: 4).

GIF-makers (not necessarily the GIF-users) adapt those skills to the manipulation not of verbal material (whether spoken or written) but of *visual* media, while GIF-users (not necessarily the GIF-makers) recontextualize the resulting extracted "text" elsewhere to suit their own communicative intentions. At one level, this is a type of "usage" very similar to that posited by de Certeau for urban spaces (1984) and by Jenkins for fans' "poaching" of media texts (1992). GIF usage on Tumblr, however, is distinct from Jenkins's formulation in that the entextualization of media objects is not only tacitly permitted but encouraged (for example, the official *Doctor Who* Tumblr blog has frequently shared GIF-sets created by fans during episode viewings).

Crucially, as well, the creation and re-contextualization of GIFs into new posts constitutes a major form of textual productivity for the site: the "user-generated content" on which Tumblr's profit margin depends. And all the economic troubles Tumblr has experienced since its purchase by Yahoo in 2013, the platform's pioneering of GIF usage has unmistakably terraformed the landscape of informal digital communications. Given SuperWhoLock's central role in fostering GIF production and normalizing the

incorporation of "in-line" GIFs within verbal texts as a communicative practice, it is not too much to say that SuperWhoLock fandom reconstructed the multimedia digital vernacular as we now know it.

In Kanai's reading, "girlfriendship" bloggers pose "an affective invitation to understand the self as part of a public of girlfriends who struggle but manage to go on," constructed through "a mixture of the generic and personal in the portrayal of girlfriendly moments" that "[give] the reader the opportunity to participate under the premise of girlfriendship, \feeling 'the same' as the blogger" (2017a: 298). Posts in SuperWhoLock fandom similarly construct an invitation to affective belonging — a sort of feeling-centered, participatory subjectivity. While SuperWhoLock fan texts demonstrate an assumption of shared femininity (as discussed in Chapter Three), however, "relatability" in SuperWhoLock fandom is centered on the dual premise of shared (excess) affect in their exuberate attachment to media texts and actors, and alienation from the culture that proscribes such enthusiasms. "Belonging" in SuperWhoLock fandom may therefore be described as a construction of individual participants as being the same in difference.

In "fandom life" blogging, belonging is not constituted through the articulation of "similar 'girlfriend' concerns, particularly in relation to feminine consumption cultures and beauty standards" (Kanai 2017a: 294), nor do the situations presented invite identification with "everyday moments of youthful, feminine, middle-class experience" (2017a: 293). Rather, the locus of commonality is *fan identity*, particularly the specific set of concerns and affective pleasures pertaining to the media texts of any or all of the

three constitutive fandoms, an identity which implicitly stands in contradistinction to both mainstream (offline) culture and the normativity tacitly attributed to other, non-fandom and especially non-SuperWhoLock, Tumblr bloggers.

The comparative rarity of the latter case is significant. Although a number of posts do articulate the distinctiveness of SuperWhoLock fandom as contrastive with other communities within Tumblr, the tendency to collapse Tumblr-internal distinctions into what Paul Booth has called "an undisciplined discipline, a chaotic system" (2017: 225) is marked. Each of the two posts below represent Tumblr as a character from one of the SuperWhoLock media texts, playing on both the reusability of GIFs in circulation and the interchangeability of subject positions within posts and across disparate media contexts; implicitly, they also appropriate *Tumblr* itself as a signifier for the promiscuous textual consumption and productivity — perhaps *generativity* — of participatory cultures online.

Figure 18: **https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/49028836107**
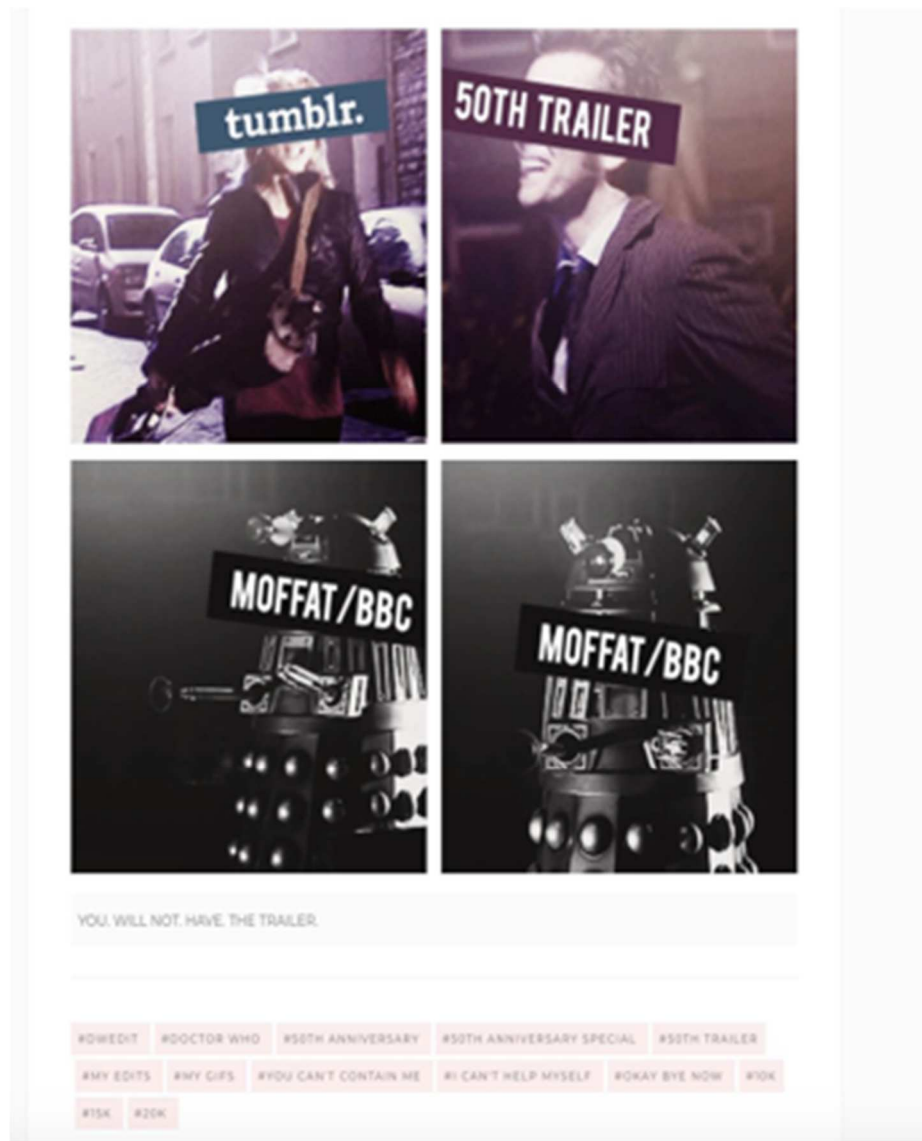
Figure 19
https://spnhasgif.tumblr.com/post/74898156196/my-friend-doesnt-believe-that-supernatural-has-a

The first image, of Charlie (Felicia Day) appearing on *Supernatural* with the

original subtitle from the media text appearing at the bottom of each GIF, is relatively

self-explanatory: renamed "Tumblr," Felicia Day now conveys the message that Tumblr,

rather than Charlie, is "a little bit obsessive" — articulating a construction of Tumblr identity as interchangeable with *fan* identity, and fan identity as characterized by excess and abjection. Within a cultural context that has already construed fan identity as "pathetic," however (Jenkins 1992), claiming this construction and celebrating it through the creation of digital texts that serve both to parody the projected self and, in the construction of the self as curated and collaborative — thus *collective* — invite identification.[3839] Notably, this construction of self is also often grounded in a recognition of in-group affective intelligibility: the keyboard smash, the claim "in Tumblr […] we say …" and so on.

The second post requires more intertextual knowledge to read, but conveys a similar message: the origin of the GIFs is in an episode of *Doctor Who* that sees the Tenth Doctor (David Tennant) and Rose Tyler (Billie Piper) running toward each other, on the cusp of reunion after an unknown period of time in the narrative chronology (but some three seasons in the personal timeline of viewers watching the show). The post was created during the summer of 2013, when the *Doctor Who* fandom was eagerly awaiting the release of a trailer for the series's 50th anniversary episode, set to air in November of that year. Thus "Moffat/BBC" is superimposed over the Dalek whose gunstick interrupts the happy reunion: the trailer and Tumblr want to reach each other, but Executive Producer Steven Moffat and the BBC intervene. Here the intensity of affect conveyed by the choice of GIFs (as "a little bit obsessive," above) is contrasted against the relative unseriousness of the subject matter, offering a parodic send-up of the

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fandom's collective Self in what Booth terms Tumblr's "philosophy of playfulness" (2017).

The winning formula Kanai identifies for the girlfriendship blogs in her study requires

> [combining] GIFs with captions to portray self-representative experiences and feelings such as the annoyance 'when a really skinny person talks about how much junk food they eat,' the shame 'when my friends see how much weight I've gained over winter' and [...] the chagrin 'when my boyfriend forgets to DVR *The Voice* (2017a: 293).

Following a remarkably similar format, letsgofrizgo produces a more extended narrative that makes play with the same construction, repeatedly positing a situation and then a generalized response.

Figure 20
Image: https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/56014983945
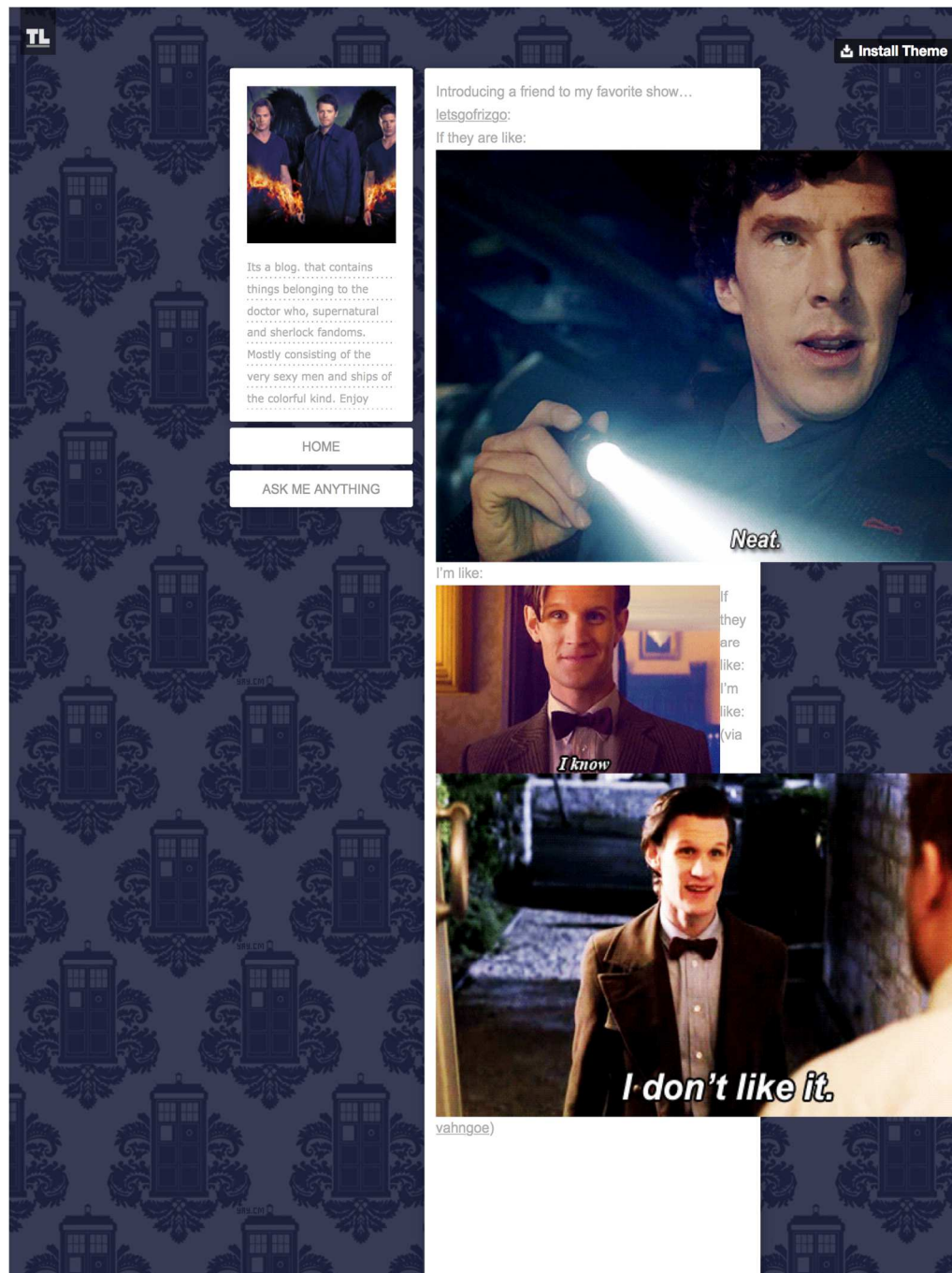
As in the posts examined by Kanai, "certain practices are required to ensure that the structure, temporality and context of the posts meet affective expectations of girlfriendship and circulate matched feelings of togetherness" (2017a: 298), so that "An intimate girlfriend relationality is set up on the basis of recognition of the feelings and experiences articulated in the posts, rather than of the bloggers themselves" (2017a: 297).

