Whose Story is it Anyway?: Legitimizing Fanworks in the Digital Age

by Brittany Larsen

When one finishes a book, there's typically a slight feeling of sadness, but most individuals do not wonder too deeply about what happens after the story on the pages end. However, this world off the page or screen is almost the entire basis of fandom. Members of fandom speculate on character's lives and fictional worlds beyond what the author creates, whether that be with fanfiction, fanart, or otherwise. Fandom has always existed in part as a kind of subculture, a way for fans who do not feel represented by mainstream media to create representations of themselves and relate characters to themselves. While fandom has existed for a long time, with the earliest fandoms being for stories like Sherlock Holmes, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, the age of the internet has changed the nature of fandom. With more authors and artists interacting with their fans and openly encouraging fandom activity, the line between what is confirmed by the author and the realities fans have created has become increasingly blurred. Therefore, as this line becomes thinner, the question becomes whether or not the distinction between fanworks and the source text even exists. Because of the way fandom has changed and become more collaborative through the internet, I believe that fandom has become a digital narrative unto itself, separate from its source text, and thus fanworks are worthy of equal consideration to the source texts they originate from.

It is only a fairly recent development that fandom has even become a subject of serious study, much less a form of media worthy of legitimization. The first book that gave weight to fandom concerns was Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* in 1992. At this time, the internet and social media were not as widespread and therefore fans spread their work through "fanzines" (Duffett 184). These zines, as well as mailing lists for fanfiction, were sent in secret between

fans from several areas of the world. They were kept a secret for two main reasons. First, copyright was held very seriously at this point in fandom history. The creators of Star Wars saw what kind of work was being created by fans and went as far as to say, "you don't own these characters and you can't publish anything about them without permission" (qtd. in Jenkins 31). As such, fans needed their anonymity because creating content that was contrary to the creator's vision made you liable to receive a cease and desist letter or worse ("Cease and Desist"). This rather hostile view of fans led to popular fandoms being essentially silenced by the producers of such programs. For example, William Shatner said of *Star Trek* fans, "people read into it things that were not intended. In *Star Trek's* case, in many instances, things were done just for entertainment purposes" (qtd. in Jenkins 30). As Jenkins points out, these kinds of attitudes about fans just end up policing what readings of fiction are valid, and therefore, whose experiences are valid in canon. Therefore, by having these reactions to fans, fans are being told who the stories are really being written for.

There are several theories on why fandom came about and what the aims of fans are. On one hand, fandom exists simply because fans enjoy the source material. Many fans do not want the story to end after a story is over, or feel as though some aspect of the narrative has been left unexplored. This idea is what leads to fanfictions that are referred to as "fix-it fics," which simply seek to resolve an issue in the source text in a different manner than the author did ("Fix It"). Because of this tendency to "correct" the work of the creators, fans are often viewed as angry or automatically hostile towards creators. Lesley Goodman posits in their article "Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory and the Death of the Author" that fans, "are hard on creators and source texts because the fannish impulse is to maintain the integrity of the fictional universe at the expense of the integrity of the creator(s) and the text itself" (Goodman

669). This suggests that fan anger comes from a place of wanting to maintain a "perfect" world, where the author is always wrong and only fans know the way the world is supposed to work.

Goodman's argument presupposes that fans love the world and hate the creator, but this is not always true. Therefore, I argue that the true motivation lies somewhere in the middle. I believe that what fans truly want is to find characters they connect to and relate to in the work they love so much. As such, much of fandom resides in creating diversity and representation for women, people of color and LGBT people, the members of which make up a large part of fandom. More angry fandoms tend to be centered on works where diversity does not exist, or exists in a toxic way, e.g. *Harry Potter* or *Supernatural.* For more diverse fandoms, however, there is not necessarily that level of anger. *Check, Please!,* which will be discussed later, has several POC characters and a canon gay relationship. However, fans do see that there is still more room for all fans to find someone to relate to. This is because narratives that only contain, for instance, one gay character for an entire population to relate to becomes alienating. Therefore, fans are finding characters they personally relate to and making them more like themselves, to explore how minority experiences are not one size fits all. In this way, rather than necessarily being a reaction of anger, desiring diversity in narratives and editing the canon to reflect that desire is a labor of love, where fans want to see themselves reflected in the narratives they love so much. In this way, fandom is a way for people to find identity.

