FANDOM AND THE FOURTH WAVE: YOUTH, DIGITAL FEMINISMS, AND MEDIA FANDOM ON TUMBLR

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Abstract

Recent scholarly accounts have noted the increasing slippage between feminism, digital cultures, and popular culture, yet few have located media fandom at this juncture. While critical and celebratory modes of popular culture consumption, production, and critique are central to both fourth wave feminisms and media fandom, both feminist and fan studies scholarship is yet to account for the ways in which media fandom and fourth wave feminisms are deeply connected in practice, as well as how fannish and feminist communities are converging within the digital landscape.

Drawing upon feminist cultural studies and fan studies, this thesis offers an examination of the role of media fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities. Analysing digital ethnographic data gathered over a two-year period through narrative survey, follow-up interviews, and participant observation, it explores the lived experiences of young people who are engaging with feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities in a routine, informal and everyday way through their ties to media fandom on Tumblr.

In doing so, it foregrounds the close relationship between feminist cultural studies and fan studies methodologically, theoretically, and empirically, and locates media fandom as a site at which meanings of feminism are collectively produced, negotiated, and contested. This research subsequently reveals the intimate, complex, and at times contradictory, relationship between popular culture, media fandom, and feminist pedagogy, and locates fandom as an important and accessible space for bringing feminism to a wider, and increasingly younger, audience beyond the academy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From the selection of high-profile celebrities declaring their identification with feminism, to popular feminist books dominating the bestseller charts, to the coverage of "feminist" issues in popular magazines including *Elle* and *Teen Vogue,* to the #MeToo movement against rape culture and sexual violence, contemporary popular culture has been marked by the renewed visibility of feminist politics. This visibility has been heightened by the affordances of participatory digital media technologies, which have enabled feminists to share dialogue, exchange information, network, organise, and mobilise in vast and varied ways. The relationship between digital media technologies, popular culture, and feminism has subsequently been examined, for example, with regards to school- and university-based feminisms (Retallack et al. 2016, Lewis et al. 2016), testimonial projects such as Hollaback!, Everyday Sexism, and #MeToo (Mendes et al. 2019, Wånggren 2016), and the circulation and reception of celebrity feminisms (Isaksen and Eltantawy 2019, Tennent and Jackson 2017, Keller and Ringrose 2015).

Additionally, the visibility of popular feminism within participatory digital media spaces, especially on social media, has been described as instrumental to the increasing numbers of girls and young women identifying themselves as feminists (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a, 2015, Jackson 2018). This marks a shift away from an earlier socio-cultural context in which feminism was largely repudiated by girls and young women (McRobbie 2009, Scharff 2012).[1] In fact, feminism is increasingly signified as a 'popular' (Banet-Weiser 2018), 'cool' (Valenti 2014b), 'stylish' (Gill 2016a, b), and ultimately desirable identity in complex, and often contradictory, ways that call for the continuing need to critically re-evaluate and re-examine the contours of young people's engagements with contemporary feminisms.

However, one under-theorised site of young people's engagement with feminism is media fandom. While recent accounts have noted the increasing slippage between feminism, digital cultures, and popular culture, few have located media fandom at this juncture. As communities formed around a shared and sustained interest in specific media texts or media cultures, media

fans are deeply concerned with both critiquing and celebrating popular culture in ways that resonate throughout discussions of the messy entanglement of feminism, digital cultures, and the politics of popular culture. Moreover, many online fan communities are located at the very sites associated with particularly high levels of digital feminist activism, such as Tumblr and Twitter, where the networked nature of these platforms brings fannish and feminist communities together.

Forging a sustained dialogue between feminist cultural studies and fan studies, this thesis subsequently examines the nature of the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminisms. Throughout this thesis, I address three key and interrelated research questions: Firstly, what is the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities? Secondly, how do feminist fan communities bring together both fannish and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities? Finally, what is the role of the micro-blogging and social networking platform Tumblr in facilitating these connections between media fandom and digital feminisms?

Drawing upon a range of interdisciplinary frameworks rooted in an anti-foundationalist and constructivist feminist epistemology, my research is based on a digital ethnography of what I term "feminist fandom", which I will discuss in more detail shortly, on Tumblr. Tumblr emerged as my primary research site for several reasons. Firstly, the site has, since its conception in 2007, developed a reputation as a platform that is largely populated by marginalised groups, including LGBT youth, girls and young women, and people of colour (Cho 2015, Dame 2016). It has also emerged as an important site where fan communities, many members of whom belong to the aforementioned groups, convene (McCracken 2017). This reputation circulates in both academic and popular discussions of the site.[2] Secondly, the technological affordances of Tumblr differentiate it from other popular social media platforms such as Facebook. Unlike Facebook, where explicit 'identity cues' (Baym 2015), including one's real name, age, location, occupation, relationship status, etc., are required for meaningful participation, the only identity information Tumblr requires a user to provide is their age[3], email address, and a username. Tumblr

affords users a high level of control over their self-presentation, visibility, and disclosure of identity information that many social networking sites do not. The platform therefore invites engagements from users for whom a sense of privacy, if not full anonymity, may be preferred, lending itself to participation from those seeking to explore identities, issues, and interests that may be unwelcome elsewhere. These technological affordances make the site particularly conducive to 'counterpublic' (Fraser 1990) modes of address that are of great importance to the digital circulation, and contestation, of contemporary feminisms (see Renninger 2015). Finally, my insider position as an acafan (Cristofari and Guitton 2017), immersed in the feminist fan community on Tumblr before undertaking this research, provided invaluable access to the feminist fans whose voices and experiences I examine throughout this thesis**.** My personal engagement not only provided a point of reciprocity, accountability, and transparency between myself and participants, but was also key to producing a complex understanding of feminist fandom grounded in prolonged deep immersion within the feminist fan community. While the digital environment is slippery, and fannish and feminist practices on Tumblr can be located within a networked and multi-sited digital ecology, my research focuses primarily on a single research site, Tumblr, for the above reasons yet nevertheless reveals fannish and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities that resonate beyond it.

This thesis subsequently draws upon ethnographic data gathered over a two-year period through narrative survey, follow-up interviews, and participant observation to unpack the experiences of young people who are engaging with feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities in a routine, informal and everyday way through their ties to media fandom on Tumblr. In doing so, I foreground the close relationship between feminist cultural studies and fan studies methodologically, theoretically, and empirically. Moreover, I argue that, just as feminist cultural studies and fan studies are connected (see Hannell 2020b), so too are digital feminisms and media fandom. Examining the nature of this connection is important because it grants us insight into an overlooked site of young people's engagement with digital feminism. My analysis locates media fandom as a space in which meanings of feminism are produced,

negotiated, and contested in a routine, informal, and everyday way. This research emphasises the intimate relationship between popular culture, media fandom, and feminist pedagogy, and positions fandom as an important and accessible space for bringing feminism to a wider audience and providing space for 'the multiplicity of voices therein' (Harvey 2020, 57).

My analysis also foregrounds the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of feminist fandom, highlighting the processes of inclusion and exclusion that bring it into being. The accounts I examine throughout this thesis make visible the multiplicitous, complex, and often contradictory, meanings of feminism and feminist practice that are circulated, negotiated, and contested within fannish spaces. My examination of dominant understandings of feminist fandom, articulated both within my ethnographic data as well as within scholarly theorisations of fandom, calls for the necessity of a sharper understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which difference is simultaneously levelled out and heightened within fannish spaces. This research subsequently disrupts normative assumptions about fandom as an uncomplicated and inherently progressive, resistant, or emancipatory space. Instead, it reveals how the lived experience of feminist fandom is fraught and messy in ways that are not conducive to easy formulations of subversion and resistance found within various scholarly accounts of fandom. Thus, while my analysis reveals the role of social media platforms like Tumblr in facilitating the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminism, it also considers its complex role in the re-entrenchment of structural inequalities in both its architecture and its use.

In what follows I will outline the intellectual and cultural context in which my research is located and highlight the contributions it makes to both feminist cultural studies and fan studies. Firstly, I offer an overview of debates about contemporary feminisms with regards to the supposed move away from postfeminism. I then discuss the circularity between fourth wave feminisms, popular culture, and digital cultures, while also highlighting various points of continuity and change between fourth wave feminisms and their predecessors. Finally, I locate media fandom at the juncture between fourth wave feminisms,

popular culture, and digital cultures before presenting an overview of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Emergent Feminisms: From Post to Popular

Since the 1990s, the concept of postfeminism has become central to feminist cultural analysis (Modleski 1991, Brooks 1997, Projansky 2001, Gamble 2001, Tasker and Negra 2007, Genz and Brabon 2009a). The concept is contentious and has been characterised in numerous ways: as a regressive 'backlash' against feminism; to refer to a time 'after' (second wave) feminism (Faludi 1992, Whelehan 2000); to signify an epistemological break with second wave feminism and alignment with other 'post' movements, such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (Brooks 1997, Lotz 2001); and to propose a historical shift towards third wave feminism (Moseley and Read 2002, Dow 1996). The term, as Diane Negra (2004) highlights, 'exhibits a plasticity that enables it to be used in contradictory ways.'

Rosalind Gill (2007c) encourages us to move beyond understandings of postfeminism as an epistemological break, as a historical shift, or simply as backlash. Instead, she conceives of postfeminism a distinctive 'sensibility' deeply enmeshed within neoliberalism. Gill highlights several relatively stable features and interrelated themes that comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse, including the shift from objectification to subjectification (Gill 2003, 2008), the notion of femininity as a bodily property (Elias et al. 2017), the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline (Gill 2009), the emphasis on individualism, choice, agency, and empowerment (Stuart and Donaghue 2011), the dominance of the makeover paradigm (Tincknell 2011, Weber 2009), and the sexualisation of culture (Attwood 2009, 2006, Gill and Donaghue 2013). Gill argues that the patterned articulation of these ideas constitutes a postfeminist sensibility. Moreover, she argues that these themes coexist with, and are structured by, continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability – as well as gender. Postfeminism, she argues, is part of a neoliberal political economy (Genz and Brabon 2009a, Negra and Tasker 2014, Rottenberg 2013, Gill and Scharff

2011b, Radner 2011) that produces specifically gendered subjects that reaffirm normative gender, race, class, and sexual identities (McRobbie 2009, Gill 2016a, Gill and Scharff 2011a, Butler 2013, Dosekun 2015, Allen and Mendick 2013). Postfeminist discourses are thus implicated in the *undoing* of feminism (McRobbie 2009, 2004), and postfeminism is often adopted as a theoretical framework to explore girls' and young women's supposed dis-affiliation and dis-identification with feminism and feminist politics in the contemporary era.

However, the analytic purchase of postfeminism has more recently been called into question by feminist scholars (Whelehan 2010, Lumby 2011, Rivers 2017, Keller and Ryan 2018), who have challenged the dominant logic that feminism is 'in retreat' (McRobbie 2009). For these scholars, feminism's increased visibility, embrace, and circulation within popular media cultures over the past decade has made visible a shift in the relationship between feminism, identity politics, and popular media cultures that calls for a re-evaluation of the utility of postfeminism as a critical-analytic framework to make sense of our cultural landscape. Negra (2014, 275), for example, questions whether 'accounts of gender developed in an earlier and distinctly different economic era still apply.' Similarly, Retallack et al. (2016) and Keller and Ryan (2015) argue that postfeminism is potentially redundant in light of emergent fourth wave feminisms which pose a challenge to postfeminist media cultures. However, while Gill (2016a) acknowledges that the position of feminism within the contemporary era has several novel features, she cautions that it may be premature to claim we have moved 'beyond' postfeminism entirely.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, feminism has become increasingly visible across popular media culture, emerging, for example, in popular television programs and films, popular music, fashion media, advertising campaigns, digital cultures, celebrity culture, and popular literature. As a result, the renewed visibility of feminism within popular media culture has produced a cultural formation in which feminism is increasingly positioned as 'cool' (Valenti 2014b), 'popular' (Banet-Weiser 2015b, 2018), 'trending' (Guillard 2016), and 'stylish' (Gill 2016a, b) to such an extent that it has become 'both hypervisible and normative within popular media' (Banet-Weiser 2018, 7). This moves us

away from an earlier context in which feminism was largely repudiated by girls and young women (McRobbie 2009, 2004, Scharff 2012). While popular manifestations of feminism are not unique to the twenty-first century (Dow 1996, Brunsdon 1997), they remain an important space for 'a *new* generation of feminist theorising' (Durham et al. 2013, 722; my emphasis).

Crucially, feminist scholars emphasise that the current moment in feminism does not represent a unified, singular popular feminism. Instead, they highlight that our cultural moment consists of a messy, often fraught, entanglement of different feminisms competing within an economy of visibility. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, precisely because feminism is now located in the 'popular', which is, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2016 [1981]) argues, a terrain of struggle', it is a space where:

> [C]ompeting demands for power battle it out. This means that there are many different feminisms that circulate in popular culture in the current moment, and some of these feminisms become more visible than others. (Banet-Weiser 2018, 1)

Feminist scholars have subsequently used a variety of terms, often critically, to describe contemporary feminisms: 'celebrity' (Taylor 2016, Hamad and Taylor 2015, Prins 2017), 'popular' or 'pop' (Banet-Weiser 2018, Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016, Zobl and Drüeke 2012), 'mainstream' (Phipps 2020, Olufemi 2020), 'intersectional' (Villesèche et al. 2018, Davis 2008, Flood 2019), 'queer' (Marinucci 2010), 'public' (Keller 2020), 'emergent' (Keller and Ryan 2018, Harris 2010), and 'neoliberal' (Rottenberg 2018). For Banet-Weiser (2018), contemporary popular feminisms exist along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly feminisms achieve more visibility, and thus popularity, while more critical expressions of feminism rooted in structural critique are obscured. An understanding of contemporary feminism as slippery and multiplicitous, as *feminisms,* is therefore necessary.

Furthermore, there is no "authentic" feminism that exists beyond its popular manifestations, and, as both Banet-Weiser (2018) and Hollows and Moseley (2006) note, the popular remains a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism. Rather than dismissing popular feminisms in favour of 'some real

authentic feminism which is “elsewhere”’ (Brunsdon 1997, 101), I take up Scharff’s (2012) insistence that feminism must be approached ‘flexibly’ in recognition of the multiple iterations of the word. Writing of the need to observe the range of perspectives and positionalities that fall under the rubric of feminism, Kaplan (2003) reminds us:

> That there is no monolithic feminism is a good, if at times uncomfortable, fact: positions, actions and knowledge – constantly being contested, questioned, and debated – mean that feminism is alive and well, and always changing in accord with larger social, historical and political changes. (47)

Moreover, Budgeon (2001) highlights that popular feminisms provide interpretative frameworks for young feminists to understand and engage with feminism. While popular feminism is not without critique, it remains crucial in making feminist discourses and identities accessible and intelligible to those outside of academia (Farrell 1998). As Skeggs (1997, 144) notes, ‘fragmentation, dispersal and the marketability and notoriety of certain aspects of feminism means than many women only have limited and partial knowledge about feminism.’ Additionally, one of the most accessible types of feminist discourse available to girls and young women within their everyday lives is popular feminism. For example, while research suggests that teen girls feel ambivalent about celebrity feminism (Keller and Ringrose 2015, Jackson 2020), they also recognise their desire for a ‘visible feminist presence’ (Zaslow 2009, 128) within popular media culture. Thus, the cultural work of these popular manifestations of feminism, Keller (2016a, 183) argues, enable many girls and young women to more ‘confidently perform a once scorned feminist identity.’ In turn, while feminist scholars express ambivalence towards ‘popular feminism’, they also note that ‘the overlaps and intersections of affect, desire, critique, and ambivalence that characterise popular feminism are potentially opening spaces for, and connections to, mobilising feminist practice’ (Banet-Weiser 2018, xi).

Given this cultural context, we have subsequently witnessed rapid transformations in both the way feminist politics and identities circulate and

are taken up within the contemporary moment, as well in our understandings of girls and young women's engagement with feminism.[4]

Mapping Fourth Wave Feminisms

The renewed interest in feminisms within the public sphere has led many to describe the contemporary 'feminist zeitgeist' (Valenti 2014a) as ushering in a 'fourth wave' of feminism. While the wave metaphor is contentious[5], and some have argued that we are in fact 'beyond the waves' (Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016, 49), many feminists continue to define themselves through the wave metaphor (for example, Baumgardner and Richards 2001, Redfern and Aune 2010, Heywood and Drake 1997) and produce academic evaluations of certain identities and practices within the context of specific waves (Bobel 2010, Budgeon 2011, Rivers 2017). The metaphor subsequently persists, and the term 'fourth wave' appears in both academic (Munro 2013, Rivers 2017, Lawrence and Ringrose 2018) and popular (Cochrane 2013, Valenti 2009, Solomon 2009) discussions of contemporary feminism. Given its persistence, Evans and Chamberlain (2014) subsequently encourage feminist researchers to engage critically with the wave metaphor, and to consider the importance of continuity and change as part of this critical engagement. As Keller and Ryan (2018) note, contemporary feminisms are emerging 'in ways that both converge with, and diverge from, the feminisms of previous decades' (2).

Given the multiplicity of feminisms circulating in the contemporary era, there is no singular understanding of the 'fourth wave'. However, it can be broadly characterised by two key features. Firstly, the increasing take-up of digital media technologies for feminist activism and debate, and, secondly, an increased public and media engagement with, and interest in, feminism(s), particularly within popular media cultures. The wave metaphor is primarily used within accounts of fourth wave feminism as a way of thinking through feminist practice chronologically (Baumgardner 2011), wherein the 'newness' of the fourth wave is primarily signified by the hypervisibility of feminism with popular media cultures, as well as the recent explosion in the number of

websites, blogs, and online communities that facilitate new kinds of feminist community building, practice, and activism (Dean 2010b).

Digital Cultures

For many feminist scholars, the conceptual distinction between third wave[6] and fourth wave feminisms rests largely on the 'new model for feminism being built online' (Valenti 2009), particularly on social media (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, Rentschler and Thrift 2015b). Proponents of the fourth wave argue that the proliferation of feminist discourse and activism on social media and blogs has had a profound impact on contemporary feminisms. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr have been identified as shaping 'feminist pedagogy' (Seidman 2013, 549) and contemporary feminist activism (Rentschler 2014), resulting in the cultivation of new modes of feminist cultural critique and 'models of political agency for practising feminism' (Rentschler and Thrift 2015a, 329).

For example, 'hashtag feminism' (Khoja-Moolji 2015, Loza 2014, Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014, Jackson et al. 2020) has become a popular form of digital feminist activism, providing opportunities for feminists to connect, share information and resources, and establish solidarities. Hashtags, denoted by the # symbol that precedes them, are shared terms used to make social media posts, particularly on websites such as Twitter, both searchable and collectable. Hashtags specifically related to feminist causes have made an indelible mark on feminist activism over the past decade, and feminist researchers have examined a range of feminist hashtags tackling issues such as rape culture, sexual violence, intersectionality, popular culture, gendered harassment, racialised police brutality, and violence against women (Conley 2014, Rodino-Colocino 2014, Thrift 2014, Loza 2014, Bowles Eagle 2015, Rentschler 2015, Clark 2016, Keller et al. 2016, Jiménez 2016, Williams 2015, 2016, Horeck 2014, Guillard 2016). Feminist hashtags have been described as a new form of collective 'discursive activism' (Clark 2016) that, through their visibility, generate a wider feminist consciousness. Moreover, the reach of hashtag feminism is not restricted to Anglophone countries in the Global North,

as researchers have identified feminist hashtag activism in countries such as Turkey, South Korea, India, Nigeria, and Germany (Drüeke and Zobl 2015, Kim 2017, Akyel 2014, Altınay 2014, Bowles Eagle 2015, Martin and Valenti 2013, Khoja-Moolji 2015, Sadowski 2015, Losh 2014).