This framing, notably, marks a substantial departure from the "hyperpersonal," one-to-one connections developed through sustained engagement within the comment threads of individual posts as facilitated by the affordances of blogging platforms like LiveJournal (Gilding and Henderson 2004). Instead, girlfriendship blogging and "fandom life" blogging both "construct [an…] intimate public with particular desires and affective modes of belonging" that uses "digital branding techniques to develop intimacy" (Kanai 2017a: 293; 294). Within what Kanai, adapting Lauren Berlant, calls a "digital intimate public" (294), "belonging is based on a call to the affective knowledges, desires and expectations of girlfriendship" (294).

Communicating Feeling: Affect & Intelligibility

As Bauman explains, "The association of performance with particular genres is a significant aspect of the patterning of performance within communities" (1977: 25), with some genres being more susceptible, or predisposed, to staging and interpretation as performance than others; within any given genre, moreover, "conceived as performance,

in terms of an interpretive frame, verbal art may be culturally defined as varying in intensity as well as range" (1977: 24).

Without making overbroad claims for the generalizability of such expectations across cultures and speech communities, it seems reasonable to note that the treatment of affect in (most) public settings in the Anglophone world is premised on the subject's suppression of non-verbal "tells" that reveal "too much" (a nebulous category that is applied differentially across categories of race, gender, and class) of her immediate affective experience, and on the willingness of interlocutors to show courtesy by pretending not to notice slip-ups in this carefully-maintained projection of poise. Participation in the polite fiction of another's affective invisibility is, of course, incompatible with the role of an audience in evaluating performance, just as the active suppression of inappropriate expressivity sits uneasily with the notion of projecting feeling (although, of course, the most readily-recognized category of performance, theatrical acting, demands exactly this operation).

The fact that "speaking up," making one's thoughts or feelings available and intelligible to others, in digital spaces requires an act of conscious communication beyond mere presence, even attentive presence, is the catch that leads Lindfors to formulate the concept of performative enactments as a way of understanding digitally-configured interventions that serve to structure the pragmatics of the interactional context within a digital, virtual space — many of which would be unnecessary as conscious acts of "communicative sign behavior" (Lindfors 2017: 171) in the interactional context of a physical space, rife with non-verbal and extra-verbal

contextual cues. In reading as performatively inflected posts within a genre of discourse that pulls against the concerns of performative orientation, "we need to attend to the relative saturation of the performance frame attendant upon the more specific categories of ways of speaking within the community" (Bauman 1977: 11). Lindfors's proposed "intermediary term" (171) is intended precisely to help us consider, and productively address, performative elements which emerge even in contexts which weigh against the establishment of a performance frame around the communicative event.

Some subjects are permitted more or less latitude for the intensity of their perceptible affect (middle-class subjects, for example, are subject to expectations of greater self-regulation in public spaces than are either the very rich or the very poor), and some portions of the affective range are considered more proper to some subjects than to others (men, for instance, are allowed exultation in victory much more readily than are women, but are far more subject to stigmatization in revealing fear or abjection). Within social spaces gendered as feminine, the management of personal affect at its point of intersection with social acceptability via "feelings rules" constitutes an important category of discursive activity (Kanai 2019).

In SuperWhoLock fandom, a discursive community already oriented toward affective concerns (Booth 2017: 223), at times the regulation of affect tends not toward its suppression, but its (re)direction. Sometimes these redirections are playful; at others, serious attempts at cultural critique via discursive maneuvers aimed at community self-regulation. Paradigmatically, however, SuperWhoLock posts are concerned with eliciting affect and with demonstrating solidarity in its experience.

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the-impossible-astronaut:

The Politician's Husband: Freya & Aiden
↳ *We've got through worse. We'll get through this.*

posted Apr 26th at 8:16 from allrightfine © the-impossible-astronaut with 183 notes
#do you ever see something and you can almost feel it yourself? #like your body recognizes the way something feels and it's almost like a phantom touch #or even with smell or taste #you see something and you can almost taste it bc the taste is so familiar to you? #what I'm getting at is #i can kinda feel some grabby hands on my tits #TPH

Figure 21
 (image from soufflesforgallifrey.tumblr.com; the original post has been deleted)[40]

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[40] I infer from context; the remainder of the posts on soufflesforgallifrey's blog, including several close in date to the above, still appear and are available to the public. It seems likely that this particular post became a victim of Tumblr's 2017-2018 site "purge" of explicit content.

The tags to this post, which make use of Tumblr's tagging function to produce hypermarginal commentary (Chapter Three, above) articulate an affective, sensorial experience (Sobchack 2014) that the reader is implicitly invited to share. Similarly, the characterization of Tumblr/fandom as "a little bit obsessive" and as passionately eager for the *Doctor Who* 50th anniversary (both above) foreground an assumption of commonality based on shared *feeling*; to refuse the feeling is to reject belonging.

Making the Self Substitutable

Like the "girlfriendly" vignettes, in SuperWhoLock posts representing "fandom life" Tumblr users "adopt particular techniques in order to amplify the affective relatability or generality of posts" (Kanai 2017a: 298). Also in common with girlfriendship blogging, SuperWhoLock users position affect within their posts by at least two distinct strategies, which are not mutually exclusive but for which the balance is linked to the conventions of Tumblr speech genres (Bakhtin 1986; Bauman 1977). The first of these is at work in letsgofrizgo's post "introducing a friend to my favorite show." Here the blogger presents us with a series of scenarios which might ensue from her initial hypothetical: "if they like it"; "if they don't like it"; each one followed by a GIF positioned as representative of the speaker's reaction.

Notably, though the GIFs selected are suggestive of affective and/or emotional states, they are *not* presented either as unwitting, synchronous revelations ("How'd that get there?") nor as actual depictions of specific, discrete events in letsgofrizgo's life. Though the examples cited by Kanai uniformly open with the construction "When +

subject + conjugated verb," suggesting habitual action, whereas letsgofrizgo instead uses the participle, both structures provide formal cues to understand the scenario the GIF(s) will shortly represent not as narration of discrete, temporally delimited personal experience but as synthesized representation of habitual occurrence — a habitual *experience* with which blog readers are invited to identify.

The pragmatic positioning of blog and blogger, and the interpretive frame provided by genre (Bauman 2004), all play useful roles in developing a nuanced reading of letsgofrizgo's post. First, letsgofrigo organizes her post according to a relatively strict set of genre conventions, with genre understood here as

one order of speech style, a constellation of systemically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse (Bauman 2004: 3).

The relevant considerations here are those prevailing in the Tumblr genre (external to SuperWhoLock fandom, but, crucially, *not* to the digital environment which constitutes SuperWhoLock's "native" setting) of "relatable" blogging, whose girlfriendship models we have been examining by way of Akane Kanai's work. The substitution of the participle for the subject + conjugated verb configuration serves to further generalize the situational context "spoken" into existence by the post, but does not disrupt the caption/GIF pairing structure (see image, above).

letsgofrizgo posits, as the girlfriendly bloggers do, a relatively specific social situation or set of conditions, which she then illustrates with a carefully- selected GIF. Contrary to generic convention, however, she does not end her post as a single

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caption/GIF set; instead, she uses the same format — calling on the poetics of repetition in digital communication (Lindfors 2017) to structure her hypotheticals — to speculate on possible outcomes. The ambiguity of her representation (have any of these events actually occurred? repeatedly? is the entire framing an extended exercise in speculation?) is significant when read against the backdrop of generality described by Kanai (2017a): the post may be read either as reportage on habitual actions (that occur with such frequency that letsgofrizgo can distill paradigmatic responses) or as speculation (in which case the opening line, with its crucial alteration from the temporally-locating "when," is to be read as establishing an initial hypothetical scenario, with each subsequent iteration constituting an equally speculative response).

Whereas the performative enactments in the girlfriendly bloggers' "self-representative" (Kanai 2019: 60) posts typically stage their reactions to various experiences of (young, white) middle-class neoliberal femininity (Kanai 2019), letsgofrizgo's post has a different point of reference: Not normative femininity, but counter-normative fan identity. In Kanai's analyses, the "girlfriend" blogs are organized around the management of affect and the negotiation of postfeminist neoliberal female subjectivity: self-deprecation, self-parody, the self-conscious sharing of "relatable" moments of failure — all are predicated on the concept of a normative ideal female subject against whom the blogger's own lapses can be measured and understood as both weakness and inevitability.

Kanai makes a compelling case that Tumblr's girlfriendly bloggers present their "relatable" posts as representations of lapse or failure experienced in negotiating the

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demands and expectations of normative postfeminist neoliberal female subjectivity (2017a). Because fan identity is already constituted as excess and abjection, however, the relatability of letsgofrizgo's post does not "[enable] the reader to feel 'average' in a way that assures them of their normativity" (Kanai 2017a: 298).

Although letsgofrizgo's presentation, which emphasizes specificity of situation but anonymity of participants ("a friend" is never identified and could be anyone; see Kanai 2017a), does "leave a space for the reader to 'fill herself in'" (Kanai 2017a: 298), what is offered is not the chance of participation in normative girlfriendship, organized around "shared concerns in meeting postfeminist standards" (2017a: 295), thereby inviting the reader to feel "'the same' as the blogger" (2017a: 298). Rather, the relatability of letsgofrizg's post is grounded in an invitation to participate, even revel, in the explicit constitution of one's self, affect, and interests, *as excessive* — outside, culturally other, potentially disruptive. The reaction GIF representing letsgofrizgo's response "if they like it" shows Matt Smith, playing the eccentric alien known only as "The Doctor," radiating enthusiasm on someone's doorstep; the gif that reprsents her reaction "if they don't like it" is demanding (the subtitle reads "learn to") and, in the SuperWhoLock context, sinister and threatening: the GIF features actor Andrew Scott playing *Sherlock* villain Jim Moriarty.