Books like Jenkins began to change the perception of fandom, but I believe what really changed the view of fandom was the rise of the internet. The internet allowed for the growth and eventual legitimization of fandom in three main ways. First, it gave fans much needed anonymity. It was much more difficult for creators to pinpoint individuals involved in fandom if their real addresses and names were not known, or at least obscured by usernames and IP

addresses. Therefore, more people felt comfortable seeking out fandom and engaging in discussion. Thus, as more people felt comfortable entering the fan sphere, the second change became possible, which is that it became easier to find individuals who shared interests and fan communities grew. These communities started with Geocities communities, which were similar to the mailing lists in that they were password protected and selective. Then fandom moved to Livejournal and Fanfiction.net, which both hosted open forum options and anonymous posting for more communication. Fandom currently resides mainly in two web-based forums: Tumblr and archiveofourown.org (Fanlore.org). Tumblr showcases the third main advantage of internet-based fandom, which is the increase in the types of narratives available to be created. While in the days of zines and mailing lists the only types of fanworks that were common were fanfiction and fanart, the digital age allowed for more possibilities, the most prominent being graphics, or digital images, made mostly in Photoshop, that portray aspects of fandom. For example, one popular form of graphic is what are referred to as social media edits. Social media edits are graphics using photographs and information about characters made to look like a fictional character's Instagram, Facebook or Twitter page, or their phone or Snapchat. The introduction of such fandom works has increased not only the number of people in fandom in general, but also the number of people who can contribute to fandom.

The other online attribute that has changed fandom is archiveofourown.org and the Organization for Transformative Works. The OTW works specifically "to serve the interests of fans by providing access and preserving the history of fan works and fan cultures in myriad forms" ("What We Believe"). This is their work in creating the Archive, which is a housing place for creative fan works of all kinds. Additionally, the OTW works in navigating fandom law, and arguing that fandom works fall under the Fair Use clause of copyright. In order for

something to be considered fair use, it must contain some combination of the following: " they 1) are noncommercial and not sold for a profit; 2) are transformative, adding new meaning and messages to the original; 3) are limited, not copying the entirety of the original; and 4) do not substitute for the original work" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). The aspect of fair use that is most compelling for my argument is the argument that fanworks contribute additional meaning to the source text. I believe this is because fans create meaning from a text in a different way than creators, and even we as scholars, do. Traditional literary analysis is accomplished by looking at what is evidenced in the text; fandom analysis is accomplished by looking at what isn't. What this means is that instead of looking for textual proof to validate a fan's reading of a text, they will instead ask, "where does it say this reading is untrue? What proof do you have that this couldn't be possible?" The questioning attitude is especially true when considering fandom's desire for diversity in fiction, where fans are seeking more than what producers are currently giving them in terms of representation of women, people of color, and LGBT characters.

Overall, though, there are many aspects of fandom analysis that are not as different from traditional literary analysis as they might seem. For example, one framework that aligns rather nicely with fandom considerations is Reader Response Theory. As described by theorist Lois Tyson, Reader Response Theory ultimately states "that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather, they actively make the meaning they find in literature" (Tyson 170). Therefore, readers may not agree with what the author views as the meaning of their work, because readers come from many different backgrounds and bring different experiences to the reading or viewing of a work. Tyson goes on to explain that a reader's meaning still needs to be supported by textual evidence (Tyson 169). This need for evidence is what lends some criticism to fandom, where some purport that fans, for example, are

"making characters gay" without a "reason or evidence" that they are. This is a problematic view, however, because it implies that certain personality or physical attributes indicate that someone is gay, when this is not the case. Therefore, reader interpretation trumps canonical evidence in such cases. However, this theory is still relevant because it shows how the members of an audience of a work can create meaning for themselves in a work and identify attributes beyond what the creator ever imagined.