Similarly, the feminist blogosphere, which Jessalynn Keller (2012a, 137) defines as 'a loose affiliation of blogs dedicated to discussing feminism and gender inequality,' has also been described in terms of its ability to generate a wider feminist consciousness (Kennedy 2007), and broaden the scope of public feminist dialogue (Beetham and Valenti 2007). While difficult to measure, researchers have claimed that girls and young women are the largest group of creators and readers of blogs (Bortree 2006, Lenhart and Madden 2005) and social networking websites (boyd 2007, Duggan and Brenner 2013, Lenhart 2015, Madden and Zickuhr 2011). Blogs and social networking sites have been described as 'a virtual room of one's own' for girls (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2004), and as 'safe spaces' (Mazzarella and Pecora 2007) from which young women speak out. They therefore harbour enormous potential in terms of consciousness-raising, campaigning, organising, and feminist activism and pedagogy more broadly.

The analysis of digital feminist spaces often draws upon Nancy Fraser's (1990) popular concept of subaltern 'counterpublics', which Fraser defines as 'parallel discursive arenas' (67) that, historically, have 'contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech' (61). Fraser's concept of counterpublics has been widely used within feminist scholarship to build a compelling case for the emergence of online feminist counterpublics (Keller et al. 2016, Keller 2016a, Sills et al. 2016, Horeck 2014, Pérez and Greene 2016, Salter 2013, Schuster 2013, Rentschler 2014, Clark-Parsons 2018), and to emphasise the importance of girls' and young women's use of new media technologies (Harris 2008b, Keller 2016a, 2012b, Sills et al. 2016). Increasing numbers of girls and young women are developing online 'networks of affinity' (Rentschler 2014, 79), and producing their own media and online counterpublics to express, enact, and network around their feminist politics

(Harris 2010). Online spaces, in this respect, can make it easier for subaltern voices to find their way into popular consciousness (Simone 2006).

While the modality of these forms of online feminist practice and activism may well be new, the issues that feminists are targeting through these practices are by no means unique to contemporary fourth wave feminism. The practice of hashtag feminist activism can, therefore, be conceptualised as developing continuities between fourth wave feminism and earlier feminist practices designed to discursively generate a wider feminist consciousness. Moreover, the modes of community building and consciousness-raising situated within the digital landscape of fourth wave feminism can be understood as a continuation of established feminist strategies. For example, both Keller (2016a) and Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016) situate feminist blogging as a continuation of earlier feminist forms through their interest in dialogue, community building, consciousness-raising, and information sharing. This interrupts the markedly 'linear' (Hemmings 2011) understanding of fourth wave feminism as an entirely 'new' and decontextualised phenomena. However, the affordances of networked digital technologies have nevertheless made these feminisms highly visible in unprecedented ways through their collapsing of temporal and spatial constraints. We thus cannot abandon the notion of 'newness' entirely.

Popular Culture

Another key feature of fourth wave feminism is its complicated entanglement with popular culture. This entanglement, the 'push and pull of feminism and pop' (Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016, 171), has been conceptualised by feminist scholars in two distinct yet interrelated ways. The first involves an understanding of fourth wave feminism *in/as popular culture*, drawing largely upon the aforementioned claims about feminisms' hypervisibility and circulation within popular media cultures. This perspective recognises the potential for feminist critique that resides within popular culture, and highlights popular culture's position as a site at which meanings of feminism are contested, co-opted, and produced (Ferreday and Harris 2017, Hollows and

Moseley 2006, Mendes et al. 2019, Cattien 2019). The second focuses on fourth wave feminism as *popular critique of popular culture.* This refers to both the incorporation of feminism into popular culture, as well as the increased accessibility, and popularisation, of feminist analyses and critiques of popular culture that manifest through both cultural consumption and production. Reflecting on the slippage between these two understandings of the relationship between fourth wave feminism and popular culture, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 884; original emphasis) write that:

> Feminism has always been a useful lens through which to *understand* popular culture. However, we now are living in a moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture.

For example, Cattien (2019) encourages us to consider the potential of feminist critique to reside within popular culture, as well as the potential of popular culture to adopt 'feminism' as an object of critique. Likewise, Hollows and Moseley (2006) encourage feminists not only to examine what feminism might reveal about popular culture, but also to 'examine what popular culture can tell us about feminism' (1). Taking this further, Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016, 56) draw attention to the circularity between fourth wave feminisms and popular culture. They emphasise that fourth wave feminisms use 'feminism to recode pop culture and pop [culture] to rewrite feminism … [fourth wave feminism] provides a feminist approach to pop culture, but it also critiques and redefines both feminism and pop culture.' Crucially, they add, the critique of popular culture by popular feminisms reproduces the popularisation and visibility of feminism in the very act of critique. It is in this sense that the mutually constitutive relationship between fourth wave feminism *in/as popular culture* and as *popular critique of popular culture* comes into being. Thus, while popular culture is often the target of popular fourth wave feminist critique, it also produces the conditions that bring this popular feminist critique into being. It 'mirrors (and messes with) the politics of pop culture' (Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016, 172).

Subsequently, feminist scholars have positioned analysing and critiquing social and cultural phenomena through a feminist lens, particularly within the context of popular culture, as one of the core practices of fourth wave

feminisms (Keller 2012b, Dean and Aune 2015). Feminist critiques of popular culture have become so pervasive that they have come to constitute popular culture. For example, this is made visible by the proliferation of websites and blogs, both major and minor, devoted to 'the analysis of popular culture and media through a feminist lens' (Naylor 2016, 43). Additionally, Cattien (2019) points to the recent 'genre-fication of feminism' (329) within popular media culture. This, she argues, refers to the number of socio-cultural phenomena becoming paratextually tied to the term 'feminist' in ways that facilitate particular modes of cultural consumption, production, and critique in line with the emergence of popular feminism. According to Ferreday and Harris (2017, 2), popular feminist politics:

> Pay attention not only to the new representational contexts of popular culture and the effects of their modes of communication and dissemination, but also to the ethics of valuing and recognising gendered and racialised forms of cultural production.

Contemporary feminisms' preoccupation with popular cultural consumption, production, and critique can be contextualised in relation to earlier forms of feminist critique governed by a politics of recognition that situates feminist politics within the realm of the cultural and the symbolic. According to Fraser (1997), recognition feminism positions the cultural and the symbolic as sites of social change and is marked by the belief that 'injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication' (14). Recognition feminism is therefore primarily concerned with issues of 'representation, identity, and difference' (Fraser 2013, 160). Feminist scholars' preoccupation with the relationship between gender, cultural narratives and representations, and structures of power and domination is produced by a politics of recognition (see Thornham 2007, van Zoonen 1994, Gill 2007b). We can see this politic resonate throughout feminist histories. For example, a significant body of second wave feminist research on cultural representations, particularly in film and television, gained momentum in the 1970s (Kustow 1972, Butcher et al. 1974, Busby 1975, Tuchman 1979, Mulvey 1975). Similarly, third wave feminisms were particularly invested in recognition feminism through their attention to representations, communication, fluid

shifting identities, and cultural production (hooks 1996, Harris 2008a, Zaslow 2009, Piepmeier 2009). While second wave popular cultural critique was governed more by a politics of refusal, rejection, or destruction, third wave critique often invested itself in the subversion and remixing of popular culture for feminist ends, resulting in the development of a DIY-feminist ethos captured most saliently, perhaps, within feminist zine culture. Fourth wave feminisms have somewhat moved away from the third wave's withdrawal to alternative feminist spaces and cultures, and can instead be largely located, as discussed, within the terrain of the popular through their heightened visibility and circulation within popular media cultures. The proliferation of contemporary fourth wave campaigns that are 'themselves *about cultural representation'* (Gill 2016a, 616; my emphasis) - from The Representation Project, to Lose the Lad's Mags and Oscars So White – speaks to the continued importance of a politics of recognition to these new feminist visibilities of the twenty-first century. Crucially, fourth wave feminism embraces modes of popular cultural critique that are not grounded in refusal or rejection but in close and passionate engagement with popular media cultures that are both critical and embracing. As Piepmeier (2009, 172-3) notes, contemporary feminists 'critique the media and also consume it hungrily, but in both modes they take it seriously, recognising that the symbolic realm is an important site for democratic struggle.'

Fourth wave feminisms' entanglement with popular culture is also intimately connected to its digital formations precisely because digital cultures are integral to the circulation of both popular culture and popular feminisms. The affordances of digital media technologies allow for the immediate popularisation of feminist discourses across both national and cultural borders, as well as the transnational flow, or 'spread' (Jenkins et al. 2013), of popular media culture. Fourth wave feminisms, digital cultures, and popular culture subsequently exist in a co-constitutive and multidirectional relationship. As Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016, 59) argue:

> Digital culture is an integral part of pop cultural circulation. If digital culture distinctly drives popular culture today, then … feminist activisms not only

> use but also productively disturb the digital economy; however, this means that the digital economy disturbs and reconfigures feminisms.

The entanglement of feminist activism, digital culture, and popular culture is symptomatic of a broader shift during the late-modern era towards modes of 'cultural citizenship' that correspond with cultural identities and practices and address questions of social inclusion and exclusion (Zobl and Drüeke 2012, Hermes 2006, Klaus and Lünenborg 2012, Harris 2010). Contemporary feminisms have taken on more cultural and decollectivised forms consistent with broader shifts in protest politics away from hierarchical and formal organisations. Instead, contemporary feminisms are often marked by their focus on popular media and culture, personal action, and digital media and communication technologies. It is at this juncture, I argue, that we may turn our attention toward media fandom.

Tumblr, Media Fandom, and Social Justice

The entanglement of fourth wave feminisms, digital culture, and popular culture signify feminisms' deeply invested relationship with popular culture, through acts of cultural consumption, production, and critique, in a manner that is not dissimilar from the mixtures of celebration and critique, fascination and frustration, that characterises media fandom (Jenkins 2006b). While fans are often characterised by the depth of their textual immersion in a *specific* set of popular culture texts, as well in 'a certain permanence of affect' (Busse 2013, 84), feminist and fannish modes of cultural critique are both marked by their creativity and critical engagement, and by a combination of 'frustration and fascination' (Jenkins 2006a, 247), or of 'outrage and delight' (Piepmeier 2009, 174), with popular culture texts and representations. Johnson (2003, 11) describes this combination of outrage and delight as the feminist embrace of 'the conflict. And the glee.' Similarly, Ferreday (2015, 23) draws attention to the connections between feminism and fandom, noting that both are marked by 'an intense engagement with media.' Fandom, she argues, brings together feminist practices of media critique as well as DIY media production.[7]

Moreover, the digital contours of fourth wave feminisms also resemble those of contemporary media fandom. Like the 'new visibility' (Keller and Ryan 2015) of feminism, the 'mainstreaming' of fandom and its practices (Jenkins 2006a, 2007, Coppa 2014, Jenner 2017, Booth and Kelly 2013, Gray et al. 2007) has also been mediated by popular culture and digital culture. With advancements in digital media technologies encouraging audiences to cultivate a typically fannish 'close audience-text relationship' (Jenner 2017, 314) subsequently reducing barriers to entry into fandom, media fandom has become 'increasingly visible' (Stein 2015, 4) in recent years. In turn, many fan studies scholars rely upon the visibility of fannish modes of consumption and production in their research (Booth 2010, Bury 2005, Baym 2000, Stein 2015). Crucially, Louisa Stein (2017) suggests that the popularisation of feminism and the mainstreaming of fandom are connected, highlighting that 'social activism is in this moment become *mainstreamed* in a way that parallels the mainstreaming of fandom over the last decade.' Scholars have subsequently examined contemporary fan activism and the increased visibility of fans within contemporary social justice movements (Gray 2012a, Jenkins, Shresthova, et al. 2016, Kligler-Vilenchik 2016, 2013, Jenkins 2012, Brough and Shresthova 2012, Hinck 2012, 2019).

The relationship between fourth wave feminisms and fandom is particularly visible on the micro-blogging and social networking website Tumblr, where the networked nature of the site brings together popular culture, popular feminisms, and media fandom. Created by David Karp in 2007, Tumblr allows users to produce and share media content in the form of text, photos, hyperlinks, audio, and video, on their individually curated blogs.[8] Anselmo (2018, 90) subsequently describes it as 'a format that is a cross between personal journal and virtual scrapbook.' As a blogging platform, users can attribute tags to their posts so that they can be more easily catalogued, organised, and retrieved within Tumblr's folksonomic (Vander Wal 2007) multi-user tagging system. Tags are used to classify themes, categories, commentary, or other attributes of the multimedia content posted to a user's blog. Other users can use a site-wide search function to navigate these custom tagging systems to locate other users to "follow" and share ("reblog") content

onto their own blog. Tumblr's interface is built around a central live feed (the "dashboard") of recent posts from the blogs a user follows. The dashboard allows a user to comment, like, and share ("reblog") posts on their own blog. The reblogging system allows users to add commentary to posts. "Reblogs" and "likes" are then truncated in the "notes" of a Tumblr post, which are used as an indicator of popularity. Several social networking functions are also integrated into the website, including a comment ("reply") system, a question submission system ("inbox" or "asks"), and more recently a text-based instant messaging system for both individuals and groups.

Unlike other popular social networking sites, Tumblr affords users a high level of control over their self-presentation and the identity information they disclose (see boyd 2012, Renninger 2015). The platform therefore invites engagements from users for whom a sense of privacy, if not anonymity, is preferred, which lends itself to participation from those seeking to explore identities, issues, and interests that may be unwelcome elsewhere. As a result, Tumblr is largely populated by marginalised groups, including LGBT youth, girls and young women, and people of colour (Seidman 2013, Thelandersson 2014, Keller 2016a, Renninger 2015, Sills et al. 2016, Mondin 2017, Fink and Miller 2013, Schwartz 2016, Guillard 2016, Dame 2016, Larson 2016, Cho 2015). These technological affordances, combined with its popularity amongst marginalised groups, make the site particularly conducive to counterpublic modes of address that are of great importance to the digital circulation, popularisation, and contestation, of contemporary feminisms (Renninger 2015, Rentschler and Thrift 2015a). Thelandersson (2013) subsequently describes Tumblr as a platform for feminist 'worldbuilding' (Berlant and Warner 1995) that provides a safe space for feminist consciousness-raising (see Larson 2016, Keller 2016a). Keller et al. (2016) argue that, for many young feminists, websites like Tumblr are key to 'discovering' feminism, gaining a feminist consciousness, and establishing feminist solidarities online. Their blogs exist as a mediated space that young feminists are 'actively *producing* as a way to participate in contemporary feminism' (Keller 2016b, 261; original emphasis). Harris (2012, 215) positions young people's blogging and social

networking practices on sites like Tumblr as an 'online DIY culture', writing that these spaces facilitate:

> Important practices of counterpublic construction in that they are forums for debate and exchange of politically and socially engaged ideas by those who are marginalised within mainstream political debate … They tend to operate for information sharing, dialogue, consciousness-raising, and community building, but can also be playful, leisure-oriented and mix up personal and political material.

Thus, while websites such as Tumblr are not feminist in orientation, 'feminist interventions there claimed them as such' (Rentschler and Thrift 2015a, 332), and feminist modes of cultural consumption, production, and critique proliferate on the site (Keller 2012b). In turn, users of the site have become discursively associated with progressive politics and the term 'social justice' (Guillard 2016, Massanari and Chess 2018, Sills et al. 2016, Hillman et al. 2014a, b, c, Nagle 2017). As patai (2014) notes, while the term 'social justice' is usually treated as self-explanatory, when invoked it is often associated with the 'familiar feminist focus on the "intersections" of, or "specialisation in," race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, class, and so on.' Similarly, Massanari and Chess (2018, 528) highlight that the term 'social justice' has long been used by feminists, anti-racists, and other progressives interested in 'ensuring both economic justice and recognition for marginalised identities.' Popular usage of the term has increased in recent years in recognition of a broader emancipatory politics. This is concurrent with the increasing popularity of intersectionality as a critical-analytic framework for contemporary feminist analysis (Phillips and Cree 2014, Nash 2019, Davis 2008). The lack of rigidity with regards to contemporary 'feminist' parameters can subsequently be read as an engagement with a feminist politics of intersectionality. I thus take the terms "feminism" and "social justice" to be largely interchangeable, and they are employed synonymously by my participants throughout this thesis.

While Tumblr makes visible the multidirectional relationship between popular feminisms, popular culture, and digital culture, media fandom is rarely located at this juncture (Figure 1), despite the similarities, and increasing slippage,

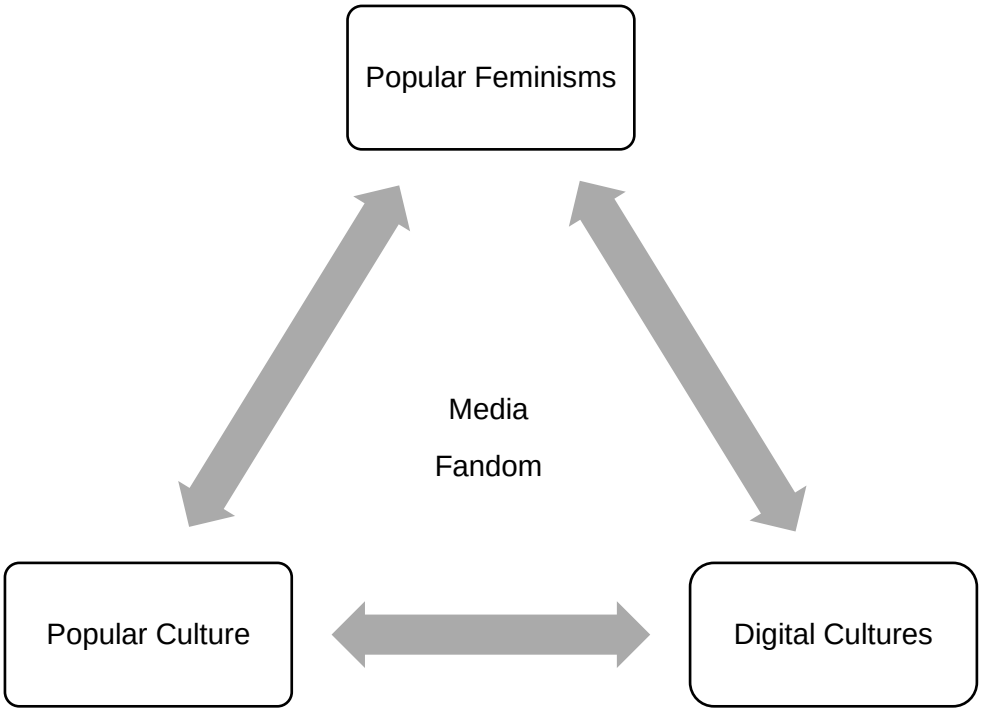

Figure 1: Locating media fandom in the co-constitutive and multidirectional relationship between popular feminisms, digital cultures, and popular culture.

between contemporary feminist and fannish modes of cultural consumption, production, and critique. Over the past decade, Tumblr has emerged as a popular platform where media fandoms convene (Bourlai and Herring 2014, Hillman et al. 2014a, b, c, Kilgo 2015, Petersen 2014, Anselmo 2018). Romano (2013), for instance, notes that, while there are still plenty of other online spaces where fandom exists, 'we have never had such a megalithic and central social platform so visibly united under one umbrella.' The platform is thus immensely popular with both feminists and fans, and the networked nature of the site has brought these communities together in varied ways that warrant sustained ethnographic analysis. For example, Renninger (2015, 1516) highlights that feminist Tumblr posts about sexuality may well 'show up on some users' feeds next to cat videos and fan art.' Similarly, Busse (2018, 11) highlights that Tumblr blogs often 'mix political and cultural commentary, episode reviews, fan works and personal narratives.' Tumblr thus facilitates the circulation of both popular culture and popular feminisms. As Booth (2017, 233) writes in *Digital Fandom 2.0:*

> Tumblr offers a site of ever-changing dynamics wherein fan audiences can be encountered but also where the multi-vocality of the audiences on the site means multiple discourses can be followed at once. There is no one "ethos" of Tumblr.