Although the post contains performative elements, with each illustrative GIF striking a pose to signal a mood or affective state/response, the cultural position of affect as subject to regulation and mediation (Kanai 2017a: 295) but not to evaluation, pulls against reading this "display of communicative competence" (Bauman 1977: 11) as

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performance in the sense of distinct, specialized "mode of communication" (Lindfors 2017: 171). This tension produces an ambivalence, as does the instability of the reader's relation to the subject position offered by the text. Above and beyond the usual exemption of affect from both the evaluative concerns and the heightened self-regulation of performance, affective identification demands the assumption of a subject position incompatible with offering evaluation of a performance, as a member of the witnessing audience. It is precisely the "skill and effectiveness" (Bauman 1977: 11) with which letsgofrizgo crafts her text that facilitates the reader's ability to "'fill herself in' [...] feeling 'the same' as the blogger" (Kanai 2017a: 298).

To the degree that the post succeeds in inviting such identification and filling-in, it removes the reader from the subject position of an observing audience (member) and discursively repositions her in the role of speaker: the "i" who introduces "a friend" to the (unspecified) "favorite show"). Success in "relatability" repositions the reader conceptually within the discursive framework of the post, such that she inhabits the social space of sameness it instantiates, like a bubble, within the digital space of the Tumblr dash. The interplay between affective identification, personal experience of "belonging," and constructed, inhabitable positions of subjectivity creates a nexus of indeterminacy between Self and community, between the experiential self and the position inhabited. This interplay structures practices of reading that further serve to involve and embed the reading subject within the frame of textual play.

Subjectivity & Shared Identity in the Digital Vernacular

Oren Soffer (2010) has observed that the online interlocutors whose digital (and largely *visual*) habits of communication via SMS and other technologies for small-group, informal communication have structured the linguistic practices of the "vernacular web" (Howard 2008) are themselves the inheritors, and to some degree the adaptors, of a major gestalt shift in the understanding of both art and communication in the latter half of the 20th Century: the transition from the monumentalizing individualism and eschatalogical progress narratives that characterized modernity to the intersecting, interacting shards of fragmentary selves, endlessly recombining, reveling in their own insistent (un)meaning (their resistance to any fixed meaning) that constituted the postmodern movement in art and literature and the deconstuctivist turn of poststructuralism within academic discourse and institutional philosophy.

In this light, then, it is constructive to notice that Linda Hutcheon has construed the conception of subjectivity as not a fixed, static, and self-enclosed identity (per modernist expectations), but rather as a potential occupation of inhabitable subjection *positions* (1988: 57-73). In this model, subjectivity is constituted in the discursive practice of negotiating one's own (current and contingent) position relative to various points of reference, including but not limited to one's immediate interlocutors and, of course, the always-postulated, never-actualized ideal, "norm" or default subject that so many poststructuralist projects sought to interrogate, to deconstruct and thus to destabilize.

These twin concepts of inhabitability and instability — of *unfixity* — provide a useful lens through which to understand at least part of "relatability" blogging's appeal, particularly as the phenomenon expands beyond the affect-regulating functions of girlfriendship and the sense of "belonging" that this affective commonality, when achieved, produces (Kanai 2017a: 295). Affect regulatio*n*, understood as moderating one's own reactivity to the demands and frustrations of experience as a postfeminist neoliberal subject (Kanai 2017a; 2017a), cannot be the point of contact for letsgofrizgo's post, which subverts the (Tumblr-wide, and therefore in wider circulation than SuperWhoLock fandom, whose borders it penetrates) genre expectation of contrast, implicit or explicit, between normative behavioral expectations and one's own achievements. In fact, rather than representing an occasion of failed normativity, when read within the context of SuperWhoLock fan culture (i.e., a subgroup already identified and identifying as having embraced the excess and abjection of the fanatic), the post instead strikes a celebratory pose it invites others to inhabit.

Structurally, in projecting the space for an "I" to be read against a background of familiar social expectations, letsgofrizgo's post conforms to the conventional caption/GIF pattern established in "self-representative" (Kanai 2019: 60) blogs. But the affective identification through which "The public is formed on the basis of reading the self into a common social imaginary shared with strangers, a social imaginary that draws on a constellation of discourses and affects" (Kanai 2017a: 189) itself draws on the concept of subjectivity as position.

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Both the "girlfriend" blogs Kanai examines and the subset of SuperWhoLock

posts that undertake to capture the affective experiences of "fandom life" can "produce

selves" (Kanai 2019: 60) as texts to be read and consumed, not only through original

postings but also through their practices of reblog curation; this is especially relevant as

SuperWhoLock fans "[curate] their own personal journey through their fandoms"

(Booth 2017: 236). Developing a coherent personal archive of posts that reflect this

journey is an important part of constituting the Tumblr "self" as fan and subject, as a

personality identifiable by consistent content choices. The reblog function, however —

integrated into the communicative practices of SuperWhoLock's digital vernacular —

offers another possibility: The self, as a whole, may be constituted by a set of curatorial

choices, but the self, in its fragmentary present iteration, inhabits the subject position

created by the post. Operating within the ethos of *undecidability* that informs

SuperWhoLock fandom, it hovers as neither/both.

One of the effects of the reblog feature on the interactional habits of Tumblr's

speech communities is that it provides an opportunity for users to author posts that take

advantage of its attributional elision (the reblogging user's "name" always features more

prominently than that of the original poster) by structuring posts that position each new

reblogging user as the "I" who speaks as the subject of/within the post. In "playing"

within the "more rigid structure" (Booth 2015) of Tumblr's afforances, SuperWhoLock

bloggers "make a virtue out of necessity" by converting what might readily be seen as a

frustrating constraint of the platform's infrastructure into one which creatively invites

other users to step into the self-shaped space the original author has projected, with

words and images, into the social space of the digital environment. To reblog such a post is to assume the identity of the speaker — but it is also to extend the same invitation and opportunity to others, to offer them the chance to stand in "her" shoes and claim the initial "display of communicative competence" (Bauman 1977: 11) for her own. In a collective of digitally curated and communally mediated Selves, all subject positions are inhabitable and interchangeable: all constructions of subjectivity available for occupation or reiteration.

Or, as they say on Tumblr: "Same."
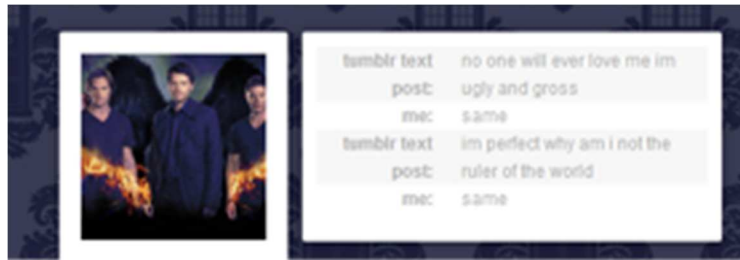
Conclusions & Caveats

letsgofrizgo's "I" does posit reactions normatively construed to be excessive and unreasonable; rather than managing the pressures and tensions of postfeminist neoliberal young womanhood ineffectively, however, she is entering fully into the fan identity, embracing its excesses and excelling in their expression. Instead of *doing life wrong*, she (and each user who assumes the speaker's position in reblogging the post) is *doing*

fandom right. Here affective identification acts as an enticement to participation, to inhabiting the position of the speaker whose feelings are performatively enacted (Lindfors 2017) through the caption/GIF pairings.

Rather than sharing, and through humor communally recuperating, the unallowable affect of frustration (Kanai 2019), however, "fandom life" posts work to articulate, and demonstrate the fulfillment of, an alternate set of "feeling rules" (Kanai 2019: 60). These rules stand in implicit contrast to normative social expectations, both offline and within Tumblr's non-fandom social spaces; yet rather than bonding over shared inadequacy with respect to the demands of normative, non-fan culture, for SuperWhoLock fandom relatability is constructed as the invitation to communal celebration of established difference. Any eulogistic reading of this initial subversion, however, must be complicated by a simultaneous attention to how the elicitation of affect functions not only to heighten an individual blogger's emotional state, but to discipline bloggers in the collective articulation of what constitutes appropriate affect within their fandom.

In this chapter we have examined the mediation of affect within SuperWhoLock culture. We used Akane Kanai's examination of "girlfriendship" blogging and the construction of relatability in order to better understand how Tumblr's platform facilitates the construction of "intimate publics" through negotiation of shared affect. Notably, this experience of intimacy produced through this process of affective identification is not predicated upon discrete, specific knowledge of the individual blogger (Kanai 2017a; 2019), but rather on the construction of texts that invite the reader

to "try on" their subject positions through the act of reblogging. We examined a selection of SuperWhoLock texts in order to better understand the constructions of interchangeable subject positions, and to gain insight into how this inhabitability may be leveraged as play to subvert expectations of normativity.

This transferability contributes to a culture of collective authorship (Booth 2017), as well as to the communal mediation of affect and collaborative production of curated selves. Following Kanai, then, we must consider how fan cultures online participate — even through play — in regulatory practices of governmentality.

CHAPTER FIVE: PARODY & PLAY/WORK

In this chapter, I examine a single, collaboratively authored SuperWhoLock text using practices of close reading to deconstruct its meanings across multiple dimensions. I demonstrate that participating in the post's authorship and/or readership requires a complex array of interdependent communicative competencies, and propose the consideration of this post as an exemplar of how parody is constructed, and can be read, within Tumblr's digital vernacular. This chapter serves my overall project by demonstrating the textual complexities of a distinctive vernacular style of communicative art (Bauman 1977) that is exclusively digital and practiced predominantly by young women. In order to effectively intervene in contemporary social and political concerns, scholars must themselves develop communicative competence in the forms of unofficial, digitally mediated interactions.

Crafting Self & Public

SuperWhoLock fan posts — like most of the user-generated content that attracts digital inhabitants to one or another of the virtual "cities," so to speak (Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and so on) — constitute a form of creative play/work. By "play/work," I mean creative material that is produced as or through practice(s) of play, and which is shared within a digital community without the expectation of direct, tangible reward, but

which nonetheless contributes substantial value to the digital platform in the form of user-generated content.

Like all creative work, SuperWhoLock texts vary in tone and emphasis and the details of their construction from one post and one author to another. Conceptually, however, these texts are linked by their shared relation to the SuperWhoLock textual archive (Derecho 2006). And when read as the collective tradition of a community, however, they demonstrate patterns of genre, of poetic patterning (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Lindfors 2017), and of distinctive sociolinguistic speech norms. Identifying and examining these patterns is an important step toward understanding the production and transmission of texts within SuperWhoLock fandom.

Because SuperWhoLock fandom has in many ways been emblematic of Tumblr's digital culture, "decoding" SuperWhoLock texts and their "protocols" (Pearson 2014) may serve to enrich ongoing scholarly discussions regarding the vernacular practices and the social and political significance of emergent forms of discourse in digital communities. Such efforts carry particular importance because Tumblr has been identified as a digital space of relative "safety," discursively positioned in particular as a space of exploration/experimentation and identity formation for marginalized groups, especially LBGTQ+ youth (Kanai 2019).