At the same time, since the methods of fandom analysis differ in some ways from traditional literary analysis, it is essential to understand the terminology used in fandom spaces before going any further. The first term that comes into play, and the one we will be discussing most, is the line between canon and fanon. Canon refers to what exists "on the page." Essentially, it is "the media universe created by the makers of a text' (Duffett 291). Fanon, by contrast, are "details or character readings contributed by members of the fan community" (Duffett 294). Fanon can range from one person's "headcanon", which is a personal reading of a character or situation, to a pervasive fandom attitude that affects how the entire fandom is viewed. One common misconception about fandom is that they have a tendency to "make things up out of nowhere", but this is not necessarily true. Many fans create these fanon ideas based on evidence from the narrative itself, in the same way we seek out evidence in traditional literary analysis. Essentially, every academic paper written on literature has been a headcanon, or a "meta", as it is called in fandom circles.

One work that exemplifies this concept is the webcomic *Check, Please!* The comic is available for free on Tumblr, and there is a great deal of interaction between its author, Ngozi Ukazu, and the fans. *Check, Please!* is the story of Eric Bittle, a college hockey player, with a penchant for baking, who has decided to tell his story with a vlog. The episodes, as they're

called, consist of Bitty's vlogs, at least in the beginning of the series. Over the course of the

comic, Bitty grows closer to his fellow players and eventually begins a relationship with another

team member, Jack Zimmerman. The story covers many aspects of life, such as anxiety,

depression, sexuality, and balancing the struggles of being a college student with being a student

athlete.

One aspect of *Check, Please!* that makes it unique is the format in which it is delivered.

The comic is available for free on Tumblr, a social media website popular with many fan

communities. Because of this, the creator is in communication with fans fairly regularly and thus

takes their opinion into account when creating the content for the comic. As such, she has several

"extras" available to enhance the fans' reading experience. For example, after each episode, she

releases a blog post detailing her thoughts as she made the current episode. Additionally, there

are tweets written as the characters, which expand on the universe and tell readers what the

characters are up to in their daily lives, since the episodes are rather brief. The final layer,

however, comes for those fans who support Ngozi through her Patreon. On Patreon, fans pledge

a certain amount of money to the creator in exchange for certain rewards. In the case of *Check,*

Please!, patrons receive sketches of the comic as she draws them before other fans, as well as

livestreams of her as she draws the comic.

The interactions Ngozi has with her fans highlight a notable feature of current fan

communities. Because of the ability of the creator to interact with fans, there comes an

encouragement and expectation of fan creativity. On her blog, she actively encourages fanfiction

and fanart ("FAQ"). This is in sharp contrast to creator attitudes about fandom in the past, such

as the comments by author Diana Gabaldon, author of the *Outlander* book series, who compared

the writing of fanfiction to "someone selling your children into white slavery" in a blog post that

has since been taken down ("Diana Gabaldon"). The fact that Ngozi legitimizes fanworks and enjoys them shows how far fandom has come into the public sphere. When combined with the encouraged fan participation, an attitude emerges where the line between fan creation and the work itself becomes very blurry.

With these concepts in mind, we can begin to discuss how this is put into practice in different fandom interactions. To begin, in *Check! Please,* there is a canonically queer relationship. This is the most popular relationship in fan circles as well. Since this diversity exists and the relationship between the creator and fans is fairly positive, one would think there would be no need for alternative readings. However, there are several other popular pairings not necessarily canon that exist in fan circles. One such pairing is Derek Nurse and William Poindexter. These characters are the defense line for the team from one year. Defensemen in hockey work very closely together, so their dynamic is very important. This pairing brings something new to the narrative. Derek, or Nursey, and William, or Dex, have a very complex relationship. The two bicker almost constantly, as Dex is very conservative and hard working, where Nursey is much more laidback. As the story goes on, though, we see them begin to grow closer and become good friends. However, because of the brevity of each episode and because the main story focuses on Bitty, the relationship between Nursey/Dex is largely explored in supplementary material.