The multimodality and multivocality of Tumblr blurs the lines between feminist and fannish communities on the site, producing a cultural formation in which feminist politics are increasingly central to the operation of media fandom on Tumblr. For instance, Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter's (2014a, b, c) research suggests that one of the key motivations for participation in fandom on Tumblr is the site's 'affinity with social justice dialogues' (Sills et al. 2016, 946). Their participants referred to 'many cases of fandom postings related to social justice' (Hillman et al. 2014a, 782), and emphasised that many larger media fandoms have entire blogs explicitly dedicated to feminist popular culture analysis and critique. Similarly, Kohnen (2018) emphasises that 'fandom on Tumblr often includes discussions of diversity in media representation and the intersections of fandom and social justice' (465). Thus, for many feminist fans on Tumblr, 'fannish engagement with the text … becomes a means of engaging with feminist discourse' (Naylor 2016, 40), operating as a 'gateway drug to networked feminist counterpublic discussion' (44). Likewise, McCracken (2017, 157) highlights that 'media representation is a chief concern' to Tumblr users, forming 'the subject of much of their sophisticated criticism, creative production, and pleasure.' Here, we can see how a feminist politics of recognition governs media fandom's passionate relationship with popular culture on Tumblr. Media fandom on Tumblr is therefore implicated in the circularity between fourth wave feminisms, digital culture, and popular culture. In a Tumblr blog post for *The Daily Dot*, journalist Aja Romano (2014) emphasises that feminist and counterpublic discourses proliferate on Tumblr precisely because the fans populating the site are also governed by a feminist politics of recognition:

> Feminism thrives on Tumblr because fandom thrives on Tumblr; because they were always hand-in-hand as ways to actively engage with and deconstruct the narratives you've been given, whether that narrative is

> "See this dude? He's so totally straight" or whether it's "The patriarchy works."

Over the years, Tumblr has subsequently secured a reputation for its users' 'in-depth analysis of representational politics' (McCracken 2017, 158) and social issues. Crucially, as scholars including Naylor (2016), Kelly (2015), Kohnen (2018), and McCracken (2017) highlight, this has enormous pedagogical potential for young people:

> Young people's experience of media on Tumblr is one of acculturation; their engagement is inevitably affected, to varying degrees, by socially critical users – often self-identified as both progressives *and* fans – speaking from their own lived experience and through shared popular discourses of feminism, anti-racism, queer or gender studies, and postcolonialism. For many youth, Tumblr has become an alternative, tuition-free classroom, a powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness that often reproduces cultural studies methods of analysis. (McCracken 2017, 152)

It is here, then, that we can situate media fandom on Tumblr at the juncture between popular feminism, popular culture, and digital culture. As Ferreday (2015) subsequently argues, 'fan and feminist identities are not separate, *they coexist and intertwine*' (23; my emphasis). Throughout my research, I use the term "feminist fandom" to describe the messy entanglement of fannish and feminist communities on sites like Tumblr. Admittedly, while several scholars examining the feminist impetus of media fandom on Tumblr have highlighted a trend of fans engaging with social issues in concentrated ways, they often neglect to embed these fannish engagements with feminist politics within a broader historical movement (for example, Hillman et al. 2014a), instead emphasising the novelty of feminist fandom. However, fandoms have long been characterised as subversive and transformational, challenging norms and existing power structures (Fiske 2010 [1989], Jenkins 1992, Lewis 1992, Bacon-Smith 1992, Penley 1997, Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). From this, a substantial amount of research within fan studies has emerged examining a wide range of fan practices which, as Duffett (2013, 73) writes, offer 'a tool for social criticism' (Jenkins, Shresthova, et al. 2016, Bury 2005, Hellekson and

Busse 2006, 2014, Busse 2005, Coppa 2008, 2011, 2014, Wills 2013, Warner 2015, Merrick 2009, Busse 2017). Yet, despite fandom's established history of engaging with a cultural politics of recognition, as well as the number of accounts detailing the entanglement of popular feminisms, popular culture, and digital cultures, few have located media fandom at this juncture.

This is of chief concern because it means we risk losing sight of the significance of media fandom in introducing young people to feminism. While media fandom is a central feature of contemporary youth culture (Bennett 2004, Stein 2015), its relationship to fourth wave feminism remains unaccounted for within our understandings of young people's engagements with feminism. Existing accounts of the development of young people's feminist identities and practices overwhelmingly focus not only on (cis-gendered) girls and young women, but also on more episodic and ephemeral engagements with feminism – for example through the kinds of 'hashtag feminisms' I detailed earlier – rather than the more routine, everyday, informal engagements with feminism taking place, for example, within fannish digital spaces.

Additionally, while critical and celebratory modes of popular culture consumption, production, and critique are central to fourth wave feminisms *and* media fandom, both feminist and fan studies scholarship is yet to *substantially* account for how media fandom and fourth wave feminisms are deeply connected in practice, as well as how fannish and feminist communities are converging within the digital landscape.

Furthermore, while fan studies scholarship often reproduces a normative assumption that media fandom is inherently progressive, emancipatory, or resistant due to its willingness to explore gender and queer sexualities in accordance with the feminist project (Coppa 2014, 2006, Lothian et al. 2007, Handley 2012), this assumption is seldom examined or interrogated at an ethnographic level of lived experience. Instead, fan studies scholars often focus their analyses of fandom's relationship to feminism at the level of textual productivity – for example with regards to fanfiction (Busse 2017, Hellekson and Busse 2014, 2006)

This context subsequently frames my analysis of feminist fandom throughout this thesis as I grapple with the complex nature of the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminisms.

Chapter Overview

To conclude this introduction, I offer an overview of the subsequent chapters of this thesis. To reiterate, these chapters collectively address my three research questions. Firstly, they address the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities. Secondly, they reveal how feminist fan communities bring together fannish and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities. Finally, they examine how Tumblr facilitates this process.

In Chapter 2, I outline the research methodology and method embedded in my research design and discuss the ethical framework underpinning my research. Firstly, I examine my methodological orientation to the research process, introducing my understanding of fan studies and/as feminist methodology (Hannell 2020b). I then examine my personal investment in the project, relations of power between myself and participants, and the subsequent ethical implications of my positionality for the research. Secondly, I position my research as a digital ethnography and offer an overview of the methods I used to collect and analyse my data and answer my research questions. These include narrative surveys, online interviews, participant observation, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis. I subsequently give due consideration to the implications of these methods with regards to feminist methodological concerns about power, voice, respect, and due criticality, before finally outlining the practical ethical issues implicated in my research, and the strategies I used to counteract them.

Chapter 3 attends to my first research question in its focus on media fandom as a pathway for feminist becoming during youth. In doing so, I move away from popular narratives within feminist cultural studies which position formal educational contexts and participation in largely ephemeral and episodic acts

of digital feminism as dominant pathways towards feminist becoming, and instead examine the processes of feminist becoming which are unique to the cultural, social, and spatial specificities of media fandom. Here, three key modes of feminist becoming emerge. The first highlights the significance of fandom as an interpretative tool to *make sense of* feminism and subsequently *make feminist sense* of media texts. The second emphasises the transference of pre-existing feminisms into everyday fannish practices, demonstrating the importance of an individual's social location in shaping their approach to fannish media consumption and production. The third mode foregrounds the processual and ongoing nature of feminist becoming, emphasising the fluidity in narratives of fannish and feminist becoming. The self-narratives captured within Chapter 3 vary according to participants' material conditions, cultural contexts, positionalities, and personal histories in ways that highlight the pertinence of identity markers, such as race, class, nationality, sexuality, and gender identity, in the process of becoming a feminist fan. Additionally, in this chapter, I introduce an argument that resonates throughout the thesis – that fandom is a site where fans collectively construct, negotiate, and contest meanings of feminism and engage in a dynamic and ongoing process of group feminist identity work that corresponds to broader discursive shifts in feminism taking place within both the academy and popular domain.

Chapter 4 examines the interrelated affective, spatial, and relational dimensions of belonging within feminist fandom on Tumblr. The first half of the chapter explores my participants' dominant constructions of belonging to feminist fandom that (re)produce an inherently progressive vision of media fandom. These dominant articulations of belonging position fandom as an imagined community built upon intensely affective modes of belonging. They also centre the importance of spatial belonging and the specificity of Tumblr's platform vernacular in producing a sense of both safety and privacy for members of feminist fandom. However, the second half of the chapter troubles this normative framing of feminist fandom. Drawing upon the responses of a number of my participants of colour, who detail their encounters with 'white fragility' (DiAngelo 2018) within feminist fandom, I question the extent to which the performance of "intersectional" feminist identities within feminist fandom

on Tumblr does the anti-racist and intersectional work that it purports to. Drawing upon the articulations of non-belonging by participants of colour, and my theorisation of more precarious modes of differential belonging, I interrogate normative assumptions within both fan studies scholarship and fandom itself that frame fandom as inherently progressive or resistant, revealing how these narratives flatten difference and obscure how online spaces extend and (re)produce inequalities and power imbalances.

Throughout Chapter 3 and 4, the pedagogical function of feminist fandom emerges as central to my participants' feminist becoming, as well as their sense of belonging to feminist fandom. In Chapter 5 I subsequently attend to the complex relationship between fandom and feminist pedagogy on Tumblr in more detail. Firstly, I explore the role of feminist fandom as an informal learning culture that fosters the development of critical feminist media literacy, providing access to information and knowledge many participants would otherwise seldom access. Secondly, I explore how these critical feminist media literacies are carried forwards into the communal production of the fantext (Hellekson and Busse 2006), positioning this as a mode of feminist knowledge sharing. Finally, I return to my participants' accounts of ongoing feminist becoming to explore their commitment to a lifelong process of learning and unlearning. To do so, I position *learning through listening* as central to the relational work required of maintaining participants' understandings of feminist fandom as a safe space. I also consider the implications of this commitment to an ongoing process of learning and unlearning with regards to the accounts of racism and non-belonging detailed in Chapter 4.

My thesis concludes with Chapter 6, which summarises my key findings and draws out the implications of these findings for our understandings of both media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminisms.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This thesis examines the nature of the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminisms. It forges sustained dialogue between feminist cultural studies and fan studies, emphasising the close relationship between the two methodologically, theoretically, and empirically. In doing so, it addresses three research questions:

1. *What is the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities?*
2. *How do feminist fan communities bring together fan and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities?*
3. *How does Tumblr facilitate this process?*

Throughout this chapter, I offer an overview of the research methodology and method embedded in my research design and discuss the ethical framework underpinning my research. When I refer to the term *methodology,* I am following Sandra Harding's (1987, 43) understanding of *methodology* as a theory and analysis of the research process. I understand the term *method,* by extension, as the practices and techniques of gathering and analysing research material. Additionally, I understand *feminist methodology* as a certain intellectual-political orientation to the research process and towards academic practice rather than a fixed or static paradigm (see Ang 2004).[9] Firstly, I examine my methodological orientation to the research process, introducing my understanding of fan studies and/as feminist methodology. I then explore my personal investment in the project, examining its autoethnographic undertones, relations of power between myself and participants, and the subsequent ethical implications of my positionality for the research. Secondly, I offer an overview of the mixed methods I used to collect and analyse my data. I begin by discussing the digital ethnographic approach, before discussing the mixed methods I adopted across three interrelated stages of data collection. Here, I also discuss my recruitment and sampling methods. I then discuss my qualitative data analysis methods and consider the implications of these methods with regard to feminist methodological concerns about power, voice, respect, and due criticality. Finally, I outline the practical ethical issues

implicated in my research method and discuss the range of strategies I used, where possible, to counteract them and work to reduce the power imbalance between myself and participants.

Fan Studies and/as Feminist Methodology

My methodological framework for this thesis emerged, in part, in response to a series of questions I encountered during the beginning of my time as a PhD student about the theoretical and methodological position of my research: "is this thesis fan studies or feminist cultural studies?". One thing I struggled to grapple with during these conversations was how a dichotomy between fan studies and feminist cultural studies was being established when, to me, the two were intimately intertwined in both theory and practice. For me, it was less a case of fan studies *or* feminist cultural studies but rather fan studies *and/as* feminist cultural studies. This is something that I felt at both an empirical level as well as a theoretical and methodological one. My experience of fan culture, my conception of fan studies as a discipline, and my own identity as a researcher are intimately bound up with feminism. I was initially drawn to fan studies, as a field marked by its sustained focus on transformative queer and female fan practices and communities, and an emphasis on the political aspects of the personal and the everyday, precisely because of its feminist orientations. Subsequently, this project has inevitably been influenced by my own specific experiences, interests, and research background, and has thus drawn from both fan studies and feminist cultural studies, as well as being grounded in feminist theory. This variety generally aligns well with fan studies, as the field is informed by feminist cultural studies research and has remained, since its conception, thoroughly interdisciplinary. However, despite its feminist underpinnings, the conception of fan studies as a feminist discipline is often taken for granted or overlooked (see Hannell 2020b). This is something I seek to remedy in this thesis by explicitly foregrounding the synergistic relationship between fan studies and feminist methodologies.

Feminist methodologies recognise that the researcher is engaged in a process of interpretation and representation which is intimately bound up in power

relations and imbalances, and feminist knowledge production therefore seeks to address and interrogate these imbalances (Stanley and Wise 1990, 1993, Maynard 1994, Cook and Fonow 1986, Fonow and Cook 1991, Naples and Gurr 2014, Collins 2009). Feminist researchers aim to make visible, and subsequently interrogate, the practice and construction of knowledge within research, using reflexivity as a tool 'to help situate oneself and be cognisant of the ways your personal history can influence the research process' (Pillow 2003, 179). Such self-reflexive attempts to situate the researcher have been positioned as a core method to promote a more ethical approach to scholarship and knowledge production (Wasserfall 1993, Ackerly and True 2010).

Within fan studies, the feminist work of reflexivity primarily takes place through representations of the complicated subject position of the acafan – a term widely used within fan studies to refer to the dual role of the academic-fan researcher (Cristofari and Guitton 2017). Fan studies is itself prefaced on a close link between personal experience and the area chosen for study, and this is made visible by the subject position of the acafan. *Textual Poachers* is often cited as the source of the concept of acafandom through Henry Jenkins' reflexive declaration of his status as both fan and researcher. In his introduction to *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins (1992, 5) wrote:

> When I write about fan culture, then, I write *both* as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community). My account exists in a constant movement between these two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment. If this account is not overtly autobiographical in that it pulls back from recounting my own experiences in favour of speaking within and about a larger community of fans, it is nevertheless deeply personal.

Jenkins' effort to place himself in the same critical plane as his subject matter, as both academic/researcher and as fan/research subject, is deeply feminist in its methodological orientation. For example, feminist researchers such as Harding (1987) advocate positioning the researcher in the same critical plane

as her participants, rejecting the object/subject binary, and calling for more self-reflexive approaches to knowledge production, selection, and interpretation. By making explicit the *processes* of the production of knowledge, feminist researchers situate themselves within the research process, thereby rejecting the object/subject binary and the silencing of the self that permeates traditional positivist research (Naples and Gurr 2014). Knowledge production, therefore, demands sustained critical self-reflection, dialogue, and interaction. Jenkins' rejection of the object/subject binary, his insistence on situating himself within the research process, and his critical self-reflection aligns *Textual Poachers,* as a canonical text within fan studies, with feminist methodological frameworks regarding researcher reflexivity.

Thus, like fan studies scholars, who exist 'in a constant movement between … two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment' (Jenkins 1992, 5), feminist researchers also reject the assumption that maintaining a strict separation between researcher and research subject produces a more valid, objective account. Feminists have long been at the forefront of establishing methodological frameworks to examine the process of 'dipping in and out of identifications' (Brunsdon 2000, 215) as a researcher and as a feminist, and as a reader, viewer, or fan, and these frameworks have influenced fan studies' contentious relationship with the concept of acafandom. Fan studies emerged from an intellectual context in which these methodological debates regarding the position of the researcher and the role of appropriate critical distance/closeness took centre stage.[10] It inherited a foundation of core insights into these dilemmas and a rich vocabulary of methodological approaches to working through them. It is therefore indebted to 'the self-reflexivity of feminist scholarship' (Scott 2018, 72). For instance, the concept of acafandom, and the complicated positionality of the acafan, mirrors Brunsdon's (1993, 314) notion of the 'fragmented' feminist researcher who must negotiate the significance of her identity as a feminist researcher with the whole range of other formative identity categories, social locations, and subject positions. Like the fragmented and multiplicitous acafan, the feminist researcher is constantly moving between involvement and analysis, between

closeness and distance. She, too, is like Tompkin's (1987, 169) 'two voices', Gray's (2009, 195) 'divided interests', or Radway's (1997, 20) 'divided subject': able to at once claim the (sub)cultural capital of familiarity with the popular *and* the symbolic capital of an academic's ability to critically analyse these forms (see Ng 2010). She is distanced but engaged, 'living on both sides of the us/them divide' (Kuhn 1995, 100), and 'wandering on both sides of the boundary that separates fan from critic' (Brown 1994, 15).

The concept of acafandom, I subsequently argue, is deeply underpinned by feminist methodological frameworks regarding self-reflexivity, and the figure of the acafan exists in dialogue with the fragmented feminist researcher. Subsequently, the methodological connections between fan studies and feminist cultural studies resonate throughout my thesis both theoretically and empirically.

Situating the Researcher: The Ethics of the Feminist Acafan

In recognition of the importance of scrutinising the 'close links between personal experience and the areas chosen for study' (McRobbie 1980, 18), it is pertinent to set out how this research project arose, and in particular my personal history in relation to fandom, feminism, Tumblr, and the academy. Over the years, I have been active in a variety of online popular media and music fandoms. I have been deeply fannish since childhood, and I grew up in a household where performing fannishness was very much the norm. My formal entry to fandom, however, was in my early teens when I discovered vidding in 2007. I accidentally stumbled upon a fan-made video ("fanvid" or "vid"), which Freund (2018, 284) defines as 'a creative response to media and fannish texts, where film and television texts are edited and set to music', on YouTube in 2008. I was enchanted by the vid's storytelling, technical precision, and the interplay of visuals, sounds, affect, and critique, and I soon began creating and sharing my own fanvids on YouTube. I soon established myself within a community of fan girls in their early- to mid-teens who also watched, created, and shared fanvids of our favourite media and fannish texts on YouTube. During this time, I frequented a variety of official and unofficial

fansites and forums and taught myself HTML to construct and moderate a custom social network I had developed for vidders on Ning (see boyd and Ellison 2007). I gradually began to engage with fandom on Twitter, having joined the website in early 2009, and occasionally used LiveJournal.[11] I was prompted to join Tumblr in early 2010 in response to a number of my fandom friends migrating to the platform, driven by the appeal of its multi-modal, multi-vocal, and multi-fannish nature. This reflects a wider shift within media fandom during this period, as Tumblr began to replace LiveJournal as the main hub of online fandom activity around 2011 (Kohnen 2018, De Kosnik 2016, Bury 2016). It was not until I joined Tumblr that I felt fully immersed in media fandom and fan culture outside of vidding.[12]

Like many of my participants, my first explicit encounters with feminism, or "social justice", took place on Tumblr, where the lines between fandom and feminist media critique were becoming increasingly blurred. Many of the Tumblr users whose blogs I visited daily explicitly positioned themselves as both feminists *and* fans, and the posts populating my dashboard were punctuated by shared discourses of feminism and anti-racism. I experienced Tumblr as a 'pedagogical space' (Kohnen 2018) where, through my routine and everyday fannish practices, I learned about identity, power relations, media representations, feminist and queer theory, digital technologies, and the media industry. While my memories of these early encounters with feminism through fandom are undoubtedly inflected by nostalgia, my interactions with a range of feminist blogs and feminist content on Tumblr during my mid- to late-teens nevertheless helped me to cultivate a critical language that I could use to name and critique my 'orientation' (Ahmed 2006) to the spaces I inhabited. My experience in fandom subsequently influenced my decision to pursue Media Studies as an A-level student, followed by Media, Sociology, and Cultural Studies at university. When I encountered fan studies in my first year of university, it provided a space for me to reflect on my own experiences within fandom and fostered a desire to examine fandom in an academic domain.