Following Roberta Pearson's discussion of the "infinite archive" (2014), in what follows I refrain from making any broad claims for the "representational" character of individual fan texts in terms of tone or content; still less in quantifiable terms of the prevalence of perspective. Instead, I focus analysis on the identification and elucidation

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of what Pearson has termed "protocols" (2014). Whereas Pearson treats "protocols" as the combination of technical affordances and sociolinguistic practices that structure textual genres and communicative norms within digital speech communities, however, I modify her usage in order to better articulate the interaction between technical affordances/constraints and the practices of play that emerge "in response to those rules" (Booth 2015: 15). "Protocols" in the sense I am using the term therefore refers to the semiotically significant structuring of communicative practice in digital contexts. They are also consonant with the development of emic genre conventions within speech communities.

Accordingly, in what follows I offer a close reading of a specific SuperWhoLock text, which I hope to present not as representative but as exemplary. By the representative/exemplary distinction I aim to convey that the particular text I have selected for exegesis is densely packed with features I have identified as salient within the patterning of SuperWhoLock texts. These protocols work together in the collaborative construction of an accretionary text across multiple speech turns; they form the accepted parameters for users' contributions and the context in which their utterances have meaning. Similar to and interactive with the interpretive frame provided by genre (Bauman 2004), such patterning forms part of the framework of cultural intelligibility within which speakers have room to "play" with their use of individual features.

"I Didn't Choose the Fandom Life"

For SuperWhoLock Summer 2013 was a season of waiting: for the return of *Supernatural* from its annual hiatus; for the casting of the Twelfth Doctor; for the first episode airdate announcement from *Sherlock'*s third season. The fervor of anticipation — and collective impatience — may go some way toward explaining why this was also a period of intensive textual productivity within the fandom. Among the gems to emerge out of this period of heightened engagement was the following, reblogged to deductingthroughtimeinanimpala July 6th:

sheisfartoofondofbooks:
kalasie:
fandomarmite:
gimblewabe:
sheisfartoofondofbooks:
I didn't choose the fandom life.
The fandom life broke into my house in the
middle of the night and said "Dad's on a hunting
trip, and hasn't been home in a few days."
I didn't choose the fandom life
the fandom life grabbed my hand and whispered,
"Run."
I didn't choose the fandom life
The fandom life borrowed my phone and asked
me "afghanistan or iraq?"

Why is it when so
happens, it is always
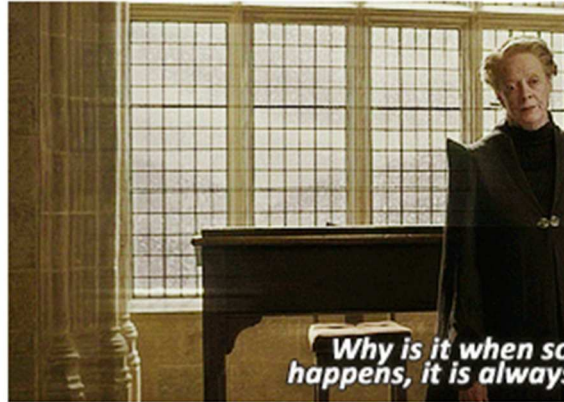
(via procrastinating-in-the-tardis-d)

Figure 23

Linda Hutcheon refers to the antecedent text on which a parody plays as its

"target" (1985). I prefer the more neutral term *referent* not only because it is less

weighted with aggressive connotations but because it is more analytically precise.

Target risks conflating two functions of parody which are in fact distinct: one is

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referencing a prior text in a relationship that imitates, while also establishing difference; the other is the communication of a *metamessage* (Tannen 2013) or pragmatics of humor or irony, what Bauman alludes to when he describes parody as "characterized by ludic or ironic inversion" (2004: 5).

In SuperWhoLock parody, therefore, the target or referent is not limited to the officially produced and authorized materials of their tripartite canon; they may 'bounce" off of other media texts, off the inherited texts of the literary canon, or off of other vernacular texts, particularly those that — like the girlfriendship blogs — provide relatively tight, easily recognizable constraints of genre and/or poetics. In general, the more tightly constrained the genre conventions are, the easier it is to produce a text recognizably in dialogue with them. If "Play only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (Booth 2015: 15), then the relatively narrow constraints of a particular genre or parodied text may be as much benefit as difficulty, providing a sharply resilient surface which, like an avid runner's "speedwork" shoes, offers "snappy" energy return. It may also be useful in this context to remember Hutcheon's insistence that

> The [Greek] prefix *para* has two meanings, only one of which is usually
> mentioned — that of 'counter' or ' against.' Thus parody becomes an
> opposition or contrast between texts. [...] However, *para* in Greek can
> also mean 'beside,' and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or
> intimacy instead of a contrast (1985: 32).

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Pushing against; pushing off. Textual bouncing. And while Hutcheon is at pains to assure us that "There is nothing in *parodia* that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule" (1985: 32), it is also important to recall that making light is not necessarily making light *of another*; textual or actual (an Other). Sometimes the greatest gift of reflexivity is the ability to turn the eye of ironic observation *inward*, to laugh *at oneself*. In that sense the inhabitability of subject positions, their transpositionability within the framework of a defined text, facilitates both self-awareness and self-laughter, the ability to view one's own foibles from an altered perspective, to make the familiar strange and greet the alien with mirth rather than suspicion.

The post above, then, takes as its starting point a meme that has seen recurrent interest in Internet culture, which in turn takes as its point of reference a quote widely attributed to Tupac Shakur: "I didn't choose the thug life. The thug life chose me." Reading the quote in the context of Shakur's life — in the U.S. context of racial violence, economic inequality and a distinctively punitive and racialized criminal justice system — there are obvious problems with the transformation of Shakur's position that "I didn't create thug life, I diagnosed it" (Stanford 2011: 16) into a meme, circulated in endless variations for laughs, even if the joke is almost always on the meme-maker. Irreverence is a feature not just of SuperWhoLock fandom, but of digital vernacularity in a more general sense: anything and everything is up for grabs; no text is off-limits. The same logic which allows the parody of *Sherlock* and the title character's coffee-making

skills (Chapter Three, above) also applies to institutional texts, and to topics that might in other social contexts be considered beyond the pale for joking.

The entertainment value of memes, not unlike the "relatability" value of girlfriendship posts (Kanai 2019) relies on a sort of substitutionality: There are fixed parts, or more often a fixed/limited pattern. Within that pattern, pieces that fit its criteria for basic dimension and shape may be moved freely from place to place, interchanged or substituted, transposed at will. Subject positions constitute just such pieces, generated by the text and inviting readers to "fill in," identify with, and — to varying degrees — inhabit them.

This inhabitability, as we have seen, provides a basis for the generation of an affective sense of closeness via similarity, thereby making possible both the construction of a "digital intimate public" (Kanai 2017b) and the disciplining of its subjects. But the same inhabitable, transposable quality of subject positions as constructed in reflexively ironic parody — such as the self-consciously dramatic declaration that opens "I Didn't Choose the Fandom Life" — may also become the premise for textual play.

"Play," to quote Booth once again, "is free movement within a more rigid structure" (2015: 15). So, for that matter, is language; and from the same perspective so are memes. Genre is similar in its own way to the general rules of a grammar, of syntax: S V O, but any S; any O. In this variant on the "thug life" meme, sheisfartoofondofbooks performs three textual substitutions/transpositions:

1. She substitutes herself, first of all, in the role of speaker; the pst retains the "I," but of course the referent of the "I" is not the same as when it is spoken by Tupac Shakur or by anybody else.

2. She substitutes "the fandom life" for "the thug life."

3. She substitutes "broke into my house in the middle of the night and said 'Dad's on a hunting trip and hasn't been home in a few days' for 'chose me.'"

The intertextual play/work sheisfartoofondofbooks produces here is in fact even more complex than this triple substitution, internally consistent with the syntactic pattern established by the original meme/quote, may appear. Besides conforming to the structure of the attributed quote while making her substitutions, sheisfartoofondofbooks also aligns her text to two other structural requirements:

1. The genre conventions of the meme: These require that whatever takes the place of "the thug life" be absurd or "soft" or otherwise in an implicitly contrastive relationship to "the thug life"; this is the "ludic or ironic inversion" noted in Bauman's description of parody (2004: 5) and elaborated by Hutcheon in terms of repetition/imitation with difference.

2. The canonical text: The action she describes for fandom life in place of "chose me" is a concise narration of Sam Winchester's re-introduction to the "supernatural" life, from the pilot episode of the *Supernatural* series.

This second point raises a third, because even as it closes the loop (the "I" of the first statement becomes the "me" of the second), it suggests a further transposition:

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sheisfartoofondofbooks now inhabits not only the role/subject position of Tupac Shakur (in the meme), but also that of Sam Winchester (in the *Supernatural* pilot).

At the risk of belaboring our point: The complexity of the operations within the initial post suggests that the vernacular practices of digital and participatory cultures (these are not identical categories, but in SuperWhoLock fandom they overlap) are capable of producing a textually rich, yet profoundly unserious, form of communicative art — which, like most vernacular art forms, is practiced by amateurs at widely varying levels of skill. And while a Tumblr user can "belong" to SuperWhoLock fandom via practices of identification and curation (reflagging), to become an active participant by helping to construct the fandom's ever-expanding archive (Derecho 2006) demands multiple layers of communicative competence to facilitate the production and reception of complex, densely polysemic texts.

Precisely because this kind of textual production is framed as "play" — because it is a leisure activity, because it is avowedly unserious, because it is practiced predominantly and distinctively by the "non-dominant" (Kanai 2017b) or "subordinate" (Derecho 2006) — its place as vernacular art, and its role in contributing to the linguistic norms and social/cultural expectations of digital discourse, are too easily elided. In yielding to the impulse — both scholarly and popular — to regard with suspicion, even hauteur, the practices of the digital vernacular, we allow ourselves to too easily elide the fact that this creative play/work, this user-generated content, is in fact the constitutive, unpaid productivity that fuels the entire social media industry and makes possible its collection of advertising revenue.

Calculate Mark Zuckerberg's net worth; add it to the stock values of not only

Facebook but Twitter, Instagram (now owned by Facebook), Snapchat … Tumblr's own

stock value has been falling steadily for more than a year, but it is perhaps not

coincidental to note that the steep decline in stock prices has corresponded almost

exactly to the institution of content-filtering and automated content removing protocols

by the parent company. One risk of relying on unpaid "laborers" who produce textual

content as play/work, for fun, is that they don't have much incentive to keep producing

when the activity becomes less amusing. In other words: rules can incite creativity,

textual play, bouncing — but only if the "more rigid system" allows for what the players

consider sufficient room for "free movement" (Booth 2015: 15).

The point bears repeating precisely because — some twenty years after America

Online and its cousins first made Internet access a practical possibility for the non-

specialist (urban, middle-class) user, cultural anxiety still lingers about the potential

effects of digital distraction.[41] More: this anxiety itself produces the elision of a

tremendous, diffuse, and penetrating appropriation of labor, which is nonetheless

generative for being simultaneously the by-product of play.