In particular, the relationship between Nursey and Dex is delineated mostly in the character Twitters. For example, around the time the two characters start developing a closer friendship, Bitty tweets, "I have no idea why Dex and Nursey sit next to each other, but I'm chalking it up to roadie superstition" ("The Tweets of Eric Bittle"). This tweet indicates that the rest of the team is just as bewildered by Dex and Nursey's sudden affinity for each other. Fans

who read the extra content, however, latched onto this dynamic and began to see the possibilities that emerged from this closer relationship. Particularly with Dex, many fans saw the opportunity to explore the implications of Dex realizing his sexuality in context with his canon conservativism. This is exemplified in a fan poem in Dex's voice entitled "Catholic Guilt", which reads, "my mother calls me every week to ask how I'm doing and it feels like confessional but I find myself saying, "Forgive me Father for I have sinned and I will probably continue to sin despite whatever scripture you quote at me" (likeshipsonthesea). This poem is read as Dex coming to terms with his feelings for Nursey in context of his upbringing. The conservative experience of sexuality is something that many people relate to, and recognize in Dex, but that isn't necessarily explicitly stated in canon. This depiction of their relationship does not come out of nowhere though, because of the evidence in the extra content. Additionally, because of the culture that the digital format of the comic allows, the creator sees these fan depictions and is led to address them in extra content and allude to them, and perhaps may be led to make this relationship canon in the future.

Whether it is made canon or not, however, I do not believe is relevant. Because of the personal experiences readers have brought to their readings of these comics, they have interpreted the character of Dex a certain way and this reading is no less valid than any other reading, especially since relatively little is known of Dex in the "canon." By delineating an idea as merely fanon, we are automatically connoting it as less real than that information that is explicit. However, these queer readings of Dex, as we've seen, have potential and benefit a large number of fans. Because fan creations can and should be read in their own right, there is no reason to believe these ideas are any less real. Therefore, instead of simply looking at fan

creations as conjecture off a source text, perhaps the source text is simply a springboard for separate branching narratives, worthy of exploring on their own.

While fandom certainly has a reputation for being preoccupied with romantic relationships, these are not the only kinds of fanon interpretations that are made. For example, there are headcanons that view Jack, Bitty's boyfriend, as autistic. Many of these headcanons come from autistic fans, who recognize their own mannerisms in Jack. For example, Jack is very emotionally unexpressive, has a special interest/fixation on hockey, has extreme anxiety and occasional meltdowns, will become non-verbal, and has sensory issues. This reading will likely never be addressed in canon or confirmed, but I believe it still has value simply because it allows a marginalized group to recognize themselves in a character and see him as a positive representation of themselves in fiction, something they are rarely afforded. This ability to use fandom as a coping mechanism exemplifies the power of what fandom can do and how the impact of these interpretations are no less real simply because they do not explicitly exist in canon.

Therefore, with the new opportunities available in the digital age, holding fandom as simply a poor extension of its source text is misguided and potentially damaging. Many valuable interpretations and new experiences are being brought to the forefront through fandom narratives. Fans, through collaboration with each other and creators, are finding new ways to construct meaning from texts in the digital age and we should encourage instead of diminish its value. The distinction of fanon vs canon simply exacerbates this divide and devalues the perspective of fans. If fans relate to a character and find something of value in relating to the character in a way the creator did not imagine, it does not hurt the creator. It need not affect the source text at all. Other readers and the creator can go on reading in the way that was intended or

imagined. But for that fan, a great deal of good has been done. Therefore, fans are not necessarily seeking the canonization of their fandom ideals. Instead, many simply wish to be allowed to freely construct their own narrative, based on, but not reliant upon, the source text. This exemplifies the potential of digital culture. Through fandom creation, we can learn a great deal about society, writing of all kinds, and literary analysis. So go ahead and watch something as a fan. You might just learn something.

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