My experiences of fandom, feminism, and the academy are therefore deeply intertwined, which subsequently became the impetus for this research. Through conducting an online ethnographic study of a sample of the fans who

populate feminist fandom on Tumblr, I have reflected on the experiences of my participants as well as my own. Data was subsequently collected not as an outsider, but as an active participant within the feminist fan community. While I am primarily concerned with the experiences of my research participants, my research is nevertheless informed by my personal history. Feminist fandom has been a transformative experience within my personal trajectory, and it has in turn provided invaluable access to the community of feminist fans that I have examined throughout this thesis. This thesis is not intended to be an uncritical celebration of feminist fandom, but it has operated as a means to personally recognise, and give voice to, feminist fans and take young fans' everyday engagements with feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities seriously.

Within fan studies, the dual position of the acafan has been conceptualised as an advantageous research position. For example, Ross and Nightingale (2003, 112) draw attention to the acafan's familiarity with the 'highly nuanced discourse of fans' and ability to detect the subtleties of fan writings. Similarly, Harris and Alexander (1998, 6) claim that 'academics and other outsiders, not privy to the fine gradations of meaning embedded in every aspect of fan practice, will miss much.' Moreover, researchers failing to display an adequate level of fandom knowledge may raise suspicion and unease among the subjects of their research. Indeed, gaining access to particular populations can be facilitated when researchers share a subject position with their participants, and, as I will discuss shortly, my access to my research participants in many ways relied upon our shared identities as both feminists *and* fans within the same digital "space".

However, researchers nevertheless have 'access to quite powerful institutions and intellectual capital' (Gray 1992, 34) which ultimately distances our subject positions from the people we study. Researching a given community as an "insider" does not 'automatically yield the research egalitarian' (Pillow 2003, 182). While many feminist scholars advocate for the 'matching' between the researcher's and research participants' positionalities (hooks 1989, Smith 2008, Wasserfall 1993), others have pointed to the impossibility of simultaneously matching for all categories of difference, instead reinscribing this 'matching' process as a 'delusion of alliance' (Stacey 1988, 25). For

instance, with many of my research participants, I felt an enormous amount of solidarity because of our shared histories, tastes, and practices within fandom, as well as our shared identities as fans, feminists, and queer (and, admittedly, white) women. However, as Hills (2012, 32) notes, if I articulate this "matching" without self-reflexive consideration of my positionality and privilege, I risk obscuring the 'power relationships, assumptions, and institutional/discursive prohibitions that remain at work on this terrain.' Even if I were to see myself, like many feminist fan studies scholars, as a 'fan first' (Busse 2018, Busse and Hellekson 2012), as a researcher now in my mid-twenties, as well as a white, young, cisgender, highly educated, increasingly middle-class, and Western European woman, I nevertheless occupy various positions of power and privilege that my participants do not necessarily share.

Additionally, I can access representational, as well as institutional, power, in being able to influence public perception and in 'being able to select which semiprivate utterances suddenly gain more attention' (Busse and Hellekson 2012, 52). As Jensen (2016) argues, the researcher has the power to define fandom and become the voice of fans without necessarily empowering fandom itself. In recognition of such ethical dilemmas, many feminist researchers have discussed the politics of representing participants' views through data analysis and presentation of research findings (Alldred and Gillies 2012, Rice 2009, hooks 1989, Robinson 2011), and have long attempted to grapple with non-exploitative ways of representing the voices of participants. They have developed a selection of 'textual reflexivity' (Macbeth 2001) strategies to interrogate the work of writing representations of the social world. One such technique I have employed throughout this thesis is through foregrounding the words of my participants throughout the write-up, making extensive use of verbatim quotations. This is consistent with feminist methodological approaches which endeavour to achieve 'an authentic presentation of the people under inquiry' (Shkedi 2004, 93). My use of extensive verbatim quotations has allowed me to prioritise the process of foregrounding their voices and experiences, providing a platform for them to speak through their own words.

However, while I undeniably possess covert and overt forms of power over my research participants, I am also cautious of implying that my research participants are powerless. As Lawler (2000, 8) highlights, participants are not entirely powerless:

> Research subjects usually can back out of the research at any point; they can refuse to answer questions; and they can withdraw their permission for material to be used. Research subjects will often get what they can out of the researcher. This may just be time to talk about themselves and their preoccupations, or it may be the pleasure of participating in wider social processes – of being important enough to be the subjects of research. ... Participating in a process of knowledge production, no matter how problematic that process is, may enhance research subjects' belief in their own self-worth.

Similarly, fan studies scholar Larsen (2016, 230) challenges 'the position of powerlessness that we assign to fans,' and instead calls for a reassessment of the relationships between acafans and fans. My research participants challenged this assumed position of powerlessness, articulating a range of positions that reflect Lawler's (2000) observations. For instance, participants articulated their sense of pleasure and joy at the introspection prompted by my narrative survey: "This was nice! Thanks a lot for making it, I enjoyed talking about my fandom-feminism-Tumblr story" (Catharine, #109). Others thanked me for providing "a means of self-expression" (Morgan, #322), writing that, "I would like to thank you for this survey. I rarely feel surveys target my interests and concerns, but this hit the nail on the head, so to speak. I appreciate having this method of conveying my thoughts and beliefs on these matters." (Di, #133). They also discussed the transformative process of working through their self-narratives: "Thank you so, so, so much for doing this! This was really powerful and interesting to sort through in my own mind," (Valeska, #244). Meanwhile, others expressed the types of joy described by Lawler at participating in wider social processes: "I would simply like to thank you for doing research about topics like this. It's so vastly important that we understand the trends in online spaces, but places other than major social networks often seem to get overlooked, or simply glossed over. It's nice to see someone delving into this issue more" (Natalie, #52). Notably, these

articulations of power and voice likely reflect the subject positions of particular participants, extending pre-existing dimensions of power and privilege into their responses. As Skeggs (1995a) notes, our social and cultural locations inform what we say, how we say it, and who gets to hear and respond. Feminism, for example, has often been used as a space for white women to exercise voice while simultaneously remaining alienating for many Black women (see Olufemi 2020, Kendall 2020, Phipps 2020).

Overall, it is clear that there are inequalities and power differentials between myself and my participants. The exercise of power is ultimately neither straightforward nor one-way. My participation in self-reflexive exercise throughout the research process is therefore important to work through the multifaceted relationship between the feminist acafan researcher and her research participants.

Research Method

In this section, I provide an overview of my research method with regards to both data collection and data analysis. Firstly, I offer an in-depth account of the three interrelated stages of data collection and discuss the mixed method approach I adopted throughout this process. Secondly, I discuss my recruitment and sampling methods and offer a demographic overview of my participants. Finally, I discuss my data analysis methods and consider the implications of feminist methodological principles for these methods.

Data Collection: Digital Ethnography

My research can be characterised as a digital ethnography. Drawing upon traditional ethnographic methods, digital ethnography is a term used to refer a combination of participative and observational research methods rooted in online empirical fieldwork and data collection (Kozinets 2015, 2010, Hine 2015, 2000, Postill and Pink 2012). According to Kozinets (2010, 60), digital ethnography, or ‘netnography’, uses computer-mediated communication as its

primary source of data 'to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon.' He adds:

> To do an ethnography means to undertake an immersive, prolonged engagement with the members of a culture or community, followed by an attempt to understand and convey their reality through 'thick', detailed, nuanced, historically-curious and culturally-grounded interpretation and deep description of a social world that is familiar to participants but strange to outsiders. (Kozinets 2010, 60)[13]

Feminist researchers have long favoured ethnography as a methodological approach that allows for active listening, relational knowledge, and reflexivity as a significant part of the research process (Skeggs 1995b, Stacey 1988, DeVault and Gross 2012, Gray 2009). Jessica Taft (2011, 193), for example, argues that ethnography provides more 'detailed, textured, and complicated data that is lively and engaging [and] incorporates the voices of a group whose words and ideas are not quite what most readings expect, giving space for their own understandings and interpretations.' In turn, many feminist researchers have adopted digital ethnographic methods in order to use feminist methodological principles to explore the social world within a digital context (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a).

Digital ethnographies are comprised of a combination, or rather *triangulation*, of methods 'uniquely suited to the specific situation being studied' (Hine 2015, 5), and I, in turn, adopted a mixed-methods approach to the process of data collection. My approach to data collection combined both participative and observational approaches and consisted of three interrelated stages. Firstly, I designed and distributed a narrative survey to self-selecting members of the feminist fan community. This was followed by a series of synchronous and asynchronous online follow-up interviews and finally supplemented by a range of observational online data from Tumblr. I shall discuss these three stages of data collection, as well as the process of recruitment and sampling, in more depth shortly.

The process of data collection was deeply connected to my engagements with, and contributions to, the feminist fan community. Much like ethnography,

digital ethnography operates under the assumption that 'personal engagement with the subject is key to understanding a particular culture or social setting' (Hobbs 2006, 59). Digital ethnography has subsequently been described as an 'inherently assimilative practice' (Kozinets 2010, 59), whereby participation by the ethnographer is an important aspect of the ethnographic knowledge production process. In turn, digital ethnography usually involves supplementing the researcher's own autoethnographic experiences with 'triangulatory perspectives from other participants' (Hine 2015, 184). This slippage between auto-ethnography and ethnography is central to the digital ethnographic method, wherein:

> Data collection is ... interconnected with netnographic participation … In general, participation will be active and visible to other community members. Preferably, it will contribute to the community and its members. Not every netnographic researcher needs to be involved in *every* type of community activity. But every netnographic researcher needs to be involved in *some* types of community activity. A netnographer probably doesn't want to be leading the community, but she should not be invisible, either. (Kozinets 2010, 96; original emphasis)

My ongoing participation in feminist fandom throughout the research subsequently allowed me to accumulate an enhanced understanding of the community rooted in both the data I formally gathered over a two-year period, as well as my auto-ethnographic familiarity with feminist fandom over the past decade, thus producing a rich and detailed account of feminist fandom grounded in prolonged participation and immersion within the community.

Narrative Survey

My first stage of data collection consisted of a qualitative online narrative survey. Online surveys, writes Kozinets (2010, 43), 'can tell us much about people's activities in online communities, and also about the way that their online community and online culture activities influence other aspects of their daily lives.' While surveys have traditionally been the domain of positivistic and quantitative research, several feminist scholars notably highlight that survey

research can be ‘rehabilitated’ because it is not inherently antithetical to feminist praxis (Oakley 1998, Miner et al. 2012), nor ethnographic approaches. For example, both Hine (2015) and Kozinets (2010) recognise the use of online surveys by digital ethnographers, and Shkedi (2004) proposes a qualitative constructivist approach to survey research that is subsequently compatible with feminist interpretivist research paradigms (see Choi 2006, England 1994, Pillow 2003). Shkedi (2004) notes that while detailed individual narratives are often gathered during in-depth interviews, surveys allow qualitative researchers to gather the qualitative narratives of larger populations using techniques that are not dissimilar to interviewing. It is in this sense that Hine (2015, 80) positions surveys as a useful method for ethnographers who hope to use their data to characterise larger populations. However, Shkedi (2004) emphasises that *narrative survey* is a method distinct from conventional quantitative surveys due to its qualitative and interpretivist understanding of the social world. The basis for data collection in narrative survey, Shkedi argues, assumes that:

> Data is gathered from people, and focuses on their stories, their explanations for the activities in which they participate, the meaning they give to the phenomena in which they engage, and so on. (Shkedi 2004, 92)

Narrative research, as Josselson (2011) highlights, is grounded in ethnographic approaches to the research process in its attempt to ‘capture the lived experience of people in terms of their own meaning-making and theorise about it in insightful ways’ (225). Self-narratives help us to understand how people use narratives to ‘*construct* a sense of who they are’ (Bamberg et al. 2011, 187). The narrative mode of research is based on the assertion that:

> People live and/or understand their lives in storied forms. […] The stories that people tell about their lives represent their meaning-making; how they connect and integrate the chaos of internal and momentary experience and how they select what to tell and how they link bits of their experience are all aspects of how they structure the flow of experience and understand their lives. (Josselson 2011, 224)

Narrative survey thus emerged as a useful approach to my first stage of data collection, and I subsequently adopted a narrative approach to my survey design (see Earthy and Cronin 2008). My survey was designed to encourage participants to reflect upon their personal narratives and biographies within feminist fandom throughout their responses. This helped me to address my first research question in particular with regards to my participants' accounts of the development of their identities as both feminists and fans. At the beginning of my survey, participants were presented with information about myself and the project, including the details of both my academic and fannish credentials, as well as information about what to expect from the survey. Participants were then presented with a consent form to confirm that they had both read and understood the information provided and were aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any point should they wish to do so (see Appendix A). As Busse (2018) notes, securing the informed consent of participants is an essential ethical practice, and is one of the most effective ways to reduce potential harm to research participants. Once participants had read and completed the consent form, the first section of my survey was designed to gather information about their social and cultural identity markers. This was following the assumption that this demographic information would later assist me in the process of contextualising and situating individual participant's narratives during the process of analysis, as well as capture more general data about my sample of participants.

While constructing the first section of my survey, I was acutely aware that the categories offered on research surveys to capture key individual characteristics are, like all classification schemes, socially constructed. As a feminist researcher, I did not want to essentialise or exclude any identity characteristics in the design of this section of my survey, especially given that the ability of survey research to capture the complexity of gender identity has long been questioned as part of a larger feminist critique of quantitative methods. As Baker et al. (2018) note, pre-determined identity categories can erase or miscategorise youth identifying as genderqueer or genderfluid. Thus, rather than offering 'gradational' measure for gender identification (Magliozzi et al. 2016), I followed Schilt and Bratter's (2015) method of allowing

respondents to describe their social identities – such as gender, sexuality, and race – in their own words in a series of open-ended responses. This enabled my participants to exert more autonomy and voice over *how* they wish to be represented within my research, and subsequently enabled my survey data to better capture the heterogeneity of my participants. This is something that I will discuss in more detail later with regards to research ethics and feminist principles of voice.

I also extended this open-ended approach to the general design of my narrative survey. This approach encouraged participants to respond spontaneously to the survey questions, rather than 'forc[ing] the respondent into the researcher's way of thinking about possible answers' (Seale 2018, 201). My approach proved successful, with participants commenting "I like the open-ended style here. A lot of surveys with multiple choice questions feel subtly wrong, but it's hard to find a place to tell the researcher which of their assumptions don't apply." (Franzeska, #76). Additionally, the risk of 'missing data' (Reja et al. 2003) associated with open-ended survey questions was not of concern, as I wanted to capture the qualitative depth, variety, and richness characteristic of responses to open-ended survey questions (Schaefer and Dillman 1998), and allow my participants to respond as they wished. The open-ended design of my survey lent itself well to my narrative approach, as it afforded participants more control over their approach to crafting their responses to the survey questions, resulting in a rich and multivalent variety of responses. As Baym (2006, 38) notes, 'the additional visual channel of written discourse combined with the ability to edit leads to better organised and better thought out statements than occur face-to-face.' Similarly, Kazmer and Xie (2008) emphasise that, when researching internet-based activities, many participants feel more comfortable engaging in text-based forms of researcher-participant interaction due to their familiarity and comfort with the mode of interaction. Moreover, Kozinets (2010, 110) emphasises that this approach to online survey design, characterised by its 'openness to the participant's unique perspective and input', in many ways closely aligns online surveys with online interviews.

The second and final section (Q2-7) of my survey was more specifically designed to invite in-depth narratives from my participants. My survey questions were informed by my research questions, as well as the themes that emerged from my preliminary review of the literature from both fan studies and feminist cultural studies. Across the two sections, the survey consisted of eight overarching categories and questions:

1. Demographic Information
2. Fannish History
3. Feminist History
4. Fannish Platforms
5. Tumblr History
6. How do you engage with feminist issues in fandom?
7. Are there any factors that affect your ability to engage with these issues?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Earthy and Cronin (2008) recommend that researchers intending to invite narratives from their participants should adopt the use of a combination of firstly, very broad questions and, secondly, prompts that encourage the relating of specific examples. In turn, Q2 – Q5 of my survey included a range of broader questions related to the themes that emerged from my literature review in conjunction with a range of prompts encouraging participants to draw upon specific examples from their own personal narratives. You can see this logic at work in the prompts I provided for my participants throughout the schedule of questions detailed in Appendix B. Q3 of my survey, for example, which focused on "Feminist History", included the following prompts:

> *Tell me about your journey as a feminist. What's your feminist story? When did you become aware of feminism? When did you start to identify as a feminist? Was there a specific moment of "feminist awakening"? What does feminism mean to you? Have you ever studied feminism?*

These prompts encouraged participants to produce storied responses to my survey questions, which subsequently provided ample material to attend to my first research question concerning the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities. On the other hand, Q6 and Q7 provided

more specific prompts or questions for my participants to consider, which in turn corresponded with my second and third research questions. This overarching structure of my survey has much in common with typical ethnographic approaches to online interviewing, beginning 'with a series of grand tour questions that help to place your interviewee in their social and cultural milieu, and then narrow[ing] down to concerns more focal to the research' (Kozinets 2010, 110). Additionally, much like an asynchronous online interview, the lack of temporal constraints within the online survey format:

> Allows participants … to take as much time as they wish to consider the questions and potential responses, rereading and reflecting on what they have previously written before actually responding, thus enriching the interview text. (James and Busher 2013, 180)

Finally, Q8 offered participants a chance to add any final comments to their responses, as is typical of surveys (Schonlau 2015, Garcia et al. 2004). Overall, my narrative survey design subsequently produced a wide range of rich and storied responses, and the narrative approach to this stage of the research proved to be highly successful.

Follow-up Interviews

While I initially hoped that my survey would be the first stage of a much larger piece of research, the response rate and size of the data set soon required me to re-adjust my expectations for the amount of data I could feasibly collect and analyse within a reasonable timeframe. I decided to use the data generated by my survey as my primary source of data in attending to my research questions. However, I nevertheless did contact approximately twenty participants for informal follow-up online interviews if further data was required.

I used various methods to conduct these informal follow-up interviews. In many cases, they were conducted through synchronous, text-based communicative means using Tumblr's in-built instant messaging system. The synchronous follow-up interviews were used to clarify smaller and less in-depth details,

quickly exchange information, or seek permission to cite a Tumblr post. While synchronous online interviews afford a 'high level of participant involvement' (James and Busher 2013, 179), they are restrictive in terms of time constraints and are subsequently more likely to lead to briefer responses from participants (Bowker and Tuffin 2004). However, given the function of these synchronous interviews, this was not a problem.