Digital Distraction and the Play/Work of Pleasure

There is already an extensive literature, both scholarly and popular, addressing

the potential for pain, and even more importantly for harm, in the digital context. Every

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[41] For a reframing of some of the practices of digital "distraction" in terms of "digital alienation," see Brandt Dainow's "Digital Alienation as the Foundation of Online Privacy Concerns" (2015); Dainow lays out his argument in terms of what he sees as a widespread misapprehension that Web 2.0 users' anxiety about the data-mining and digital reproduction of user-generated content lies in concerns about the individual user's privacy, rather than in a sense of ownership over their textual production.

new instance of teen suicide — a real and pressing problem, whose urgency I do not wish to downplay — prompts a spate of speculation, informed and otherwise, in the popular press about the dangers of "cyberbullying." Every new "mass shooting," similar, prompts an immediate and intensive examination of the perpetrator's social media accounts — seeking an explanation, yes, but also seeking his (the attacker is almost always a "he") justification in the digital reconstruction of his pain, his isolation, the digital traces of our collective failure to adequately address his affective needs and thus prevent the emergence of a monster. Even Akane Kanai, whose work offers a thoughtful and nuanced approach to digital female relationality on Tumblr, approaches the practices of "girlfriendship" blogging she examines partly in terms of how the "affective pleasures" of participation in a "digital intimate public" (2017a) open the bloggers to regulation of their affective experiences and serve to reify neoliberal, postfeminist ideals which the subjects are disciplined to reproduce (2017a; 2019).

All of these intersecting anxieties participate to some extent in "the widespread alarm with which many older Americans have responded to young people's use of social media" (Tannen 2013: 100). Such anxieties are of course not exclusive to the United States or to either of the American continents, although they may perhaps offer a salutary example of "first world problems." Nor does it seem merely coincidental that so many of the worries, and so much of the attention, both public and scholarly, should find as its particular focus the interactional habits and social formations of young women — a tendency from which, given the feminine-gendered social space of SuperWhoLock fandom, this project is not itself exempt. Young women's bodies, feelings, and

behaviors are culturally positioned as sites for intervention and regulation (Kanai 2017a; 2019); young women occupy an ambivalent social category which is at once seen as especially vulnerable and especially in need of regulation.

This construction whereby the discursive positioning of the young, female subject as in need of supervision and protection operates as a pretext for discipline and regulation often takes on an explicitly sexual dimension, in which both vulnerability and, on the other hand, visibility, are sexually coded. The patriarchal anxiety regarding (young) women's desires and the inculcation of chastity perhaps explains how the pervasiveness of angst over racy Instagram accounts can coexist with a generally laissez-faire approach toward the seemingly more-threatening rise of "alt-right" and other politically incendiary political discourse among (male) Internet users.

These culturally situated and contingent concerns — classed, raced, gendered, and otherwise finely calibrated according to a host of social criteria — are not unimportant, and they help to construct the social worlds which SuperWhoLock fans inhabit: the "offline" social world from which they enter Tumblr, and also of course the digital social world they themselves create therein. At the moment, however, I want us to attend a bit more closely to the source of pleasure in digital fandom — of the pleasure of participation in participatory culture.

Anybody who has ever tried to teach a room full of college freshmen all in a hurry to check their phones can attest that the phenomenon of digital distraction is quite real. But things which distract us are, in general, those that cause significant discomfort/pain (a sore tooth; a pressing urgency to find the nearest restroom) or, on the

other hand, offer the promise of special reward/pleasure. It is therefore worth paying serious attention to understanding the attraction/distraction presented by digital fan cultures. In other words: Why produce play/work at all? Why not re-watch the media text, instead? Or go for a walk? Play a video game? Take a nap?

Fans' attention to and centering of the practices of reading has long been foregrounded within the scholarship on participatory cultures. The intensive character of fans' reading provided the primary theme for a full chapter ("How Texts Become Real") of Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992); in some sense, his theory of fan reading as the basis for textual production and community engagement anchors his own text, and his interpretation has proven both persuasive and resilient enough to influence a generation of fan studies scholars in the decades since. It is, for example, strongly consonant with the orienting ethos behind the formation of the *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*; it stands behind and informs each of the essays collected in one of the most widely-read anthologies in the field, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (2006) — even though Abigail Derecho's contribution suggests an alternative theory of fan *writing*, she does not in fact contest Jenkins's theory of fan *reading*. I am therefore not going to undertake to demonstrate at length (again) that the practices of participatory culture constitute something more than passive textual consumption.

Implicitly, however, a theme underlying much of the work on participatory culture seems to be that fans' intensive reading practices somehow function as a form of redemption for what would otherwise be a dubious activity — the enjoyment, the avid

and even greedy consumption, of media texts. And a further assumption — rarely stated, implicitly present — seem to be that the affective attachment to a media text comes *first*, and then the fan is drawn into intensive reading: First a fan, and *then* — as a by-product of excessive fascination — a participant, an active reader.

I submit that this construction, however implicitly or accidentally, gets the story backward; and the order does matter. Rather than encountering a media text almost at random and being seized with such a profound attachment to it that they develop a newly engaged and intensive approach to reading in order to pursue their interest further, it seems likely that fans — at least the subgroup of self-identified "fans" who go on to "belong" to one or more communities of participatory culture (Booth 2017: 1-24) — enjoy reading, primarily and constitutively, and when they encounter media texts they find particularly appealing, they bring all that joy of textual intimacy to bear on the new object of their interest.

Perhaps this seems a fine distinction — who cares, after all, which came first: the chicken or the egg? I am not, however, merely splitting hairs; and from a theoretical perspective it makes a difference which construction we choose.

Linda Hutcheon devotes a full chapter of *A Theory of Parody* to elaborating "The Pragmatic Range of Parody." Her argument is finely-grained and labyrinthine as only a poststructuralist exposition of postmodern subversion can be, but one of its through-lines is a concern for the role of *irony* in parody — and for irony to be successful, it needs an understanding (by the reader) of the intent (by the author) that is not explicitly set out in the text (which would be a version of "explaining the joke," and thus spoiling the fun).

The significance of irony to parody means that Hutcheon has to explain the reader's role in interpretation somehow; and this necessity leads her down a path that, even now, in the age of affect studies and renewed attention to feeling as "lived experience," many literary theorists might fear to tread: She ventures to explore reading pleasure, reading *as* pleasure, the pleasure — not of the text, exactly, but delight in the process of meaning-making. And to map this territory she turns not to *plaisir* and *jouissance* (Barthes 1973), but to E. M. Forster and a description of reading parodic texts as "bouncing":

> The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing' (to use E. M. Forster's famous term) between complicity and distance (1985: 32).[42]

The significance of insisting, as it were, on a particular "order of operations" for understanding fans' relationship to texts and reading within the context of participatory cultures is that prioritizing the pleasures of reading, putting them hierarchically as well as temporally first, better explains the broadly similar practices of reading, re-reading, analysis, and (inter)textual creation that have been noted across fandoms than does the supposition that media fans across the board have independently developed homologous practices of textual engagement out of nothing more than a shared affective affinity for widely disparate media texts. Even as early as *Textual Poachers*, the practices of the several participatory cultures whose texts Jenkins examined had far more in common

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[42] Note the parallels, too, between the construction of reading as a practice of textual/interpretive "bouncing" that Hutcheon uses here and the construction of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15) with which we have been working throughout.

than can be explained by any similarities between the media narratives themselves (which, in fact, demonstrated very little similarity at all).

Centering the appeal of participatory culture as grounded in the practice of intensive reading — understanding the pleasure as one taken in meaning-making — not only serves to explain the broad similarities between the textual practices of fandoms organized around vastly divergent media texts but, as a result, helps to also explain a common impetus behind fans' practices for engaging with one another's texts. These practices — as in sheisfartoofondofbooks's riff on a familiar meme — in many ways translate to the practices and norms of usage in vernacular web culture more generally.

The notion of a similarity between fan practices and digital vernacularity has already been raised in other contexts; in explaining his approach to participatory cultures as they operate in digital spaces, Paul Booth notes that

> Fans are only one way of looking at New Media, but fans' use of online interactive technologies demonstrates an important step to an augmentation of scholarship in media studies. It is 'digital' fandom not because it assumes that there is some inherent difference in the way digital technology affects fans, but rather because many creative fan practices rely on the characteristics of the digital (2017: 10).

Booth's description of the interrelationship between digital and participatory cultures here is useful, but I think we could push this point a bit further: Fan culture, first

and foremost, is a culture centered on texts, and shared investment in those texts. Participatory culture is a culture centered on cooperative textual analysis, description, and production — those practices of collaborative reading and responding that Henry Jenkins described in *Textual Poachers*, and which Abigail Derecho has placed within a broader context of writing-with, writing-against, and writing-in-conversation that she calls *archontic literature*, borrowing from Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive (Derecho 2006).

As a result of this intensive textual engagement, participatory cultures are especially attentive to the practices and techniques of *entextualization*, which Richard Bauman has defined as

> the organization of a stretch of discourse into a text: bounded off to a
> degree from its discursive surround (its co-text), internally cohesive (tied
> together by various formal devices), and coherent (semantically
> intelligible) (2004: 4).

Conceptually, entextualization is to discourse as a cookie cutter is to rolled-out dough: applied, it distinguishes a cookie from the surrounding dough. To *remove* the cookie, to lift it out and set it on a tray with other cookies extracted and laid out for baking, is to *decontextualize* and *recontextualize*, respectively.

While these operations are theoretically distinct, in practical terms *entextualization* functions as the intellectual work that identifies what should belong "inside" the text and what can be left "out": the process of determining, in other words, where to place the boundaries such that the resulting text will demonstrate both cohesion

and coherence, thus "[serving] to objectify it as a discrete textual unit" (Bauman 2004: 4). Actually *using* this text, for example by quotation, requires decontextualization (we are no longer operating within the originary context) and recontextualization (we are, instead, operating within the *present* context).

In oral contexts, *entextualization* paradigmatically means separating out a prior utterance for reportage, repetition, evaluation, transmission. In the digital context, *entextualization* often requires a literalizing of the conceptual bounding and extraction: to create a GIF, for example, requires identifying a stretch of digital video footage that encapsulates a single, semiotically significant act or expression, inserting "breaks" or "cuts" before and after, and then applying one or more software applications in order to copy the resulting "clip" and transcode it into Graphic Image Format (as opposed to any of the digital video file formats). Only then does the GIF actually exist as a "discrete textual unit" which can be copied, saved, shared, posted, or inserted into the body of a comment thread on Tumblr.

The construction of SuperWhoLock texts reflecting on fandom experience may serve as the invitation to affective identification, with all the emotional positivity that comes from belonging, as discussed in Chapter Three. But in the construction and reading of hypermarginal texts like "I Didn't Choose the Fandom Life," SuperWhoLock fandom offers another set of pleasures, based on the reader's "level of engagement" (Hutcheon 1985: 25): her intimacy with the text; the pleasure of participating in the construction of meaning. Both Tumblr's posting format, especially its "photoset" function (Booth 2015) and the way its affordances structure accretionary texts through

layers of reblogged commentary, incite (perhaps even *arouse*) instances of high-engagement reading; and Tumblr's horizontal structure furthermore distributes high-engagement readings across texts without regard to media origin or official/unofficial notions of authorship.

Lateral Engagement

sheisfartoofondofbooks's opening extracts and recontextualizes three prior texts: The "thug life" meme, by extension the original Shakur quote, and of course the opening scene of *Supernatural*. Placed in the canonical frame of cultural categories suggested by Jan Brunvand, the post makes free with texts from all three major categories: Shakur's quote is elite or authoritative, the meme is "folk" or vernacular, and *Supernatural* constitutes a "normative" mass media text (Brunvand 1998: 10). Tumblr user gimblewabe continues the theme of interweaving vernacular genres with media and authoritative texts in her Whovian (*Doctor Who* fan) iteration of the same pattern:

I didn't choose the fandom life

the fandom life grabbed my hand and whispered,

"Run."