Asynchronous email interviews thus emerged as a more appropriate method for conducting more detailed follow-up interviews. These email interviews were informal yet in-depth, and often took days or even weeks to conduct as I encouraged participants to respond at a time suitable to their needs. Follow-up email interviews usually included a series of questions for the participant based upon their responses to my narrative survey, although several also referred to data I had gathered during my participant observation. For example, one of my email interviews focused not only on a certain participants' survey responses but also on a series of blog posts they had authored that shed further light on their responses. For the convenience of participants, my email interviews were prefaced with relevant excerpts of their survey responses to contextualise my follow-up questions. This provided participants with an opportunity to confirm, clarify, or retract their survey responses.

Follow-up interviews thus provided a way for me to confirm or verify particular kinds of 'local understanding' (Kozinets 2010) with my participants, allowing them to clarify the meanings of their responses and providing them with an opportunity to provide further feedback where necessary (James and Busher 2013).

Participant Observation

While I was analysing the data I collected from my narrative survey and later my follow-up interviews, I supplemented my analysis with additional data informally collected during periods of largely 'unobtrusive' (Kozinets 2010, Hine 2015) close observation of the feminist fan community on Tumblr. This observational data provided an alternative source of information without

'having to rely on the retrospective or anticipatory accounts of others' (Mann and Stewart 2000, 84). This involved following a wide range of feminist and fannish blogs on Tumblr, at times "liking" and "reblogging" their posts onto my own feminist fan blog, keeping up to date with new content and topics of discussion, and regularly exploring and "catching up" on my Tumblr dashboard. According to Postill and Pink (2012, 130), such acts of sharing, following, exploring, and catching up are central to digital ethnography because they open the researcher directly 'to the sharing of others'. Moreover, the act of routinely engaging with participants' online activity, they argue, helps to sustain both strong and weak ties with participants, working to 'signal or reaffirm a sustained interest in, and appreciation of, a research participant's activities' (ibid.). While my decision to engage in acts of sharing, following, and exploring inevitably implicates the politics of selection, it also works to reaffirm my position as an active participant within the community.

Participant observation allowed me to continue to immerse myself into the feminist fan community on Tumblr 'from the inside' (Hine 2015, 83). Additionally, my continued participation in and engagement with feminist fandom throughout the research provided sustained mutual visibility between myself (as an "insider") and my participants and worked as an important mechanism of trust and accountability. As Hine (2015) and Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) note, such prolonged exposure and engagement between the researcher and their participants is an important accountability procedure as it ensures that the researcher remains publicly accountable to their participants.

Recruitment, Sampling, and Participant Demographics

Online web-based surveys have been identified as an effective way to target young people owing in part to the large amount of time young people spend engaging in online communication (Madden et al. 2013, Lenhart et al. 2008, boyd 2014). In turn, my survey was distributed using an online platform, Google Forms, which connected participants to the survey page via an active

web link. The survey was launched in early March 2018, and was advertised on my personal feminist fan blog with the accompanying text:

> SURVEY: FANDOM, FEMINISM and TUMBLR
>
> This survey is part of my PhD research* on feminist fan communities on Tumblr. My research explores the relationship between media fandom and feminism and examines the experiences and practices of fans who identify as feminists and use Tumblr to engage in fandom. It's worth noting that I'm conducting this research as a feminist and a fan (I've been active within fandom for 10+ years, and on Tumblr for 8+ years).
>
> I'd love for you to write as much or as little as you wish in response to my survey questions, and your responses can be as informal or as formal as you'd like. There are no right or wrong answers - I want to hear about your experiences!
>
> Once you've completed the survey, please reblog this post and pass the link to the survey on to your feminist and fannish Tumblr friends.
>
> If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to drop me a message or email me.
>
> * = *This research has full ethical clearance from the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee.*

My insider status within the feminist fan community was therefore integral to my ability to recruit participants for my research. Moreover, anchoring the research to my personal blog was a deliberate decision I made at the beginning of the research process as I identified this as a 'contextually appropriate' (Whiteman 2012, 35) approach to recruitment. I felt that to anchor the research to my own personal fannish and feminist blog would operate as a form of self-disclosure to my participants, making my account of feminist fannishness accountable. It is an important means for establishing both trust and authenticity between myself and them. However, while doing so may have assured participants of my sincerity, it may also have impacted the kinds of potential participants who felt comfortable engaging with the research given the contours of my personal history, identities, and interests captured on my blog. Additionally, my decision to foreground my position as a PhD researcher

in the blog post implicitly aligns me with certain forms of institutional power, respectability, and social, cultural, and intellectual capital that may have dissuaded some from engaging with the research, particularly for those belonging to social groups who have been 'marginalised, pathologised and othered in most mainstream research' (Skeggs 1997, 23). However, given the high response rate and the depth and breadth of responses, I nevertheless understand my use of my personal blog to recruit participants as a largely advantageous form of ethnographic self-disclosure (Kozinets 2010). Notably, Hine cautions against this, writing that:

> The choices ethnographers make about how to portray themselves and their projects in various media can be highly consequential for relationships with informants … Being co-present with one's research site on social media may entail giving off more information about oneself than feels comfortable. (Hine 2015, 71-2)

Hine encourages ethnographers to exercise due caution when engaging in forms of self-disclosure. Indeed, self-disclosure can in some instances expose feminist researchers to harm, particularly if their work 'triggers strong ideological reaction' (ranzke et al. 2020, 11). Similarly, fan studies scholar Deller (2018) highlights the need for acafans, whose research 'involves a high degree of self-disclosure' (198), to take ethical measures to ensure their own safety and protect their wellbeing. This is something I remained cognisant of throughout the research process. However, within the specific context of my research, I felt that my engagement in acts of self-disclosure was contextually appropriate given my position as an insider within feminist fandom on Tumblr. Additionally, feminist and autoethnographic methodological traditions often insist on positioning the researcher as 'an intentionally vulnerable subject' (Holman Jones et al. 2016, 24), and fan studies scholars such as Phillips (2010) have encouraged researchers to embrace a personal, 'overly confessional' even, approach to the research process (also see Phillips 2013, 29-38). Phillips suggests that such 'a lean towards openness and individuality can in fact lend greater academic authority because of the personal attachment and investment to the subject.' For Phillips, a reflexive and 'overly confessional' approach to the research process can add to a researcher's

academic authority. Phillips admittedly discusses this within the context of personal embarrassment within a fannish context, yet feminist researchers such as Wilkins (1993, 93) have similarly argued that a personal approach to one's research 'can foster a sophisticated sensibility in the research setting.' As Carroll (2012) notes, this is an interactive process that may involve the type of self-disclosure described by Phillips (2010). For example, a common technique used by feminist researchers to improve rapport is to disclose narratives about ones' own personal life experiences. While there is a limit to the confessional in terms of the ethics of care to the self, this approach nevertheless has several advantages in terms of recruitment and rapport. Anchoring the research to my personal blog, which is itself full of my own fannish history, provided a way for my participants to be reassured that my scholarly interest is both sincere and genuine, having been prompted by my own life experience. This allowed me to establish a sense of commonality and reciprocity between myself and participants. Should a potential participant feel unsure of my fannish or feminist "credentials", they are able to look through almost a decade's worth of blog posts to reassure them of my "insider" status and make my own personal experience visible to them. I therefore understand my co-presence, and the merging of my personal and professional identities, on Tumblr, as an accountability, transparency, and authenticity procedure that was central to the recruitment process.

Once I had activated my survey on Google Forms and published my Tumblr post advertising the research, I contacted a variety of fannish and feminist blogs from my pre-existing network on Tumblr asking them to help raise

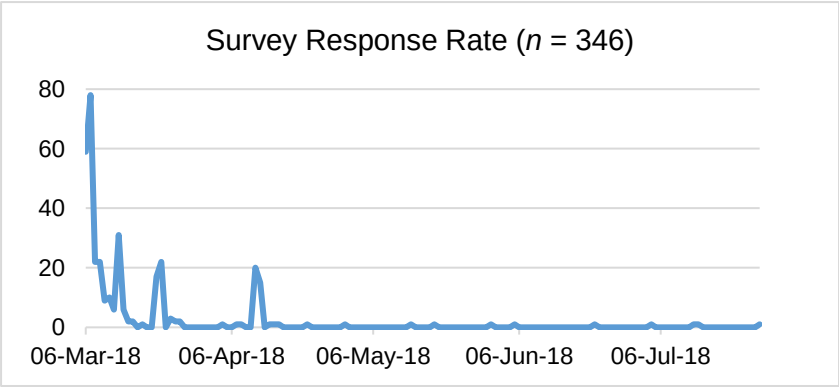

Figure 2: Survey response rate during recruitment period. March 2018 to July 2018.

awareness of my research by recirculating my blog post. This provided an expeditious approach to launching the survey, and it subsequently received 143 responses within the first 24 hours (Figure 2). At the end of both my blog post, as well as the survey itself, I encouraged respondents to pass the survey onto anyone else they felt might be interested. I subsequently used a mixed-methods approach to sampling by combining both purposive and snowballing sampling methods (Patton 2002, Noy 2008). This made sampling both convenient and efficient, as I could begin my recruitment with outreach to feminist and fannish "gatekeeper" blogs within my pre-existing network on Tumblr, and obtain additional participation through snowball sampling (Creswell and Poth 2018). Moreover, the technological affordances of Tumblr, namely its networked nature, lent themselves well to this snowballing sampling process. In total, my survey recruited a total of 342 complete responses, as well as 4 additional non- or partial completions, producing more than 250,000 words of data. However, the ease of the recruitment and sampling process was not without precedent, given my insider position within the community alongside the general convenience of studying fans. As Jonathan Gray (2003, 76-7) highlights:

> Fans, let us be honest, are easy to find. To begin with, they are often highly socially organised, meaning that one need only tap into existing group networks. … The very nature of fandom suggests willing informants: they feel strongly about the text(s) in question and have considerable interest in them, they are likely to enjoy talking about the text(s) … Precisely because they care about the text(s) under study, they can be counted on to give involved replies to our questions. Their fan activities will frequently involve discussion and analysis of the text(s), so they will have a discursive history to draw on in an interview setting, and are therefore very likely to provide us with impressive, elaborated answers.

While many fan studies scholars examining the 'feminist impetus' (Handley 2012, 103) of fandom examine 'female fandoms' (Bury 2005, Russo and Ng 2017, Dell 1998), I endeavoured to give voice not just to women and girls, but to self-identified and self-selecting *feminists,* regardless of their gender. In turn, while the majority of my participants self-identified as girls and women,

43 self-identified as gender diverse and non-conforming in a variety of ways, including self-identifying as trans (both masculine and feminine), gender-fluid, non-binary, genderqueer, and/or questioning. Several respondents indicated that their gender identity was in flux and listed numerous gender identities and pronouns. Only 9 of the total 342 respondents self-identified as men, and not all my respondents clarified whether they were cis, although 28 respondents did explicitly situate themselves using the terms “cis” or “cisgender”.

My participants used a wide variety of terms to describe their sexualities. While 80 participants identified themselves as heterosexual, the majority of my participants (157 in total) self-identified as bisexual. Additionally, 26 participants identified as a lesbian, 27 as queer, 26 as pansexual, and 17 as asexual or aromantic. The remaining participants used a range of additional terms to describe their sexuality, did not wish to disclose their sexuality, or emphasised that they were still unsure or questioning. Given that many young people use the internet to explore their sexual and/or gendered identities (Robinson et al. 2014, Smith et al. 2014), and especially given Tumblr’s reputation as a safe platform for queer and gender diverse youth (Robinson et al. 2014, Cavalcante 2019, Wargo 2017, Byron et al. 2019, Mondin 2017, Cho 2015), the heterogeneity of my participants with regards to gender and sexuality was something I had anticipated before I began my data collection.

Meanwhile, 247 of my respondents explicitly referred to themselves as white and/or Caucasian in response to my question about their racial, ethnic, or cultural markers. However, the figure is likely higher as 32 respondents did not report identifying with *any* racial, ethnic, or cultural markers. For example, several respondents instead listed their nationality. While this may be in part due to my phrasing of this particular question on the survey, normative identities are often invisible to those who possess them (Ahmed 2004b), as many scholars working within critical whiteness studies have argued (Frankenberg 1993, Sue 2006, Hughey 2012, Dyer 1997). Respondents to the survey did not articulate their normative identities in response to Q1 in the same explicit ways in which they addressed their marginalised identities. I have not quantified the racial demographics of my participants of colour. This

is because, as a white, Western European, and Anglophone researcher, I felt deeply uncomfortable with the idea of condensing and coding my participants' heterogenous ways of describing their non-white racial and ethnic markers and identities. I felt that to do so would risk homogenising these participants and flattening difference which would effectively undercut my decision to use open-ended questions to provide participants with a voice in describing their non-normative positionalities. Instead, throughout my write-up where appropriate I use my participants' verbatim descriptions of their ethnic and racial markers and identities when discussing their individual responses.

The average age of my participants was 25.7 years old, while the modal age was 21. Rather than conceive of youth as a biologically defined age group or a static and fixed category, I approach the concept of youth from a poststructuralist perspective, emphasising that discursive formations produce our understandings of youth and that conceptions of youth are socially, historically, and culturally constructed. Like the concepts of 'girl' and 'girlhood', the concept of youth is also 'slippery' (Harris 2004). Scholars have argued that broader socio-economic shifts within post-industrial societies comprising of, for example, rising engagement with post-secondary education, precarious, low-paid, and flexible youth employment, and a liberalisation of social norms regarding partnership, parenthood, and sexuality has resulted in a new stage in the life-course between adolescence and adulthood (Bynner 2007). These conditions are said to have given rise to what Arnett (2000, 2004) conceptualises as 'emerging adulthood' under late modernity, which, while fluid in its application, is often ascribed to young people in their late teens and twenties. The majority of my participants can thus be aligned with youth and youth culture. Additionally, this age range is concurrent with social media usage trends, which suggest that young adults are more likely than other age groups to use social media daily (Smith and Anderson 2018). Moreover, young women between 18 and 29 are particularly likely to use Tumblr (Duggan and Brenner 2013, Duggan and Page 2015, Madden and Zickuhr 2011). The demographic composition of my survey respondents therefore adheres to the informal 'age norms' (Settersten and Mayer 1997) of Tumblr, aligning the site with youth (see McCracken 2017).

My survey gathered respondents from 39 countries in total[14], although the vast majority of respondents were from countries situated within the Global North. North American respondents predominated, which reflects the usage of the internet, but other Anglophone nations are well represented (the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). In turn, throughout my analysis, I consider how the high number of respondents from Anglophone countries in the Global North impacts the feminisms taken up by my research participants.

In the following section, I will discuss my data analysis process throughout the course of the research.

Data Analysis

My approach to the data analysis process can be broadly situated within the tradition of grounded theory (Urquhart 2012, Bryant and Charmaz 2007, Charmaz 2006). However, while, like many grounded theorists, I sought to produce an 'empirically embedded' (Hodkinson 2008, 83) understanding of my data, I was mindful that it would not be possible to strictly adhere to the principles of grounded theory and produce my theory entirely from the ground up. For example, I began the project with an extensive literature review and used this literature review as an 'orientation process' (Urquhart 2007, 351) to establish my research questions and my approach to the initial data collection, as well as my subsequent interpretation of the data. As I noted earlier, for instance, my survey questions were informed by the theoretical arguments about contemporary feminisms, youth cultures, fan cultures, and the internet detailed throughout my literature review. Additionally, my experience as a participant within the community before the start of the project inevitably inflected my approach to the data collection and data analysis process. The initial stages of my research process were, therefore, deductive, rather than inductive, in nature. However, my approach to analysing the data itself was largely inductive, allowing my research questions and interests 'to evolve throughout the coding process' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84) as guided by the emergent analysis. Thus, while the later stages of my analysis were conducted using approaches largely derived from grounded theory, I avoided some of the

more prescriptive grounded theory procedures during the early stages of my project, and instead adopted a looser and more 'exploratory' (Hodkinson 2008, 93) approach. Many researchers similarly have paid 'lip service' (Bryman 2012) to grounded theory but do not wholly subscribe to its strict, prescriptive, and systematic approach to data analysis, particularly in regards to the notion of inductive analysis in its purest sense. I subsequently used a combination of approaches derived from grounded theory throughout the process of analysing my data: thematic analysis, constant comparison, and narrative analysis. Due to their relationship to grounded theory, the three methods belong to the same 'family of methods' (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, 11), and are thus highly compatible, but are less restrictive than a strict inductive grounded theory approach.

Once I finished my initial data collection in late 2018, I imported my survey results into qualitative data analysis software NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd 2018) to begin my initial data analysis. I used NVivo to assist me in the process of identifying, categorising, and organising the initial themes and patterns that emerged from my data set into *codes* (see Bazeley and Jackson 2013, Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2011, Kozinets 2010).[15] The initial steps of thematic analysis involved a time-consuming process of slowly and closely reading and re-reading the entire data set with my three research questions in mind to identify new codes (or, in NVivo, nodes) in the data, as well as reassigning existing codes wherever they reoccur. The process of identifying initial themes, or 'categories' (Dey 2007), within the data aligns this stage of my data analysis with *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis draws upon grounded theory methods including narrative analysis and discourse analysis, yet Braun and Clarke (2006) notably present the method, not as an extra or alternative methodological approach to qualitative data analysis, but rather 'as a strategy for combining other approaches' (Flick 2014, 421). They conceptualise thematic analysis as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). They highlight that a 'theme' captures something important about the data in relation to the overall research questions and represents some level of '*patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (82). Themes can identify patterns, processes,

and relationships within the data. ‘Thematising meanings’ (Holloway and Todres 2003, 247) has subsequently been identified as one of several generic skills across a variety of qualitative methods of data analysis (Boyatzis 1998), and Ryan and Bernard (2000) locate thematic coding as a process performed within many major analytic traditions.

Throughout this process, as each new theme emerged it was coded and organised through NVivo, and subsequently analysed using a constant comparative method typical of grounded theory approaches (Glaser 1965, Glaser and Strauss 1967). The constant comparative method is used to identify the similarities and distinctions between different themes captured within the data, and it involves constantly comparing each occurrence of a theme to the next in order to elicit information about the properties, dimensions, comparisons, and contrasts across the data. While individual themes emerge from close engagement with the data, researchers can achieve a higher level of abstraction in their analysis through a process of constant comparison. Themes, writes Dey (2007, 168), form ‘the theoretical bones of the analysis’, which are later fleshed out by ‘identifying and analysing in detail their various properties and relations’ to one another through the process of constant comparison.

Hodkinson (2008) notes that the constant comparative method not only involves the coding and comparing of existing data but, where appropriate, the ‘focused’ collection and coding of new data:

> The initial outcomes of … preliminary analysis … feed back into further data collection oriented to the exploration of particular themes or hunches. At this stage, the process of data collection shifts from its initial exploratory focus towards something deliberately designed to investigate emerging theoretical concepts or possibilities. (Hodkinson 2008, 85)

Under the broader rubric of grounded theory, this process is often referred to as ‘theoretical’ sampling (Charmaz 2006, Morse 2007, Draucker et al. 2007). It enables the researcher to obtain additional data in order to explicate the themes identified in the initial data analysis. Conducting additional data collection led by emergent theoretical concepts enables researchers to craft

conceptually ‘thick’ (Geertz 1973) analyses of their data. For example, while developing my comparative understanding of the relationship between two key themes, ‘fandom and race’ and ‘non-belonging’, that emerged from my initial analysis, I collected new data in order to further refine and develop my theorisation of the relationship between the two themes. This data collection involved both participant observation of the blogs belonging to participants’ whose responses were coded as containing both themes, as well as a follow-up email interview with one participant who discussed both themes in considerable depth in her responses to my survey. The additional data produced by this focused data collection was crucial to the process of understanding the patterns, connections, usage, and significance of the two themes. This additional data was largely used to substantiate my participants’ claims, yet in some cases it provided a useful way to problematise participants’ accounts. For example, this was particularly important with regards to my desire to critically examine and interrogate the utopian framing of fandom.