Gimblewabe's response fulfills all the conditions set by the original attribution, its reappropriation into a meme, and the post by sheisfartoofondofbooks, but she completes the formula by replacing "chose me" / "broke into my house in the middle of the night …" with "grabbed my hand and whispered, / "Run" — an early moment from *Doctor Who*'s 2005 return to television. Here, then, the transpositions allow gimblewabe

to occupy the triplicate position as Shakur/fan (presumably their "own" or "real" identity)/Rose, all while emulating sheisfartoofondofbooks and amplifying the latter's original post.

Gimblewabe's contribution is obvious mimicry, but in her almost-echo she is not merely playing copy-cat. The use of repetition in digital settings is well-documented, though under-discussed; as a structuring protocol for the production of digital texts it has a variety of uses. Interactionally, it can sometimes signal social-contextual cues, as in the reduplication of word-final vowels (Tannen 2013), the reiteration of social-relational utterances (Tannen 2013; Lindfors 2017), and the transmission of messages across multiple media (Tannen 2013). Repetition, reiteration, and near-echoing also form an important element in the practice and construction of digital poetics. Here, for instance, the reiterative strategy serves as part of the patterning of gimblewabe's performance (Bauman 1977; Bauman and Briggs 1990). At the same time, her recasting of the meme formula in the terms sheisfartoofondofbooks has suggested also aids to further situate the emergent performance within the SuperWhoLock context; gimblewabe's addition of a verse from/for the *Doctor Who* fandom shifts the socio-cultural context of the post to a multi-fandom text, and conditions the potentiality of a distinctively SuperWhoLock text, whose fulfillment depends on the participation of another speaker. In articulating her own contribution, therefore, gimblewabe prepares the stage she exits.

Although sheisfartoofondofbooks plainly presents her original post as prose, gimblewabe makes one additional alteration, beyond their substitution of *Doctor Who* for *Supernatural*: They eliminate the period after "life" and instead rely on the

enjambment created by starting a new line to create a pause/break between "I didn't chose the fandom life" and "The fandom life grabbed my hand and whispered…"

Using a change of typed lines to signal the "long pause" at the end of a complete thought where in Anglophone writing conventions it is traditional to place a period certainly has the effect of making many Tumblr text posts visually resemble certain examples of "free verse" poetry (e.e. cummings comes to mind). It also, however, has the effect of signaling continuance, of indicating that there is more to come; it fulfills, on some level, the function of body language, breathing patterns, and intonation in face-to-face communication. In this sense, then, the lack of finality further suggests the possibility of another performer, another "verse" in the extemporaneous collaboration.

Paradoxically, however, the omission of the period (and its replacement with a line change) is so common in Tumblr text posts that it has become the default or linguistically "unmarked" case (see Tannen 2013); to use the period and other conventions of punctuation derived from traditional print and/or writing culture suggests instead either a markedly formal register or, on the other hand, a pragmatics of terse delivery. As Tannen explains for reduplication of word-final vowels in SMS exchanges: "Because reduplicating word-final vowels is unmarked, single vowels in that position take on negative metamessages for those who have become accustomed to letter repetitions as an enthusiasm constraint" (Tannen 2013: 106). As the "long pause" at the send of a sentence is replaced by the open-endedness of a skipped line, an enjambment, instead of a period, the management of metamessages via manipulation of punctuation and typography norms becomes a part of Tumblr's distinctive poetics.

Contextually, I read sheisfartoofondofbooks's use of conventional punctuation as an instance of the former (marking her discourse for formality) rather than the latter (marking for terseness), primarily because the latter does not make sense when she is the initiating speaker; the negative pragmatics or "metamessages" (Tannen 2013) of terseness are associated with responsive, rather than initial, speech turns. Marking her initial utterance for formality, however, contributes to removing it to a degree from the expectations of ordinary conversation (Bauman 2004: 3) — an instance of elevated or altered diction that may contribute to keying her speech act as performance. It is not necessary for gimblewabe to mark their contribution separately as performance; in reduplicating the poetic patterning of sheisfartoofondofbooks's speech (minus the marked punctuation), gimblewabe demonstrates that their speech turn is to be read within the same frame, as a continuation of the performance.

Interpreting, and continuing, these complex intertextual operations requires fans to engage one another's texts on intimate terms in precisely the same kind of intensive reading practices that have been documented in participatory cultures' approaches to media texts, and which we have outlined above. Thus the transition from gimblewabe to fandomamirite incorporates the same set of polysemic interpretations and transpositions as did gimblewabe's assumption of the role of speaker from sheisfartoofondofbooks. Fandomamirite replaces *Doctor Who* with *Sherlock*:

I didn't choose the fandom life

The fandom life borrowed my phone and asked

Me "afghanistan or iraq?"

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As in both previous iterations, "the fandom life" takes on a role from the media text; in this instance, it is Sherlock Holmes, who borrows John Watson's cell phone and poses this question during their initial encounter in the BBC series pilot. Notably, fandomamirite follows gimblewabe in omitting punctuation after "fandom life," similarly using the line change instead. However, she retains the question mark in Sherlock's address to John — suggesting perhaps that the Tumblr conventions regarding "unmarked" punctuation only apply to Tumblr-internal speech, and not to quoted material from elsewhere, including canonical media texts. Alternately, we may read both fandomamirite's and gimblewabe's use of closing punctuation as signaling the end, not of a sentence, but of their role as performer/speaker.

Taken together, these three speech turns complete a *Supernatural/Doctor Who/Sherlock* parody on the "thug life" meme, itself already a product of the vernacular web; the post also performs a textual "bouncing" against/off of the three mass media texts. The "fun" is not, however, quite over: audience evaluation is recognized as an integral aspect of performance in the ethnographic sense (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Buccitelli 2012; Lindfors 2017). The establishment of virtual co-presence which facilitates such evaluation within the always-asynchronous context of digital discourse can pose a communicative challenge, with affectively dissatisfying effects (Buccitelli 2012; Lindfors 2017); within some groups, long gaps in responsivity are particularly encoded with metamessages of disinterest or even active antipathy (Tannen 2013). In this post thread, Tumblr user kalasie rises to the occasion.

Although it would theoretically be possible for kalasie to articulate a response using only tags in their reblog (which, as we have seen, is a common and even a preferred use of the Tumblr platform's affordances), they elect to present their evaluation directly within the comments/captions, which increases the range of expressive possibilities by enabling the use of images as well as written text. And kalasie has a GIF that corresponds to the foregoing speech turns with remarkable exactitude, a visual *bon mot*:

Figure 24
https://deductingthroughtimeinanimpala.tumblr.com/post/54796973715

Parody as Play

In addition to describing distinctive features of genre, sociolinguistics, and poetic patterning, I want to suggest that the conditions of SuperWhoLock play/work lend themselves particularly well to constructions of parody. There are so many competing definitions of parody in circulation that claiming to have found parody "in the wild" has little meaning until tied to a particular understanding of the term; in my analysis, I follow closely Linda Hutcheon's discussion in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (1985). Hutcheon's theorization of parody is useful not only because it is one of the most thorough treatments of the topic available, but because it places the expectations of parody within the context of postmodernism, a cultural movement whose echoes are still very much heard in digital spaces today.

Parody is a "mode of intertextuality" characterized by "the ludic or inversive transformation of a prior text or genre" (Bauman 2004: 5). While proposing any transhistorical, and thus any transcultural, definition of parody is problematic (Hutcheon 1985: 10), in general *parody* refers to a relation between two or more texts in which the present, "new" text simultaneously imitates and diverges from the prior, antecedent text(s).

In Hutcheon's terms, the variation of the present text from the antecedent text(s) it imitates must "mark difference rather than similarity" (1985: 6). The divergence is thus the point; but a *difference* can only be marked with reference to, and understood in terms of, the "original" — that is, whatever prior texts or genres form the point of reference from which the present text diverges. Parody, like play, is therefore an

operation of "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Booth 2015: 15). If, as Booth proposes, "Play only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (2015: 15), then parody similarly only happens with antecedent texts in place; parody works by and in reaction to those texts. For this reason, parody presents a particularly apt instance of art as "play within constraints" (Berryman 2018).

For parody to be effective, the "rules" to which it responds must be "in place" for both author (or speaker) and reader (or listener). As Hutcheon explains:

> ... parodic codes, after all, have to be *shared* for parody — as parody — to be comprehended. [...] While all artistic communication can take place only by virtue of tacit contractual agreements between encoder and decoder, it is part of the particular strategy of both parody and irony that their acts of communication cannot be considered completed unless the precise encoding intention is realized in the recognition of the receiver (1985: 93).

Decoding parody requires multiple dimensions of communicative competence, which are available only to members of a speech community, although the breadth or narrowness with which "speech community" may be defined is contextually dependent. (In fact, one way of defining "speech community" would be as "interlocutors who share a basis of cultural intelligibility in which to comprehend one another's utterances.")

If the audience is unfamiliar with the antecedent texts, the likely result is a reading of the present text as "straight" — that is, decoding the semantic meaning but missing the joke:

> ... if readers miss a parodic allusion, they will merely read the text like any other: the pragmatic ethos would be neutralized by the refusal or inability to share the necessary mutual code that would permit the phenomenon to come into being (Hutcheon 1985: 94).

I rely so heavily on Hutcheon's work precisely because her thoroughgoing and carefully argued elaboration of parody provides a resilient framework for understanding parodic texts, both in the interpretation and analysis of individual texts ("close reading"), and in situating their production and reception within a complex array of social, political, and historical concerns. Hutcheon's work contains one crucial error, however, which demands adjustment: She assumes that

> The generic or rhetorical competence of the reader presupposes a knowledge of rhetorical and literary norms in order to permit the recognition of deviation from those norms that constitute the canon, the institutionalized heritage of language and literature (1985: 94).

There is nothing in any of Hutcheon's several definitions of parody that requires the antecedent text(s) to possess any "institutionalized" or authoritative status; she is even at pains, at several points in her discussion, to emphasize the relatively democratic and democratizing potential of parody; so one way of reading her description here is as a simple oversight. In that case, the general scarcity of scholarship on work which parodies vernacular texts/genres would seem to suggest that it is an oversight widely shared — possibly as a result of scholars lacking the necessary communicative competence to recognize the parodied texts/genres, and thus "[reading] the text[s] like any other" (1985: 94).

We need to remain open, in our process of inquiry, to the possibility that the parodied text, or the "original" against which the newly constructed text plays, may itself be not an "official" media text, but an established vernacular text or genre. Hutcheon's definition of parody demands that "parody's 'target' text is always another work of art, or, more generally, coded discourse" (1985: 16). This focus on "coded discourse" distinguishes parody from satire, which in her reading has a social or moral target (1985: 43), but it does not require that the "coded discourse" be itself of any particular type or that it inhabit a position of cultural authority (only *priority*, in the sense of order of appearance vis a vis the parodying text: "To say, quite simply, that any codified discourse is open to parody is more methodologically cautious and more true to fact than to assert, as some do, that only mediocre works of art can be parodied" (1985: 18). "Fandom life" posts, for example, are open to interpretation as parodies of "relatability" blogging, and of other vernacular texts online and within fan culture.

In the relatively elite works of parody Hutcheon examines, and to some extent in works of parody mediated by one or more branches of the culture industry, the "rules" in reaction to which parody emerges are often constituted by the formal thematic features of a single text, or a relatively delimited set of texts. The Mel Brooks film *Blazing Saddles*, for example, is a parody of the institutionally defined genre of Western films, and within that category it takes aim particularly at the subgenre of Western lawman films. In SuperWhoLock parody, however, the "rules" to which an individual post reacts may be the conventions of a vernacular genre, or of an established meme. For this reason, it is important that we adjust our framework for recognizing parody to explicitly include — rather than implicitly *exclude* — parodies of texts that are themselves products of the vernacular web. And we need to remember, in our analysis, that pushing *against* is always, from another perspective, pushing *off of*.