My approach to thematic analysis was subsequently focused on what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as the ‘latent level’. That is, my analysis was largely concerned with identifying and examining the ‘*underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data’ (84; original emphasis). The critical orientation of this approach to thematic analysis makes it highly compatible with feminist methodologies, which, as I shall discuss shortly, emphasise the need to contextualise data within broader structures of power and domination. When conducting my data analysis using latent thematic analysis, my interpretation of the themes thus sought to critically examine the broader assumptions, structures, and/or meanings implicitly underpinning what is explicitly articulated within the data. For example, when analysing the aforementioned relationship between the themes of ‘fandom and race’ and ‘non-belonging’ in Chapter 4, I sought to examine the underlying ideologies shaping these interrelated narratives through my subsequent focus on the role of whiteness, and particularly ‘white fragility’ (DiAngelo 2018, 2011), in the differential distribution of access to feelings of belonging within feminist fandom. Rather than adopting an entirely inductive approach to my data

analysis, here existing theoretical ideas were central to the process of generating theory based on the interpretation of my data.

As I made progress with my data analysis and had successfully identified a range of themes across the data, narrative analysis offered a useful supplementary approach to my data analysis that allowed me to craft a 'thicker' description of the data I had gathered during both my initial and my focused data collection (Josselson 2011, Earthy and Cronin 2008, McAdams et al. 2006). While narrative analysis relies on thematic analysis, and both fall under the rubric of grounded theory, rather than just identifying and describing themes, narrative analysis explicitly foregrounds the necessity of the comparative approach to data analysis. As Shkedi (2004, 92) notes, the purpose of analysing data generated through narrative surveys 'is not to represent each narrative separately, but to bring to light characteristics that emerged from a comparison between a number of narrative cases.' Narrative analysis endeavours to 'understand the themes in relation to one another as a dynamic whole' (Josselson 2011, 227). This emphasis on constant comparison thus makes narrative analysis compatible with a grounded theory approach to data analysis. Moreover, given the narrative-based focus of the design of my research survey, narrative analysis enabled me to capture how my participants constructed their sense of self as feminist fans as part of an ongoing narrative trajectory.

Thus, while thematic analysis assisted me in the initial stages of data analysis, narrative analysis enabled me to more closely analyse the responses of individual participants. Additionally, the constant comparative method of approaching the data was important throughout this process. The combination of these analytic approaches to the data is embedded throughout my analysis as I move between, firstly, examining interrelated themes and patterns within the data and, secondly, more closely attending to the ways in which individual participants discuss their lived experience of these themes.

Feminist methodologists recommend an approach to data collection and data analysis that privileges 'listening, recording, and a non-judgmental stance' (Kelly et al. 1994, 39). Lewis and Marine (2015), for example, call for a

compassionate approach to feminist research comprised of ‘empathy, kindness, and recognition of commonalities’ (128). Under this schema, a compassionate approach to research about young people’s feminism ‘resists judging young feminists within the frame of an earlier era and a different political context’ (129), and instead remains mindful of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which contemporary feminisms are developed and enacted. They emphasise that a compassionate approach to the research process does not forsake due criticality. Feminist compassion, they argue, ‘does not foreclose critique of the work under review, but encourages constructive engagement rather than simply judging it, and finding it wanting, against a standard developed in different political and social contexts’ (130).

Lewis and Marine’s understanding of feminist compassion can be aligned with Gill’s (2007a) notion of ‘critical respect’. Describing the concept of ‘critical respect’ with regards to the act of ‘respectful listening’, Gill argues:

> [Respectful listening] is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualise these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context. (Gill 2007a, 77)

Respectful listening thus produces an approach to data analysis which involves ‘attentive, respectful listening, to be sure, but it does not abdicate the right to question or interrogate’ (Gill 2007a, 78). Similarly, as fan studies scholar Hills (2002) notes, as researchers we should be mindful to avoid interpreting fan talk at face value as direct “evidence” of the fannish experience:

> Fan-talk cannot be accepted merely as evidence of fan knowledge. It must also be interpreted and analysed in order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations, its moments of failure within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, and its repetitions or privileged narrative constructions … Asking the audience cannot act as a guarantee of knowledge. (Hills 2002, 38)

Moreover, Hills later adds that analyses should in turn account for the ‘potential gaps’ and ‘absences’ in fans’ reflections on their identities and cultures (42).

Following these assertions, I approached my participants' narratives compassionately and respectfully yet remained mindful of the need to critically situate their stories within a wider context, and to, as Gill and Hills note, examine their silences and exclusions. In doing so, I foreground how the narratives produced by my participants are rich and varied and yet, at times, contradict one another in ways that reveal the powerful processes of inclusion and exclusion at work within feminist fandom, as well as digital feminist spaces more broadly.

In conclusion, I endeavoured to privilege the multivocality and heterogeneity of my participants throughout my analysis, listening to their stories and experiences compassionately and respectively, while, through my use of latent thematic analysis in particular, also remaining attentive to the mechanisms of power and exclusion at work within them.

Research Ethics

This research was conducted with ethical approval from the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee and is therefore informed by the University's Research Ethics Policy. However, beyond my engagement with institutional ethical frameworks, my research is also governed by a feminist ethics of care as well as the ethics of studying fans and fandom in an online context.[16] As Natasha Whiteman (2012) notes in *Undoing Ethics*, researchers are often pulled in various directions by competing ethical frameworks and domains. She distinguishes between the ethics of the academy, the institution, the researcher, and the researched, and calls for the ongoing negotiation of a 'localised production of ethical stances' (143) according to the situation at hand. Likewise, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidelines similarly state that:

> Because 'harm' is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context. (Markham and Buchanan 2012, 4)

This has been echoed by many fan studies scholars in turn. Nielsen (2016), for example, highlights the importance of giving due consideration to 'intra-fandom codes of ethics,' and advocates for a more multifaceted approach to research ethics which accounts for the local codes of conduct at work within each fan community. Similarly, Busse and Hellekson (2012, 41) note that 'there can be no hard and-fast rule' when devising an ethical approach to the study of fans and fandom.

Expectation of Privacy

The localised and situated production of my ethical framework was particularly important with regards to my participants' expectation of privacy on Tumblr. To many humanities scholars 'the notion that something is published and freely available means that permission to critically discuss the work is implicit' (Busse and Hellekson 2012, 38). The fact that anyone can open access and view online pages 'can give rise to the *assumption* that all texts are created in a public domain or public sphere' (Berry 2004, 323). For instance, boyd and Crawford (2012) note that it is considered acceptable for researchers to utilise data from online 'public spaces' as the authors of the content have the reasonable expectation of being overheard. However, Whiteman (2012, 47) urges researchers to be attentive to the specific 'expression[s] of privacy' within their research settings, highlighting that our understandings of both public and private should be relationally established and embedded in local research contexts. As Marwick and boyd (2014) note, we as researchers cannot conflate being *in* public with a desire to *be* public (2; original emphasis). We must instead understand notions of both public and private as dynamic, complex, and contextually and relationally determined (Barth et al. 2006, Nissenbaum 2004, 2010, ranzke et al. 2020).

Within the context of the study of fandom, scholars are often confronted with a model of semi-privateness and expectations of privacy that are unlike many other online blogs and forums (Busse 2018). Fannish identities and practices often restructure notions of public/private (Harrington and Bielby 1995, Duffett 2013, Zubernis and Larsen 2012), and many fans expect privacy from people

who are not a part of the context within which they share their fanworks and engage in fandom (Jensen 2016, Freund and Fielding 2013, Jones 2016). While some have advocated for an approach that treats all fanworks and fannish utterances as public and thus citable, such as Jamison (2015), who writes that 'fannish practice/tradition doesn't dictate my pedagogy,' many fan studies scholars contend that, when writing about fans and their creations, it is not ethical to ignore fans' expectation of privacy (Busse and Hellekson 2012, 39). This is particularly important with regards to the redistribution of fanworks:

> Fan scholars need to remain ever vigilant as they draw attention to particular fan works, especially when these exist in spaces (such as blogging platforms and social networking sites) where fans have an expectation of privacy due to the semi-public nature of their blogs and the mixing of public and personal material. (Busse 2018, 12)

Many fans are concerned about the privacy of their online fan spaces because of their desire to retain control over the distribution and spread of their fanworks, and many prefer to keep their real-life identity separate from their online fan identity, fearing unwanted attention from those outside fandom, as well as being inadvertently "outed" if their fan pseudonym is linked to their real-life identity. Fans are expected to adhere to an 'implicit code of conduct' (boyd 2014, 35) that privileges an expectation of privacy (Shorey 2015, McCracken 2017). To expose a fellow fan through the loss of privacy is considered a gross 'norm violation' (McLaughlin and Vitak 2011). For some fans, the risk of the loss of privacy, and the loss of anonymity afforded by their fannish pseudonym, could amount to substantial harm. As Nissenbaum (2010, 2) highlights, in mediated contexts, 'what people care most about is not simply restricting the flow of information but ensuring that it flows appropriately.' As I highlight in Chapter 4, my queer participants who explore their gender and sexuality through fandom notably emphasised their concerns about the risk of harm in this sense. They emphasised that, while they felt able to undertake queer identity work within the semi-private context of Tumblr, they would not be able to do so on other more "public" platforms such as Facebook where such information about their gender and sexuality may become available to

unsympathetic peers and family members, subsequently amounting to substantial harm.

While Tumblr is not a closed-access or password-protected site, and users can even browse through personal blogs and tracked tags without an account, many online fan spaces are commonly perceived as semi-private, if not entirely private, and therefore as safe from censorship and incursion (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, Busse and Hellekson 2012). Moreover, Whiteman (2012, 59) cautions against equating technical accessibility, in this case with regards to Tumblr's status as an open-access site, with publicness. Instead, she draws a crucial distinction between *technical* and *perceived* privacy, wherein the researcher should defer to, or at least consider, how the inhabitants of a given online space understand these environments. For my participants, the sense of privacy afforded by Tumblr was fundamental to their feelings of safety, comfort, and belongingness. My analysis revealed that my participants affectively experience Tumblr as feeling *more private* and thus *more safe.* Fandom, and by extension Tumblr, is marked by its strong 'internal ethos of protecting fannish spaces' (Busse and Hellekson 2012, 42), and fannish norms, values, and expectations of privacy were taken into consideration throughout the research process.

Citing Fanworks

Most notably, these norms, values, and expectations of privacy were taken into consideration while determining my approach to the citation of fanworks from Tumblr. Many fan studies scholars have highlighted the ethical dilemmas implicated in citing fanworks and fannish utterances in an academic context, particularly in light of the aforementioned debates about the situated and local production of ethical stances on privacy. Fathallah (2016), for example, emphasises the researcher's responsibility to ask permission from fans before sharing the content they have produced in academic contexts. She describes the act of republishing fanwork within an academic context as 'an exercise of power which we are afforded by our institutional context,' but notes that fans may not have such securities (252). This is particularly important in regards to

the concept of ‘context collapse’ (Davis and Jurgenson 2014, Marwick and boyd 2010), wherein fanworks and fannish utterances risk being presented in academic research without due attention to the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they were produced.

Throughout this research, my citation policy has always centred an openness with the fans whose work I quote. Like Hine (2015, 153), I view contacting participants to ask for permission to quote or cite their fanworks as an ‘ethical duty’. When contacting fans in this capacity, I used my personal Tumblr account to contact them, providing them with information about the project, offering the chance to ask further questions, and then asking them how they would like to be cited should permission be granted.[17] Under this schema, where permission has been obtained from the author, I have made this clear in the accompanying caption for the respective figure.

However, there are several exceptions to this throughout the thesis. For example, several of the blog posts I feature throughout the thesis were authored by Tumblr accounts which have since been deactivated. Obtaining consent from these sources is thus not possible. While blogs can perform an archival function, operating as ‘specific accountings of the passage of time that can then be explored, returned to, dug up’ (Dean 2006), they are nevertheless ephemeral in ways that reveal the impossibility of strictly adhering to a given ethical framework. Additionally, fan art shared by fan artists themselves has also been featured without seeking explicit permission. In both cases, the artwork had been recirculated on Tumblr thousands of times, and I thus felt it reasonable to assume that the artists were aware of ‘speaking potentially to thousands’ (Gray 2005, 847).

Pseudonyms and Anonymity

Researchers are routinely reminded of the importance of participant confidentiality as an ethical requirement of research, particularly given ethical concerns about the expectation of privacy. Researchers are encouraged to use pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of research participants and

protect their privacy. While some scholars emphasise that researchers should have sole responsibility for participant anonymity and confidentiality (Creswell 2013), there is little guidance on *how* to allocate pseudonyms, let alone on the ethical dilemmas involved in this process (see Allen and Wiles 2015, Berkhout 2013).

When designing my survey, I adopted a collaborative and participatory approach to this process by inviting participants to choose their own pseudonyms, or "Public Identifier", for use in my write-up. This, I felt, provided a respectful way to invite my participants to choose *how* they wish to be represented in the research and would enable participants to speak out in one's own name, should they wish to do so. In doing so, this approach adhered to feminist methodologies which emphasise the importance of reducing hierarchies between the researcher and participant, as well as enabling participants to exercise voice in the research process (see Berkhout 2013, Burgess-Proctor 2015). This approach was subsequently embedded into the consent form all participants were required to read and sign, as well as the design of the personal information section of my research survey. The consent form stated, "I understand that the data collected about me during this research will be credited to the given name or pseudonym that I provide to the researcher when it is submitted for presentation or publication." This was then followed by the distinction between providing one's "name" ("*This will be kept confidential and is purely for my records. This doesn't have to be your legal name. It can be your username*."), and providing a "public identifier" ("*Can I use the name given above in my write up (i.e. publications, papers, etc.) or would you prefer a pseudonym or anonymised marker? Again, this could be your username*.") when responding to my survey (see Appendix A and B).

Many of my participants provided a pseudonym for public use distinct from their name provided for private and confidential use. Several also permitted me to refer to them by their given name in my write-up. Alternatively, many requested that I refer to them using their Tumblr usernames. Many researchers emphasise that individuals' online usernames are, firstly, often pseudonymous (Bechar-Israeli 1995, Nakamura 1995, Osell 2007), and, secondly, are central to their online identities and sense of self

(Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011, Hassa 2012, Aldrin 2019, van der Nagel 2017). It is therefore not surprising that many of my participants wished to extend their online identities into the research process. Moreover, as Donlan (2017) notes, online usernames play specific roles within fan communities in particular, marking out the individuality of a user, highlighting their engagement in a given fandom, and promoting the labour they undertake on behalf of the fandom (also see Baker 2009, Freund and Fielding 2013). Within fandom, fans accrue significant and traceable reputations under their pseudonyms, which operate as an 'accountable, archivable, and socially positive way of separating online activities from a physical sphere' (Lothian 2012, 2). Thus, while some scholars argue that online pseudonyms and usernames should *always* be anonymised by the researcher (Sveningsson 2004), I adopted a more contextual approach to this process and instead abided by my participants' requests to be publicly identified by their Tumblr username in recognition of their desire for their contributions to my research to remain embedded within the context of their broader role within the fan community.

Additionally, a small number of respondents requested that I assign them an anonymous pseudonym of my choosing. When assigning pseudonyms in response to such requests, I was deeply conscious of issues concerning power and voice involved in the process of selecting pseudonyms on behalf of my participants. While it is widely acknowledged that there is an intrinsic link between names and identity (Thompson 2006, Dion 1983, Alford 1987), anonymisation naming strategies enacted by the researcher are rarely 'questioned, examined, or viewed as problematic,' and are instead 'taken for granted' (Clarke and Fujimura 1992, 10). As Nespor (2000, 546) notes, while pseudonyms have been conceived of as ethical devices for protecting participants, they also operate as:

> Strategic tools that play important roles in constituting objects of inquiry ... They congeal all sorts of assumptions that need to be scrutinised, and fit together representational genres that make certain kinds of accounts easier and others harder to articulate.

While designing my survey, I didn't anticipate the extent to which I would agonise over the process of assigning pseudonyms to my participants upon request. Yet, as a feminist researcher committed to attending to questions of power and inequality, I felt acutely aware of the risk of obscuring important cues about the age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality of my participants based upon the pseudonym I assigned them. Here, as Allen and Wiles (2015) highlight, there exists a tension between the need for confidentiality and the need for context. I thus endeavoured to account for the nuances of my participants' positionalities and identities during the process of assigning them pseudonyms. For example, I assigned my non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer participants gender-neutral pseudonyms, and searched for regionally and culturally specific names for my participants who were not from Anglophone countries.

My contextual and participatory approach to participant anonymity produced a wide range of naming conventions used throughout the thesis. When citing my participants, I cite their chosen, or in several cases assigned, public identifier alongside their corresponding respondent number from my research survey. Giving my participants control over their pseudonyms and level of anonymity emerged as an appropriate way to not only give them a voice but also allow them to negotiate how much privacy they wished to be afforded by participating in the research, thus producing a local and contextually determined ethical framework.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have discussed my methodological approach to the research, detailed my research design with regards to methods of both data collection and data analysis, and finally offered an overview of the empirical ethical framework underpinning the project. I have emphasised the methodological, ethical, theoretical, and empirical connections between research methods and methodologies within both fan studies and feminist cultural studies, and the implications of these connections for my research. I have sought to remain reflexive and attentive to my subjectivity in the

production and interpretation of knowledge throughout the research process in ways that reveal the feminist orientations of my research. In doing so, I have examined the complex ways in which my subjectivity as a feminist and acafan researcher has informed the ongoing production of my ethical framework, both theoretically and empirically. Subsequently, throughout this chapter I have detailed the strategies I implemented throughout the process of data collection and analysis to reduce the power imbalance between myself and my participants.

Chapter 3: Becoming a Feminist Fan

Feminist becoming has been a lively subject of inquiry over the last three decades, particularly in psychological research. Much of the research on young women's feminist becoming focuses on the significance of educational contexts as fertile ground for feminist identity development. A great deal of this research examines university contexts (Marine and Lewis 2014, Aikau et al. 2007, Hercus 2005), while more recent perspectives have emerged focusing on feminist becoming within high school (Retallack et al. 2016, Ringrose and Renold 2016, Kim and Ringrose 2018). Furthermore, over the past decade, in response to the increasing visibility of 'emergent feminisms' (Keller and Ryan 2018) within the mediated public sphere, feminist researchers have explored the significance of the internet and digital cultures (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a), as well as popular culture (Schuster 2013, Martin and Valenti 2013, Keller 2015, Taylor 2016), as a pathway toward feminist becoming for young people. Digital perspectives, for instance, have focused on the significance of the everyday reach and visibility of online DIY cultures, in addition to networked social-media-based feminisms, to feminist awakenings and consciousness-raising (Keller 2012b, Rentschler and Thrift 2015a, Rentschler 2014), while popular culture perspectives have examined feminist becoming through the lens of the concepts including 'celebrity feminism' (Hamad and Taylor 2015, Keller and Ringrose 2015, Jackson 2020) and 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Indeed, much has been written about the broader importance of popular culture to identity development for young people (Brown et al. 1994, Altheide 2000, Buckingham 2007, Larson 1995). Williams and Zenger (2012, 3), for instance, argue that popular culture provides the 'rhetorical, linguistic and semiotic building blocks' through which young people 'perform identities and make meaning in their own lives,' while Gray (2014, 170) notes that many young people 'weave media-generated source materials into their identity work.' Popular culture has been described as a tool for navigating and deciphering everyday life (Barnett and Kooyman 2012, Lincoln 2014), as comprising the 'primary sites, practices and frames through which people

make sense of the world' (Rowley 2010, 14). Feminist work on the interactions between feminism, popular culture, and feminist identity formation are thus the logical extension of this.

And yet, these understandings of the interactions between contemporary feminisms, networked digital cultures, and popular culture have seldom been brought together to examine how digital feminist cultural critique might draw young people towards feminist consciousness and involvement. This means that media fandom, as a space situated at the intersection of digital cultures, digital feminisms, and popular culture, is largely unaccounted for in our understandings of young people's pathways to feminist becoming – with the exception, perhaps, of Alex Naylor's (2016) research on a group of *Game of Thrones* fans on Tumblr. In her research, Naylor offers insight into the relationship between media fandom, feminist activism, and cultural critique on Tumblr through the lens of a group of fans of a popular character from the series. When introducing her case study, Naylor briefly alludes to evidence that many fans 'see pop culture critique *as a gateway drug* to networked feminist counterpublic discussion' (Naylor 2016, 44; my emphasis).[18] She cites a popular 2012 webcomic by Kara Passey to support this claim (Figure 3). The webcomic evokes notions of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed 2010) and features a depiction of the artist herself, head in hands, next to a speech bubble which proclaims, "I think I'm addicted to feminist media criticism. I will never enjoy something quietly again." At the time of writing, the webcomic has more than 32,000 notes on Tumblr and, as Naylor notes, is punctuated with commentary from thousands of other Tumblr users expressing their identification with the comic through remarks such as "about me," "same", "me," "fact," and "literally me." However, beyond Naylor's brief suggestion that media fandom might operate as a pathway, or 'gateway', towards feminist 'counterpublic discussion', the potential connections between media fandom and the development of a feminist identity remain, by and large, overlooked and undertheorised, despite a range of accounts emphasising that the symbiotic relationship between media fandom and digital feminisms on platforms such as Tumblr that I discussed in Chapter 1.

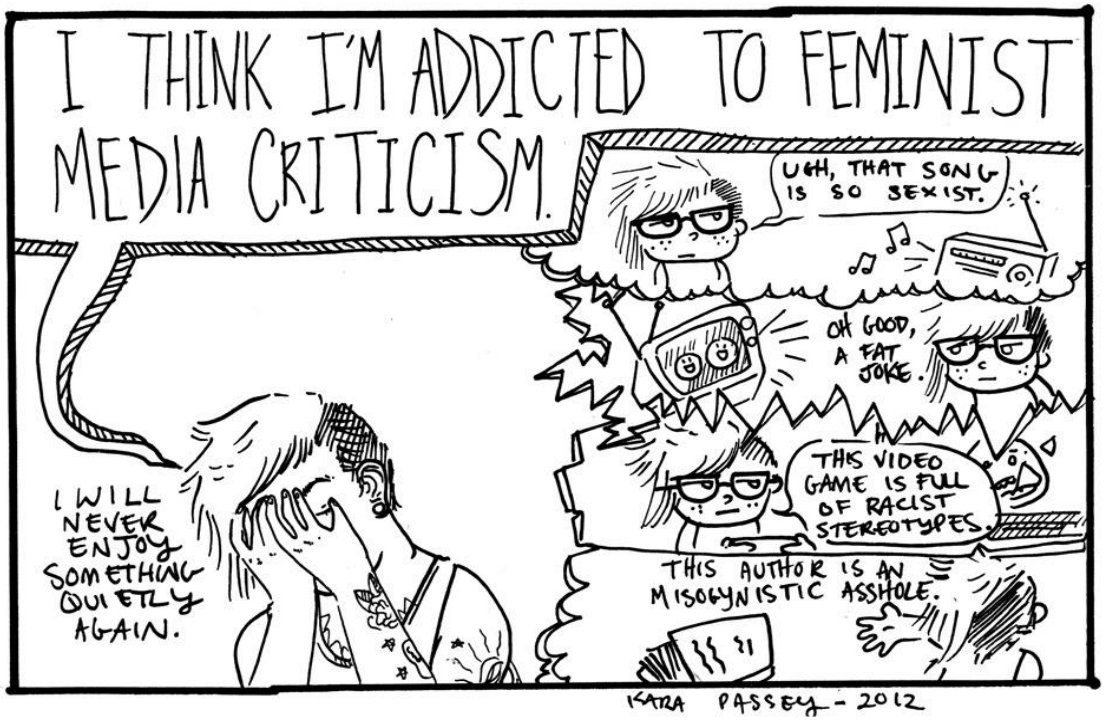

Figure 3: Web comic by Kara Passey, 2012.

Through the documentation and analysis of a large group of individual self-identified feminist fans' self-narratives in this chapter, I aim to explore how contemporary internet-based media fandom might operate as a pathway for "feminist becoming" during youth. In doing so, I attend to my first research question: What is the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities? Building upon theorisations of continuity and change in self-narratives and the discursive construction of identity (Bamberg et al. 2011), I examine my participants' self-narratives of fannish feminist becoming to explore how media fandom can, under certain circumstances, offer a social and cultural context conducive to drawing young people towards engagement with myriad feminisms. This troubles the dominant narrative within feminist accounts of young people's feminist becoming as rooted primarily in more formal educational contexts, during high school or university (Ringrose and Renold 2016, Lewis et al. 2016), and in episodic and ephemeral engagement with digital feminisms, rooted for example in hashtag feminism (Horeck 2014, Khoja-Moolji 2015, Clark 2016) or single-issue based online movements (Mendes 2015, Mendes et al. 2019). Instead, my participants' self-narratives of feminist becoming offer insight into the significance of ubiquitous and everyday engagements with feminism through interest-based online DIY

cultures in the formation and development of young people's feminist identities. Many of the more typical narratives of feminist becoming do not account for the complexity of this process within the context of fandom, within which feminist becoming is bound up with affect, textuality, and shared cultural consumption and production in complex ways.

Transformation and Transference in Self-Narratives of Identity Development

Many sociologists have argued that our sense of self is formed between our internal world and external world and that the process of identity development involves degrees of both self-observation and reflection (Goffman 1959). The construction of our sense of self often relies upon what McAdams' (2011) describes as 'narrative identity'. Narrative identity, he argues, refers to the internalised story of the self that a person constructs, both for the self and for others, to make sense of their life. According to Bamberg et al. (2011), narrative frames are central to identity development and performance, as they work to ensure that the identities we discursively construct align with both our internal and external worlds. Self-narratives allow us to perform, manage, and, in some cases, disavow our identities through social interaction (Fenstermaker and West 2002, Goffman 1959, Bettie 2014). They become the means by which we come to recognise ourselves, 'the stories we live by' (McAdams et al. 2006, 4). Self-narratives have a *defining* character and can be understood as 'discursive practices' that 'form the locus of identities as continuously practised and tested out' (Bamberg et al. 2011, 186). Self-narratives thus offer insight into how people *construct, perform*, and *make sense of* who they are. It is in this sense that they can grant us insight into the development of young people's feminist identities.

According to Bamberg et al. (2011), self-narratives often draw on prevailing cultural norms about discontinuity and continuity in the process of identity formation. They argue that these themes of discontinuity and continuity permeate discursive constructions of identity formation, wherein:

> Subjects [position] their sense of self in terms of some form of continuity, i.e., constructing their identities in terms of some change against the background of some constancy (and vice versa). The choice of particular discursive devices, taken from the range of temporality and aspectual markers, contributes to the construction of events as indexing (potentially radical) transformations from one sense of self to another and constitutes change as discontinuous or qualitative leaps. In contrast, other devices are typically employed to construe change as gradual and somewhat consistent over time. (Bamberg et al. 2011, 188-9)

These themes of *discontinuity* and *continuity* are well documented in the literature from feminist cultural studies on self-narratives of identity formation and development in relation to becoming a feminist. In recent years, scholars working within fan studies have also begun to explore the process of becoming a fan in more depth. Hills (2014), for instance, identifies two primary narratives of becoming a fan: fandom as *transformational*[19] and fandom as *transference*. The first mode, which he describes as a kind of transformative and emergent fandom, tends to involve the first subjective appearance of a fan identity, often during childhood or adolescence. I understand this mode of fandom entry as a kind of *discontinuity,* wherein encountering fandom (and later, as my data suggests, feminism) is discursively constructed as a transformative break from the past. This has been described by many scholars as a common trope in self-narratives of becoming a fan (see Cavicchi 1998, Harrington and Bielby 2010). The second mode of becoming a fan, Hills (2014) argues, is marked by gradual mediations, pre-configurations, and transfers of fandom from one fan object to the next. These narratives operate as a form of *continuity* or *extension,* wherein entry into fandom is framed as the natural consequence of a learned fannish predisposition or as the continuation of 'narratives of the self' (Giddens 1991, 76) already at work. Such a narrative can be found, for example, in Bacon-Smith's (1992) description of the gradual entrance into a community of media fans based upon a pre-existing interest in certain genres and mediums, which frames fannish becoming as the extension of a fannish predisposition. This mode of becoming a fan often presupposes an established familiarity with fan culture, marking a reorientation or rearticulation of pre-existing fannish attachments and competencies rather than the 'pure

discovery' (Hills 2014, 16) of their initial appearance. Fannish becomings articulated through this discursive repertoire are therefore framed as a form of transference.

Similarly, feminist interpretative frameworks often articulate feminist becomings through self-narratives of *transformation* or *transference* (Skeggs 1997, Taft 2017). For example, Bartky (1975, 425) describes the process of becoming a feminist as a 'profound personal transformation', while Downing and Roush (1985) refer to a transformative 'revelation' stage in the process of becoming a feminist. Alternatively, Hercus (2005), in her research on narratives of feminist becoming, identifies the figure of the 'always feminist'. The 'always feminist', she writes, positions herself as having always held views and had feelings 'consistent with feminism' (37). In becoming feminist, the women Hercus interviewed did not report experiencing dramatic changes in values, beliefs, or their sense of self. Their self-narratives did not, she writes, include reference to a process of personal transformation or conversion, but rather:

> In becoming feminists, these women did not report experiencing dramatic changes in values, beliefs, or their sense of self. The process they described was not so much one of personal transformation, but of becoming aware of the language or discourse of feminism as a vehicle for expression already held beliefs about the world and about themselves, and of linking up with other women who shared their outlook. (Hercus 2005, 38)

Here, Hercus' description of women coming together to connect and collectively express and name already held beliefs about the world and themselves echoes Friedan's (1963, 15) notion of 'the problem with no name.' The feminist becoming of the 'always feminist', therefore, marks the transference or extension of pre-existing values and beliefs onto the language and discourses of feminism. However, Hercus offers an additional narrative of the 'evolving feminist', which can be positioned at the intersection of both *transformation* and *transference.*[20] Many of Hercus' participants emphasised the fluid and evolving nature of their feminist identity development, framing their feminist identities as 'something that had to be worked at as an *ongoing*

project' (Hercus 2005, 56; my emphasis). Given the often-simultaneous operation of both continuity and discontinuity in self-narratives of identity development, it is not surprising that many sociologists, working from a poststructuralist and anti-foundationalist perspective, understand identity in processual terms. Contemporary feminist theories, for example, have generally embraced the idea that subjects and identities are always in-process or always becoming, doing, or performing, rather than fixed or essential ontological beings (Rattansi and Phoenix 2005, Braidotti 2002, Skeggs 1997, Grosz 1999, Cover 2014, Fenstermaker and West 2002, Braidotti 2011, Butler 1990, Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016). For example, as Currie et al. (2007, 2009) highlight, becoming a feminist is a much more complex and ongoing process than typically acknowledged: one is not positioned simply 'inside' or 'outside' feminism by taking up a subject position within feminist discourse. Feminist identities remain 'emergent' and in-process (Budgeon 2001, Harris 2010, Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016), much like the 'evolving feminist' that Hercus (2005) describes.

The notion of the evolving feminist as a subject that remains *in process* is particularly compelling as it helps to demonstrate how self-narratives of becoming are often processual, fluid, and non-linear. This processual understanding of self-narratives of identity development speaks to the operation of *some* continuity and *some* change that Bamberg et al. (2011) refer to in their description of common discursive constructions of identity formation. Self-narratives of identity development thus often operationalise discursive themes of both transformation and transference, conversion and extension, and continuity and change. Indeed, many of my participants' self-narratives can be positioned at the intersection of these discursive themes. A dichotomous understanding of my participants' self-narratives, such as those which have been operationalised within both fan studies and feminist cultural studies, does not allow for the nuance and complexity of my participants' personal biographies. Throughout this chapter, I argue that my participants' narratives of becoming as *transformation* or *transference* are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and in many cases can be understood as transformation *and/or* transference. Many of my participant's used discourses of both

transformation and transference in their narratives of becoming a feminist fan, assigning varying levels of emphasis to moments of continuity and change in their narratives of the self.

Fandom and Feminist Becoming

Building primarily upon my participants' responses to Q2 and Q3 of my survey, I will now explore their self-narratives of feminist becoming to examine the relationship between digital media fandom and feminist identity development. In doing so, I move away from earlier empirical feminist research which examines young women's ambivalence towards and dis-identification with feminism. Instead, I more broadly align my findings with contemporary accounts which centre young people's emergent feminisms (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller and Ryan 2018, Keller 2016a). Building upon this, I explore my participants' self-narratives of feminist becoming in order to examine the significance of media fandom and popular cultural critique to my participants' narratives of feminist becoming. In doing so, I consider how the process of feminist becoming is organised and structured through the discourses, practices, and subject positions of media fandom – that is, through engaging with the multitude of social and cultural practices associated with digital media fandom. Additionally, I also consider how my participants' self-narratives of feminist becoming vary according to their material conditions, cultural contexts, social positionalities, and personal histories. These negotiations highlight the pertinence of identity markers, such as race, nationality, sexuality, and gender identity, in the process of becoming a feminist fan.

Because my research consists of a purposefully self-selecting sample of participants who identify as feminist fans, it is not surprising that their self-narratives emphasise that feminism is a significant part of their lives and sense of self. Three dominant discursive themes emerged in my participants' narratives of feminist becoming: *fandom and feminist sense-making*, *translating feminism to fandom*, and *fans' emergent feminisms*. I examine the first and second theme through the lens of Gray's (2010) theorisation of paratexts to reveal how the texts both *consumed* and *produced* by fans

contribute to the process of feminist becoming. In doing so, I examine the significance of paratexts in creating, constructing, contesting, and circulating meanings of feminism within fandom. The first theme, *fandom and feminist sense-making*, examines self-narratives which emphasised the significance of fandom as an interpretative tool to *make sense of* feminism. In these self-narratives, fandom is positioned as providing the language, social structures, shared interests, and shared cultural signs, frameworks and symbols through which participants come to understand and make sense of feminism. In these accounts, fandom renders feminism intelligible, prompting the re-direction and re-evaluation of the frameworks fans use to interpret texts. Within the second theme, *translating feminism to fandom*, participants' self-narratives focus less on processes of feminist becoming within fandom and more so on how pre-existing feminisms are integrated and taken "into" everyday fannish practices and interpretative strategies. These narratives thus emphasise processes of feminist transference, particularly through engaging in fannish cultural production instilled with a feminist "ethos". Additionally, the self-narratives which adhered to this theme revealed how different social positionalities, particularly surrounding race, can mediate this process of transference. In the final theme, *fans' emergent feminisms*, I explore self-narratives which emphasised the processual and emergent nature of feminist becoming. In these narratives, respondents positioned feminism as an *active* and *ongoing* form of group identity work which takes place within/through fandom, fan culture, and fan communities. These accounts positioned fannish feminisms as the starting point in an ongoing trajectory of feminist becoming.

"It went from theoretical to applicable to the world.": Fandom and Feminist Sense-Making

Feminists have long been interested in how popular cultural texts offer interpretative frameworks for how feminism is understood. Scholars such as van Zoonen (1992), Mendes (2015), Dean (2010a), Bronstein (2005) and Freeman (2001), for example, have focused on textual representations of feminism within mass media, with particular emphasis on both print and

broadcast news media coverage. Elsewhere, Dow (1996) and Taylor (2016) have examined the significance of popular culture in mediating understandings of feminism, exploring prime-time television and celebrity feminism respectively. As Keller and Ryan (2018, 1) note, over the past decade feminism 'has become increasingly visible within popular media cultures.' Many of these scholarly accounts seek to examine and reveal how these texts offer visions of what feminism *means* (Dow 1996, 5), of what 'popular culture can tell us about feminism' (Hollows and Moseley 2006, 1). Not only do these popular cultural texts shape our understandings of feminism itself, they also 'work to inform whether, how, and to what extent women come to engage with feminism' (Taylor 2016, 3). What many of these perspectives do not account for, however, is the way that these texts circulate more broadly within our mediated environment. What about the very readers and viewers 'who populate the text' (Gray 2010, 146)? What sort of 'cultural work' (Bourdage 2014, 173) do they undertake? To what extent do these perspectives account for the participatory nature of the process of constructing and circulating textual meaning? And how might this participatory and social process of constructing and circulating meaning affect our understandings of feminism itself?

In many of my participants' self-narratives of feminist becoming, they emphasised that popular cultural texts helped them to make sense of feminism, its practices, identities, and discourses, in ways which were unique to the specificity of their identities as fans. That is, their sustained and communal fannish engagement with popular cultural texts helped them to cultivate an interpretative framework for understanding feminism on not only a *textual* level of the fan object but also a *paratextual* level of the wider fan community.

In *Show Sold Separately,* Jonathan Gray (2010) argues that paratexts structure and guide the reception of media texts, forming an extensive part of our contemporary mediated environment. They surround texts, audiences, and industry, and subsequently fill the spaces between them. To study paratexts, Gray argues is to study 'how meaning is created' (26). Gray highlights that fan-created paratexts operate as 'important additions to a text'

(143) and are a fruitful site at which we can examine how meanings are created, constructed, and contested. The cultural practices and social formations of fandom, ranging from fannish commentary, debate, and analysis to the cultural production of a myriad of fanworks, have been understood by many scholars as paratextual (Brooker 2001, Jenkins 2006a, Castleberry 2015, Fathallah 2015, Leavenworth 2015, Ng 2017, Brown 2018, Geraghty 2015b). Hellekson and Busse (2006), for example, offer the concept of the 'fantext' to encapsulate the totality of fan-created paratexts.[21] The *fantext* refers to the entirety of fan additions to a text (in addition to the text itself) so that the multitude of fan-created texts, discussions, analyses, and interpretations therein becomes:

> A work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. By looking at the combined fantext, it becomes obvious how fans' understanding of the source is always already filtered through the interpretations and characterisations existing in the fantext. In other words, the community of fans creates a communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation in which a large number of potential meanings, directions, and outcomes co-reside. (Hellekson and Busse 2006, 7)

An understanding of the cultural practices and social formations of fandom as paratextual, then, accounts for how fandom operates as a site of communal and reciprocal meaning-making. Building upon French literary theorist Gérard Genette's (1997) work**,** Gray differentiates between *entryway paratexts* and *in media res paratexts*. *Entryway paratexts* preface a work and guide us *into* it. They shape the reading strategies that we take forward "into" a text and provide the interpretative frameworks which we use to examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption. *In media res paratexts* interrupt, inflect, or possibly redirect a reading in the middle of a text. They shape and inflect our "re-entry" into a text, offering frames through which we can interpret and make sense of the text at hand. They can thus subtly or radically alter our reading of texts accordingly. A single paratext can operate as both an *entryway* or an *in media res* paratext, depending upon the reception context and reader of the paratext. For instance, for one reader at a specific moment in time, a paratext

might operate as an *entryway paratext*, whereas for another it may later operate as an *in media rest paratext.*

Gray (2010, 146) argues that the fantext can work as 'a powerful in media res paratext' in its ability to redirect a reading in the middle of a text, 'directing its path elsewhere.' Fannish commentary, debate, creativity, and analysis can, he writes, call for subtle changes in interpretation, and open up new 'paths of understanding' (147). Indeed, many fan studies scholars have mapped such lines of textual resistance, particularly with regards to issues surrounding fannish creativity and gender and sexuality (Jenkins 1992, Busse 2017, Hellekson and Busse 2006). It is in this sense that, as I discussed in Chapter 1, the fantext has been described as a tool for social criticism that can carve out 'alternative pathways through texts' (Gray 2010, 143).