Genre & Interpretation

The text of "I Didn't Choose the Fandom Life" as a whole is demanding of the reader, requiring several dimensions of textual knowledge to adequately parse its polysemy: Knowledge of the original attribution; awareness of the meme genre, which has developed its own conventions around the construction of parody; sufficient familiarity with each of the three SuperWhoLock media texts to recognize the source and the contextual appropriateness of each of the substitutions for "chose me"; conversational competence in the various uses of "fandom life" as an intelligible term. As we noted earlier:

We have seen that, if readers miss a parodic allusion, they will merely

read the text like any other: the pragmatic ethos would be neutralized by

the refusal or inability to share the necessary mutual code that would

permit the phenomenon to come into being (Hutcheon 1985: 94).

While Hutcheon cites shared linguistic, generic, and rhetorical competencies

(1985: 94) as the keys to cultural intelligibility of parodic texts, the need for these

competencies is not necessarily evenly distributed in the interpretation of any particular

text. Here, the significance of *genre* as an interpretive frame which allows

SuperWhoLock readers to make sense of the "fandom life" meme across three

consecutive iterations is key (Bauman and Briggs 1992; Bauman 2000; Bauman 2004).

In folkloristic and ethnographic terms, genre consists of

a constellation of systematically related, co-occurrent formal features and

structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the

production and reception of discourse (Bauman 2004: 3).

The construction of this "orienting framework" takes place both cognitively

(within a speaker's own internal schema) and collectively (a shared understanding of

generic conventions is to some degree constitutive of a speech community). Such

frameworks require multiple iterations of similarly patterned texts, and the

internalization of emic genres constitutes a major element of communicative competence for members of a speech community, as accurately identifying the *genre* in which a new utterance is to be understood is often crucial to its interpretation.

Familiarity with the antecedent media texts that form the core canon of SuperWhoLock fandom constitutes a minor accomplishment, relatively speaking; it is an intellectual feat of memory activation and association. Functional recognition of genre, however, is more complex, and relies not only on familiarity with particular texts but on an ability to identify patterns and to place a new text into dialogue with them, not merely in terms of whether the new text "fits" or does not "fit" the conventions (constraints) of a particular genre, but — in order to decode the ironic "ethos" of the performed text (Hutcheon 1985) — also in terms of how the new text manipulates the "intertextual gap" (Bauman and Briggs 1992; Bauman 2000; 2004) and to draw appropriate conclusions about the pragmatics of the relationship between the present text and an entire body of antecedent texts from whose collective, but never perfectly duplicated, pattern it deviates. That is to say, the readers have to read the present text against/with the background of antecedent texts such that they recognize its similarity to their pattern and interpret its variance as intertextual play.

This is why it is crucial to center the act of comparativity and the inference of intertextual relationships *laterally*, rather than hierarchically in terms of what Hutcheon calls the "institutionalized" canon (1985: 94). In the SuperWhoLock context, of course, the necessary knowledges are not "institutionalized" or derived from the literary canon at all, but on the contrary rely on familiarity with a distinctly heterodox assortment of

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cultural texts drawn from mass culture and the vernacular web. Regardless of source material, such shared knowledges — and the ability to take them for granted, to assume that one's audience will recognize the referenced texts and understand the generic frameworks which function as the "rules" against which the speaker leverages her intertextual play — are essential to the formation of speech communities. To be a member of SuperWhoLock fandom is not just to self-identify as a "fan" of the three media texts, but also to develop the textual knowledges that facilitate interaction, often densely encoded with intertextual meanings, with other fans; in short, to become somebody who will get the joke.

Within the relatively limited frame of this post, the requirements include sufficient knowledge of web genres to accurately apply the "thug life" meme as an interpretive frame for each of the three iterations presented (Bauman and Briggs 1992; Bauman 2000; Bauman 2004), enough familiarity with each of the three media texts to appreciate the targeted precision with which each speaker "bounces" their own performance off the series canon, and an awareness of SuperWhoLock fandom itself robust enough to allow decoding of the *Supernatural-Doctor Who-Sherlock* ordering the contributions take, as well as the general appropriateness (or not) of each participant's self-casting in the role of a character from the media canon — thereby allusively acting on behalf of the fandom, in its collective plunge into the media narrative.

Evaluation as Participation: Enacting Appreciation

Kalasie's intervention introduces the need for an additional layer of reading competence, beyond those already discussed. Besides "bouncing" off a media text outside the three-way SuperWhoLock canon, it also turns a post that previously consisted solely of written material into a multimedia text. The reader must be able to integrate words and images seamlessly in order to produce a coherent, sequential ("serialized" — see Buccitelli 2012 and Lindfors 2017) text. This operation is of course not beyond anybody who has successfully read a graphic novel — a genre in which the presentation of narrative relies, as we have seen, on similarly engaged practices of reading as meaning-making (Booth 2015: 24-52). It is, however, a skill distinct from that required in reading the kinds of "illustrated" texts with which most Anglophone readers become familiar in early childhood, and whose images function as a reduplication of the narrative, supporting readers' engagement and confirming or guiding their interpretation of the alphabetical symbols — a far more arcane system for the representation of meaning, although we have naturalized it.

We should note that one possible reading of kalasie's intervention is as a fourth speech turn in an ongoing performance. In this view, their choice to add a reaction GIF on the reblog, rather than commenting in the tags, suggests a stepping-forth, taking the virtual stage and thereby assuming responsibility to an audience (Bauman 1977; Lindfors 2017). The interpretation I have laid about above, however, construes kalasie's GIF comment as an enactment of audience evaluation, rather than a turn at/within performance. I base this interpretation on two main factors:

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1. The particular GIF kalasie chooses and inserts, absent additional framing, does a remarkable job of reaffirming the completeness and internal cohesion of the foregoing speech turns *as a single unit* (Bauman 2004: 4). If performance already, in its conceptual "staging" and establishment of footlights, "puts the act of speaking on display - objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73) and, as a result, "[by] its very nature [...] potentiates decontextualization" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73), then kalasie's contribution offers an example of how *treating* a "stretch of discourse" (Bauman 2004: 4) as a complete and internally coherent unit serves to discursively reify the boundaries of the performance as a discrete text.

2. Tumblr's tagging allows only for the inclusion of text, not images. While the overall "default" rule, as we have seen is "your feelings go in the tags not the caption," the fact that a) reaction GIFs are a demonstrably common form of interaction on Tumblr (see also Kanai 2017a; 2017a); and b) reaction GIFs are not a communicative option in tags suggests that the implicit social weight against adding comments/captions to a post directly may not bear down with equal weight when the medium is image-based, rather than written. As a result, while the use of written captions *contra* tags is marked, the use of image comments may not be equally keyed, or marked. In Lindfors's terms, kalasie's insertion of the GIF is a *performative enactment,* in that it constitutes an "[instance] of communicative sign behavior" that partakes of the "principle of

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performativity" in order to communicate (both its literal, semantic meaning and metamessages regarding the relations between speakers; see Tannen 2013), but because kalasie cannot communicate in this medium without entering the body of the post/thread, her intervention is not marked for performance.

(Preliminary) Conclusions

Roberta Pearson has elegantly problematized the difficulty of establishing representationality of digital texts and the methodological hazards of drawing generalizable conclusions based on an ever-expanding "infinite archive" (2014) — which also, as Derecho's discussion of *archontic* writing informs us, is always-changing. At the same time, developing accurate and up-to-date frameworks for the interpretation of digital texts — perhaps especially those texts created without official mediation or oversight, within self-defined vernacular communities of interest — is essential to understanding a cultural moment and (digital) media culture in which the default network status for most subjects within the global neoliberal system is "connected." I have followed Pearson in shifting focus from representative positions taken (by fans or within fan cultures) to protocols used (characteristic patterns in discourse or media use). I have further adjusted Pearson's model to direct attention particularly to the linguistic and paralinguistic features of vernacular web texts, and I have offered a close reading of a specific SuperWhoLock text as exemplary of poetic patterning used within that speech community, with special attention to how the several layers of constraints within which the participants produce their play/work predispose a

construction of SuperWhoLock texts as parody. SuperWhoLock texts, serving as synecdoche for a wider array of creative textual play/work in digital spaces, parody texts distributed laterally as well as hierarchically — a practice which has political implications in the cultural reception of texts in other digital arenas and offline, as digital cultures, media fandoms, and "everyday" life become increasingly interwoven and integrated.

Finally, I have proposed the term play/work to aid in the theoretization of creative production that is simultaneously work and play; at once a practice of leisure and a recuperated activity that generates significant value for the owners of digital platforms, in whose spaces the fans are always, only, tenants.

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CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

What we've learned, where we're heading.

<u>The Room: Architects</u>

Textual Poachers (Henry Jenkins). *Fans* (Matt Hills). *Fandom* (Jonathan Gray,

C. Lee Harrington, Cornel Sandvoss). *Digital Fandom* and *Digital Fandom 2.0* (Paul

Booth). Line them up in a row, scan the titles, and one gets a fair idea of the shape of the

field: we even call it *fan studies* when a research project, whatever it is, purports to

examine and report on something that intersects with the activities of participatory

culture. Implicitly, this usually means *media* fans, differentiated from such notionally

related categories as sports fans or music fans — even though, as a practical matter,

there are far more fans listening to Lady Gaga through their earbuds or watching the

SuperBowl from their couch than there are following her latest tour or cramming into

the stadium on Superdome.

A friend of mine likes to say that the most profound statement he ever heard in a

college lecture came from Dr. Jeffrey Buttram, a Sociology professor at the University

of Alabama in the 1970s: "I'm not going to *teach* you anything in this class. I'm just

pointing out connections between things you already know." This seems a good model

for thinking about the role of conclusions in academic writing: They don't introduce

new information, but ideally they bring together the information the project has presented so as to understand its research in new ways.

In this chapter, then, I will review the arguments made over the previous chapters. My goal is to point out connections between these arguments and show how, taken together, they establish a pattern. That pattern, to return to the metaphor with which I opened the Introduction, can tell us something about the shape of the "room" — the social conditions prevailing in, and the emergent digital habitus of, the vernacular web. The term I have coined to describe this general sphere of cultural activity is "digital vernacularity," and digital vernacularity — like other forms of unofficial culture — exists situated within a much wider context of social, political, and economic concerns. My aim in this project has been to "map" a small piece of a global puzzle, pervasive and diffuse — at once slippery and intractable.

The Room: Fan Studies

Fan studies, as I've suggested above, operates on a general premise: there is something distinctive about media fans that both unites them as a category and distinguishes them from other inhabitants of contemporary culture. Scholarly work in fan studies, to date, has generally attempted to identify what that something is — a way of relating to a text; a way of relating texts to one another; a way of relating *to each other* based on shared engagement with a set of texts — and to draw some conclusions about what this practice or orientation or way-of-being-in-the-world might mean.

All very right and proper; this work has produced a number of useful insights, many of which I have used in the preceding chapters as the intellectual foundations on

which my own project is built. But what we do *not* see is the study of fan fiction (to take an example) as revealing something important about the functions of pen and paper, though a strong case can be made for the marginalia of women's private collections as archontic literature (Derecho 2006). Nor (much later) do we see Henry Jenkins or Constance Penley informing us of what fans' textual transgressions have to say about the capabilities of the typewriter, the Xerox, the listserve. Implicitly, it is assumed that these technologies existed prior to fandom, and though fans freely use *media texts* in ways that are (at least sometimes) distinctive from the widespread habits of passive media consumption, graphite and ink-ribbon and html are all pretty much the same for fans as they are for anyone else, and they work more or less the same way no matter what one draws or types or formats with them.

There are reasons to doubt that the technologies of writing substantially predate the creation of "fanfic": the first instance of which I am aware is *The Aenid*, which takes us back a bit — and also perhaps suggests some assumptions I am making about the salience (or not) of distinctions between media fandom and other forms of intertextual creativity and responsivity. But even in the narrowest definition of *fandom* as affectively charged communal engagement with texts derived specifically from mass media, widespread civilian Internet access demonstrably postdates this cultural formation. That scholarly analyses of fan activity, even and especially *online*, have largely treated the affordances of networked communications — like pencil and paper and copy machines — as a *given*, which fans inherit and use as intended, seems therefore something of an oversight.

This project, therefore, contributes to the field by providing a description of key practices and protocols within SuperWhoLock fandom on Tumblr during a period of especially intense textual productivity. Scholars in fan studies may find this snapshot of SuperWhoLock, and its framing, useful in developing their own directions for further research — the collaborative construction of texts *across fandoms* and the multiple cultural literacies and media competencies this intertextual production and reception requires offer especially exciting avenues for inquiry.

More importantly, this project has aimed to contribute to the field by broadening, and refocusing, its scope. The integrated Tumblr dash, and the foreground of the reblog function, make it more possible than ever for heretofore "casual "fans — those who enjoy a media text, but do not themselves engage in the practices of intensive reading described by Henry Jenkins (1992), or produce archontic texts of their own as described by Abigail Derecho (2006) — to *participate* in participatory culture by hitting a quick alt + reblog on a clever post shared by a friend, or by saving a GIF to integrate into their own discourse as a visual "bon mot" later. As Booth suggests, on Tumblr the line between "fan," in the sense that is usually meant in scholarly studies of participatory cultures, and casual media consumption, in the broad sense of enjoying a particular media text, is blurred: participation becomes the default, and the curation of one's participatory experience becomes a digital identity (Booth 2017).

The Playpen: Estates in Cyberspace

If the Tumblr dash restructures how its digital tenants engage with texts and one another by multiplying the possibilities each user has for encountering the textual by-products of participatory cultures, then it is also true that participatory culture has radically altered the experience of Internet use, not only on Tumblr but throughout any platform that allows multimedia expression — in particular, the integration of images with written material typified by the use of "reaction GIFs." This form of user-generated content is ubiquitous. It is what makes "social" media fun — and therefore profitable.

Participatory cultures' manipulation of contemporary "technologies of entextualization" (Jones 2009) in the prolific generation of digital texts across multiple media has shaped the experience of *social* media in significant ways. The now wide-spread use of "reaction GIFs" offers a particularly striking example, as these are now commonly inserted in digital discourse across multiple platforms: Facebook, SMS, Twitter. Their "home," however, was Tumblr long before GIFs as bite-sized selections for performative enactments become pervasive elsewhere (McHugh 2015). And the people most motivated to develop the skills of entextualization and devote the time — to the practice of textual production as *play/work* — necessary to identify and extract communicatively significant frames of performance from mass media and render them available for others' use in a diffuse, yet penetrating "quotation culture" (Newman 2013; Booth 2017) have been fans. In GIF usage particularly, though not exclusively, the role of fandom in producing the user-generated content that facilitates the extremely lucrative (for owners) behemoth of social media becomes clear.

I therefore return to the analogy with E. P. Thompson's examination of power relations and customary usages in early modern England with which we began: In treating media texts as the raw materials of the landscape, subject to ostensible "ownership" by often distant landowners but in practice subject also to a wide variety of habitual "usage" rights, fans may indeed "poach" copyrighted media texts (Jenkins 1992) for use in their creation of new texts for a shared archive (Derecho 2006). But the *landscape* — the virtual estate on which all this poaching and crafting takes place — is in the digital era most often one or more of the platforms of social media. And the reliance of social media "estates" on user-generated content to maintain their profitability, indeed their viability, means that fans' digital play/work — even when the individual practices play off the rules and the texts generated are parodic or irreverent with respect to copyright holders, forms of authority, normative expectations of the neoliberal subject — directly produces value for the estates' owners: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr. It is precisely because fans' prolific textual generativity is coded as *playful* that this tremendous productivity, this intensive practice of skilled labor, goes not only *unpaid*, but *unrecognized*: hidden in plain sight.

The early emergence of Tumblr as a site for the creation and circulation of GIFs and the practice of integrating them into otherwise written texts, as well as the development of an emergent sociolinguistics whose usage has continued to spread through "oral" (but really digital) transmission, raises additional concerns. In this regard it is especially important to bear in mind the formative role of young women's discourse in shaping Tumblr's community speech norms, and the role of SuperWhoLock fandom

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in producing an unprecedented archive of GIFs from which to construct novel utterances: in the classic example, "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky 1957).

One way of getting our heads around the sheer diffuse cultural permeation whereby the owners of social media platforms simultaneously *target* their inhabitants as markets, increasingly finely calibrated, on behalf of advertisers, and *appropriate* the value of those inhabitants' textual productivity, to attract yet more users to generate yet more content and provide yet more attentive eyeballs for sale to the highest bidding advertisers in the expanding cycle of consumption, is to view them as the *inverse* of the operations de Certeau describes under the heading *la perruque*. That is to say, if

La perruque is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer [...] as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room (1984: 25),

then from the perspective of digital estate-holders the operation is reversed. It has never been more true that "the dividing line no longer falls between work and leisure. The two areas of activity flow together" (1984: 29) — but the lords of the manor have discovered a way to "steal back" the tenants' time.

Since both Tumblr and SuperWhoLock have been constituted, independently, as cultural and creative havens for groups marginalized under the conditions of patriarchy *and* neoliberalism, and particularly as sites for textually-centered interaction among young women, the textual productivity of SuperWhoLock fandom offers an especially

apt demonstration of how social media platforms profit by extracting value from precisely those subjects who — under the premises of contemporary biopolitics, which we might problematize another time — are constituted as particularly *vulnerable* and *at risk*. More, because media fandom, intensive use of social media technologies, and young women as subjects are all culturally encoded as "frivolous," and frequently as abject, excessive — affectively *embarrassing* — this extraction remains elided: not as *deliberately concealed*, but as *beneath our notice*.

We cannot see what we do not want to know.

The Game: Playing with/in Parody

I am far from the first to notice that social media platforms' reliance on user-generated content constitutes a reliance on unpaid labor, so I do not want to attempt an analysis of the political economy of Tumblr here. Within fan studies, too, Karen Hellekson has provided an exploration of fandom as as "gift economy" (2010); Paul Booth has suggested adjusting this frame to consider production and gift exchanges in participatory cultures online as a "digi-gratis" (2017). It is in the nature of conclusions, however, that in retracing and pointing out the pattern that has formed they often give hints at what shapes might be drawn next. In that vein, then, I want to suggest that the centers of most intensive digital play/work have been both overdetermined and understudied.

A second ambition of this project is therefore to intervene in the scholarly conversations around fan and digital cultures in part by demonstrating that in the *new*

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new media context, the practices of participatory culture and the ethos of digital engagement as *play* — as a reaction to rules, a bouncing off of existing frameworks — can in fact teach us something about the (relatively) new technologies for digital communication, textual transmission and manipulation, and play/work as the addition of labor-value to social media platforms, whose owners — but not *users* — profit from the activities of fandom conducted therein. It also, by identifying "protocols" and norms of usage, attempts to provide a primer of sorts to the sociolinguistics of SuperWhoLock fandom and the multiple competencies involved in "decoding" Tumblr texts.

In reading these texts, the project employs the definition of "play" used by Paul Booth in his formulation of the "philosophy of playfulness" he seeks informing participatory cultures online. *Playing* off Booth's work, however, this project takes a particular set of practices within one participatory culture (SuperWhoLock) and seeks to analyze how they work as *play*, reacting to the "rules" of a specific digital environment (Tumblr), which is itself structured by the ambient social and political conditions of a global neoliberal political economy.

The resonance between *play*, understood in these terms as "free movement within a more rigid structure" that "only happens with rules in place, as a reaction to those rules" (Booth 2015: 15) and *parody*, a "repetition with differentiation" (Hutcheon 1985: 25) is not coincidental. Neither is the relationship of parody to postmodern art (Hutcheon 1988), or the relationship of postmodernity to the fragmentary aesthetics of digital vernacularity (Soffer 2010) — nor the practice, in SuperWhoLock posts (Booth 2017) and in the digital sociolinguistics of homosocial female friendship groups (Tannen

2013) of reiteration, affirmation, rearticulation. All of these cases at once refuse and reinscribe authority; intensively self-aware, they construct Selves only to stage their own evaluations from an "ironic distance" (Hutcheon 1985: 10). And the kaleidescopic fragmentary approach to the arts of entextualization: any text can be broken down, deconstructed, taken *apart* into *spare parts* and reassembled in a new configuration. In the world of digital media, as in Derecho's conceptual/textual "archive," to *use* a text is never to use it up: reproducibility is infinite, and the original always remains.

Parody as play; playing as parody. Always within the limits of the system: "granted a special license to transgress the limits of convention, but [only] temporarily and only within the controlled confines authorized" (Hutcheon 1985: 75). I cut Hutcheon's quote off too soon: speaking of parody, she circumscribes its operation "within the confines dictated by 'recognizability'" (1985: 75). She means the recognizability of the present text's reference to antecedent text(s), but she could as well be speaking of *habitus* and of communicative competence: play and parody only "work" within the limits of cultural recognizability. Language, after all, only functions as a *system* — transgress too far, and speech becomes noise. The limits are what make play possible: The contact, the rebound, the trampoline effect: art and action bouncing off the walls of the room, which turn them backwards and send them into the air again. And if *art* — by at least one definition — can be understood as "play within constraints," then the practices of parody in SuperWhoLock fandom can be summarized as an *art of play*.

Such practices, threaded together into an art, do not confront either the appropriation of their textual creativity or the systems that place them on Tumblr, in the

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margins, the hypermarginal tassels of contemporary culture. Neither do they deny their own complicity. Instead they refuse final meaning: taking as our model the metaphor of play as a practice of bouncing balls off the walls in a closed room, enjoying the lift on rebound, then every toss — every post, every GIF, every ironic transposition — reminds us of limits by testing gravity again.

There are two basic responses to the inescapable millennial conclusion that "there is no longer an elsewhere" (de Certeau 1984: 40). One, of course, is the apathy of total despair: surrender in the face of the impossible.

The other is laughter — playing with/in the limits not because it will change the system but *because one/we can*. The defiance of play/work is not in the refusal to surrender value, but in its insistence on the pleasure of textual generativity — knowing the value it creates will be appropriated and making anyway: *art* for its own sake, by any other name.

For inheritors of postmodernity, for the digital tenants of the 21st century, the rallying cry perhaps is this: "If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do."

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BIOGRAPHY

Sarah G. Carpenter received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of North Alabama in 2006. She earned her Master of Arts in Spanish: Applied Linguistics from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in 2008, and received a Master of Arts in Folklore from the University of Oregon in 2011. Since 2015, she has worked with businesses and non-profit agencies as an independent consultant in digital cultures and outreach. She is currently employed as an instructor of English composition at the University of North Alabama, where she likes to remind her students that if they are not careful they, too, may go to graduate school.