Within this schema, I consider fandom as an important site at which meanings of feminism are thus paratextually constructed, negotiated and contested. Rather than attributing the process of feminist becoming solely to the myriad ways in which feminism has been incorporated into popular culture over the past decade, as discussed in Chapter 1, I am interested in how the paratextual circulation of popular cultural texts offers interpretative frameworks for young people to make sense of feminism. Building upon my participant's self-narratives of becoming feminist fans, I argue that fan-created in media res paratexts can operate as an important pathway towards feminist becoming, wherein the paratextual framing and reframing of texts within feminist fandom is important to the transformative process of *making feminist meaning* of texts, as well as *making meaning of feminism* itself.

Many of my participants' self-narratives of feminist becoming emphasised the processes by which fandom helped them to cultivate the shared language, cultural signs, symbols, and frameworks through which they came to understand feminism. In one response, twenty-five-year-old Isolde-thelady described this process of feminist becoming in length:

> I think being on Tumblr and having the amazing big sister that I have was the catalyst to my feminism ... It started small, reading posts and articles about how the world works and microaggressions and studies about

> stereotypes ... And it just snowballed until I was the annoying girl who always had to talk about the patriarchy and systematic racism and ableism and every other ism that people around me could give a fuck less about. (Isolde-thelady, #315)

Having been involved in fandom since her mid-teens, Isolde-thelady explains that her process of feminist becoming began initially as a more gradual, drawn-out process closely tied to her participation in fandom on Tumblr. She explained that fan-created paratexts circulating on Tumblr introduced her to feminist interpretative frameworks, concepts, and discourses through the lens of the popular cultural texts she was interested in as a fan. Isolde-thelady's self-narrative implies that the Tumblr posts she encountered during this period functioned in a consciousness-raising capacity that allowed her to begin to make sense of feminism through the familiarity of her interests as a fan. Isolde-thelady's self-narrative subsequently supports feminist researchers' claim that blogging platforms such as Tumblr may generate a wider feminist consciousness (Kennedy 2007, Larson 2016, Keller 2016a). Once this consciousness-raising process had been initiated, Isolde-thelady explained that it soon "snowballed" into a much more rapid and transformative process of feminist becoming.

Later in her responses, when elaborating further on the fan-created paratexts that initiated her process of feminist becoming, Isolde-thelady listed fan meta analysis, a form of fan-created self-reflexive critical writing and analysis that is stylistically unique to fandom, as particularly conducive to this process. Describing meta as a "conduit" for feminist becoming, she explained that:

> Long text posts that get really involved in a specific character or scene or arc and talk about them in the context of the media, but as though they were happening in real life. I think it's so interesting the way people are able to get into a character's head and talk about what they were going through or thinking about that made them make this specific decision or give another character a specific look. And I think that's super important for female characters especially. It gets people to engage with the idea that women have multi-dimensional thoughts, feelings, ideas, or personalities that exist outside of a plot or, in the case of real life, outside of the men around them. (Isolde-thelady, #315)

Here, Isolde-thelady's positions meta as a fan-created paratext that can interrupt and redirect interpretations of a text. Such fan-created paratexts enable fans to construct and negotiate frames through which they can re-read and re-interpret texts from a feminist perspective, devoting renewed attention to the "multi-dimensional thoughts, feelings, ideas" of the characters who populate the text. Isolde-thelady's description of the snowballing effect of this process, wherein her interpretation of media texts is "always" mindful of "the patriarchy and systematic racism and ableism and every other ism", implies permanence in the shift in the interpretative process prompted by the fan-created paratexts which circulate throughout feminist fandom. Josie (#227) similarly described the benefits of fan-created paratexts using similar discursive themes:

> People spend so much time thinking and writing and engaging in discussions about reasons behind/implications of so many things (and not just in source material, but also within the fandom). I appreciate reading so much of this, even when it's uncomfortable for me because ... I come from a really privileged background and I approach a lot of material from a very different perspective. Reading about what other people have to say deepens my understanding not only of the source material, but also of other people.

As Gray (2010, 43) notes, in media res paratexts often 'build themselves into the text, becoming inseparable from it' – much like the experience documented in Kara Passey's comic (Figure 3). Self-narratives of feminist becoming highlight how paratexts can prompt powerful processes of transformation in fans' development of a feminist identity. Fan-created paratexts can provide a framework through which they make sense of feminism. The role of such in media res paratexts in shaping the process of feminist becoming subsequently points to the pedagogical value of fandom as a space to 'engage in a variety of issues and real-world problems' (Booth 2015) through the lens of fannish engagement with texts (something that I explore in more depth in Chapter 4). Additionally, Isolde-thelady's self-narrative notably highlights the significance of being embedded within a social context that is conducive to feminist becoming. In this case, Isolde-thelady's close relationship with her "amazing

big sister" was also an important aspect of her trajectory towards feminist becoming. This indicates that, while fandom (and the fan-created paratexts it encompasses) can provide a pathway towards feminist becoming, this process does not take place in a vacuum and is often dependent on other contingencies within the individual biographies and positionalities of fans. This is something that I will explore in more depth shortly.

However, other respondents similarly described a gradual processes of feminist transformation through fandom, much like Isolde-thelady's account. Sugarcoatish (#304), an eighteen-year-old from the Netherlands, for example, also emphasised the significance of fannish analysis, commentary, and critique to her process of feminist becoming. While she admits that she was aware of feminism before encountering it in fandom, she emphasised that she only became more deeply invested in feminist issues after engaging with them within the context of "the internet and fandom." She explained that it was through encountering "feminist discussions and the analysis of (problematic) representation" in fannish spaces that she began to re-evaluate her interpretation of popular cultural texts. These feminist discussions within fannish spaces opened up new paths of understanding and were central to her trajectory of feminist becoming. This, she later emphasised, involved a gradual "process" of transformation that is still ongoing. Similarly, zeppelinfish (#255) also wrote that it wasn't until she became involved with fandom that she began to identify strongly with feminism. She subsequently positioned "feminist takes on fandom" as central to her meaning-making process as a fan, as well as more broadly:

> It wasn't until after I got heavily into fandom and the internet that I was properly "woke" as a feminist and realised how important it was to me. I spend a lot of time reading feminist takes on fandom and feminist blogs, and I view the world through a heavily feminist lens.

Many of these self-narratives emphasised that the process of feminist becoming, initiated by in media res paratexts circulated within fandom, subsequently inflected the kinds of fannish content they consumed after coming to recognise themselves as feminist fans. Sara (#333), for instance, explained that her process of feminist becoming had a transformative impact

on the way she approaches cultural consumption. “The way I consume content has changed a lot ever since I started taking my participation in the feminist movement seriously,” Sara explained. Marie (#37) similarly noted, “I've learnt about abuse and unequal power dynamics from fandom and it's shaped what fannish content I consume.”

Many of the narratives of feminist becoming centred specific fantexts in this process of making sense of feminism, and in turn making feminist sense of texts. These included, for example, those surrounding franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games,* television series such as *Glee, Game of Thrones,* and *Orange is the New Black,* boybands such as *One Direction,* and celebrity feminist stars such as Emma Watson. In these narratives, the specific fantexts surrounding these popular cultural texts are positioned as offering a shared cultural framework through which fans come to understand and make sense of feminism, wherein the familiarity of the fantext makes feminist interpretative frameworks more accessible and intelligible. As seventeen-year-old Tuva (#231) wrote, “I find these discussions or threads are more engaging when they are about things I already have a connection to.”

In these accounts, the specificity of the fantext is significant, as the fan’s pre-existing affective investment in, and engagement with, the text operates as the foundation for feminist becoming. These narratives of feminist becoming emphasised how the paratextual commentary circulating surrounding the object of fandom interrupted and redirected their readings of specific texts, subsequently initiating the process of feminist awakening. As fan studies scholar Busse (2017, 3) notes, fannish commentary and debates are often ‘enmeshed with larger social issues.’ Thus, if we are to understand feminist becoming as deliberative (see Marine and Lewis 2014), it is important to consider how the deliberative nature of fandom might be conducive to the development of young people’s feminist identities. For example, one respondent named spelertoneel (#36), reflecting upon her process of own feminist awakening, wrote that the commentary circulating around the US teen musical comedy-drama television series *Glee* (2009-2015) was especially important:

> I can't quite remember when it all started but my feminism did sprout from discourse on Tumblr, and I'm quite certain it was around one of the latter seasons of *Glee* which had such controversial moments that Tumblr did discuss them in detail and, looking back on it, used much of feminist language to strengthen their points. It was around that time that I started to identify as a feminist too; although it was a gradual process before I actually realised that I was. (#36)

Having been embedded within a community of *Glee* fans for several years, and thus having developed a certain level of affective investment in and attachment to the text, as well as meaningful relationships with other fans, spelertoneel was particularly receptive to the in-depth discussion circulating around the fantext during this period. This discussion, she notes, often used feminist language, discourses, and frameworks to interpret the text. In a follow-up email, she explained that she routinely encountered blog posts discussing and critiquing *Glee*, and its fandom accordingly, from a feminist perspective, focusing on a wide range of issues relating to gender, sexuality, race, and disability. Fans' use of feminist discourses to collectively make sense of the text (see Bury 2005) within the fandom subsequently enabled spelertoneel to make sense of these very discourses, as well as make sense of the text in relation to them, subsequently initiating her gradual process of feminist becoming. Likewise, Alejandra (#16) also reported a similar experience within the *Glee* fandom, noting that many of the fan blogs she followed on Tumblr "were bringing up all these issues that I hadn't questioned before, so I started doing research about it and after seeing all the inequality and injustice I began sympathising with the cause."

Twenty-four-year-old Emily (#71), who has used Tumblr since mid-2011, described a similar process of feminist becoming rooted in fan-created paratexts. Emily's feminist awakening was closely tied to her favourite character in the fantasy-drama television series *Game of Thrones,* (2011-2019, adapted from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* fantasy novels)*,* a teen girl named Sansa Stark*.* Her self-narrative is linked to an intensely affective and identificatory engagement with the text and is thus distinctly fannish in its mode of feminist becoming. As she explained, "I don't

think I really identified as a feminist until I joined the *ASOIAF* fandom and decided to stan for Sansa Stark." As I have explored elsewhere (Hannell 2017a), many fans use Sansa's storyline as a framework to discuss issues surrounding sexual violence, trauma, abuse, victim blaming, and internalised misogyny, moving outward from textual analysis towards more broader social and political commentary (also see Naylor 2016). This is something that Emily affirmed in her responses to my survey, and these themes appear frequently throughout her blog posts over the years. In her responses, Emily explained how her participation in debates and discussions about these issues during her late teens introduced her to a community of feminist fans who, "were older and gave me a lot of words and pedagogy and theory." Notably, a number of my participants also wrote about the significance of multi-generational dialogue about feminism within fandom to their feminist becoming. Sabrina (#25), for example, wrote that older fans helped her to re-examine her positionality and work through her internalised misogyny. She told me that older fans were subsequently integral to her feminist becoming. They "helped me realise how to be a better person/feminist regarding women in fandom," she wrote. A number of my older respondents, such as forty-year-old Willow (#75), emphasised their awareness of their role in this capacity. Willow explained that she felt it was important to engage "in conversation with other women, especially young women" about feminist issues in fandom. She emphasised that she viewed it as a "responsibility" to do so. It is in this sense that my participants' narratives adhere to Stein's (2015, 175) understanding of contemporary media fandom as a 'safe but multi-generational environment,' wherein multi-generational dialogue can offer 'an empowering route to knowledge within a supportive community.'

For Emily, her feminist becoming was driven, in part, by her intense identification with Sansa, as well as in her sense of belonging to a multi-generational community of like-minded Sansa fans with whom she felt a sense of solidarity and mutual recognition. "For me," she explained, "at age 18/19/20 defending Sansa felt a lot like finally defending myself, and was when I really had my feminist awakening." For Emily, the fan-created paratexts circulating around Sansa not only served a pedagogical consciousness-raising function,

equipping her with the “words and pedagogy and theory” through which she came to make sense of feminism, they also had a powerful impact on her sense of self more broadly that was central to her feminist awakening. As Gray (2010, 38) notes, ‘paratexts can amplify and/or clarify many of a text’s meanings and uses, establishing the role that a text and its characters play outside the boundaries of the show, in the everyday realities of viewers’ and non-viewers’ lives.’ The paratextual circulation of texts creates spaces in which fans can create ‘meaning *from* and *within* the text’ (Geraghty 2015a, 2; my emphasis). Emily explained that, while fandom provided her with the language to describe “things I had felt and experienced but didn’t have the verbiage to explain,” thus allowing her to make sense of feminism, it more importantly provided her with a space in which she was able to make sense of her own experiences of trauma and abuse as a child:

> For me, feminism was about finally having the tools to understand my abuse, and how it was perpetrated and why and how my abuser got away with it - and having the tools to try to protect other little girls and other vulnerable women and know I'm fighting a battle alongside many others and feeling less alone. (#71)

Through Emily’s narrative of becoming, then, we can see how powerful and transformative the impact of feminist becoming can be to feminist fans’ sense of self. The use of fandom as a space to evaluate, negotiate, and make sense of feminist discourses, practices, and identities can have far-reaching consequences for one’s biographical sense of self. Not only did Emily’s interactions with feminist fan-created paratexts enable her to make feminist meaning of the text, and make meaning of feminism itself, they also facilitated a broader shift in Emily’s understanding of her life narrative and the conditions and experiences which have shaped it. Crucially, for Emily, this process of feminist transformation was tied to the feminist solidarities that she established with other fans with whom she is “fighting a battle alongside”. This points to the significance of media fandom as a space that can be both socially and culturally conducive to feminist becoming.

Like Emily, who emphasised that fandom provided her with the language and frameworks to describe things she “had felt and experienced but didn’t have

the verbiage to explain," many other participants also emphasised that they had long held views and had feelings and experiences consistent with feminism, but did not have the appropriate means to name them as such until they encountered them in fandom. As eighteen-year-old Natalie (#52) reflected, media fandom often operates as "a place where a lot of people find solidarity and even the language to describe themselves." The role of fandom in helping participants to develop the language and frameworks through which they could come to express pre-existing sentiments, thoughts, and feelings was a common theme across the responses. Mirime, for example, explained that:

> I was always the can-do-anything-be-anything type of a person. I looked up to women who excelled at things, who did things to impact and change the world. My favourite characters in fiction were always women who were strong and confident and took no shit from anybody. ... Then, as I was getting more exposure to various viewpoints ... I began to have vocabulary to express these feelings, to express why it was so important to me to see women have a place in my favourite stories and be treated with respect. (Mirime, #257)

In her responses, Mirime explained how her immersion in fandom helped her to make sense of not only her orientation toward cultural texts but also her sense of self more broadly. Her engagement with, and creation of, fan-created paratexts helped her to develop the appropriate language and vocabulary to describe and express feelings she had long held. In doing so, it helped her make sense of the ways in which she had always been drawn to stories that centred women. These moments of transformative self-recognition in the feminist discourses and frameworks that circulate within fandom are subsequently common across the responses to my survey. In becoming feminist fans, my participants did not necessarily report experiencing dramatic and transformative *changes* in values, beliefs, or sense of self. As Sedgwick (1990) reminds us, the act of "coming out" does not necessarily require the revelation of new information or actions, but the discursive articulation of a subject position that may or may not be previously known. Rather, the processes of transformation they describe centre the process of becoming

aware of the language or discourse of feminism as a framework for making sense of and expressing pre-existing sentiments and feelings, as well as connecting with other like-minded fans. As Budgeon (2001, 24) observed in her research with young women in England, even though her interviewees did not initially recognise themselves as the subject of feminism, she discovered that a subtle affinity with feminism was often already at play. She noted that many of her interviewees practised 'identities informed by feminist ideals,' adding that identification with feminism does not necessarily depend on recognising oneself as a feminist. Likewise, many of my participants emphasised that, while they often had an implicit long-term affinity with feminism, it was not until they encountered feminist concepts, practices, and discourses in fandom that they began to recognise themselves as such. Their narratives subsequently draw upon discursive frameworks of both *transformation* as well as *revelation* and *recognition.* This suggests that, while fandom can operate as a pathway towards feminist becoming, to do so may also mark the continuation of narratives of the self already at work, if not yet recognised as such.

In some cases, participants explained that, while they were already aware of the language and discourse of feminism through more formal educational settings, particularly with regards to university, it was not until they encountered "queer, feminist, and intersectional readings of pop culture" (Peyton, #213) in the informal and everyday fannish spaces they inhabit that these concepts began to resonate with them on a much more immediate level. Such accounts echo earlier research on feminist identification which emphasise the tendency of many young women to regard feminism as a largely academic and middle-class domain.[22] One participant named Peyton (#213), for example, explained that while she had studied feminism in a formal capacity at university, feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities did not truly resonate with her until she encountered them in relation to texts and storyworlds she was deeply invested in as a fan. She explained, "Tumblr really put those frameworks in a more direct context. It went from theoretical to applicable to the world." Similarly, Willow (#75) noted that the familiarity of the fantext to fans offers a productive space to work through feminist issues, often

for the first time. She explained, “I do think that the issues of relevance to feminism in canon/source material can be a safer platform for discussion than making people expose themselves and their lives.” Joslynnyc (#157) also echoed this understanding of fandom as a safer and more contained space to engage with these issues, highlighting that “we use the things we love as a jumping off point to examine feminist issues.” In doing so, these discussions that invite alternative feminist reframings of popular cultural texts can be integral to the process of feminist becoming. Jenkins (2006a) notably positions popular culture as mattering politically for this very reason. He argues that ‘popular culture allows us to entertain *alternative framings* in part because the stakes a low ... this is in the end another reason why popular culture matters politically – because it doesn’t *seem* to be about politics at all’ (238-9; my emphasis). Popular culture, he later adds, can offer shared references, resources, and frameworks that fans can use to articulate their hopes and fears about the world (Jenkins, Shresthova, et al. 2016). Jenkins’ understanding of popular culture as a space in which people can entertain alternative political framings in a more informal sense thus resonates with my participants’ narratives of feminist becoming.

While these narratives do not necessarily pinpoint a sudden, life-changing transformation in one’s sense of self, self-narratives such as eighteen-year-old Ingrid’s, featured below, nevertheless demonstrate how important this process of coming to name these aspects of the self can be and the powerful feelings of belonging that it can produce:

> I believe it was fandom that introduced me to feminism ... I identified as a feminist the moment I learned what the word really meant. I never really studied it formally, but since then I've been educating myself constantly. Feminism is an important part of my identity. It gave me words and explanations for gut feelings that I had never really been able to understand before. It helped me with self-esteem, it gave me power, it made me kinder and more aware. (Ingrid, #313)

Throughout these self-narratives, fandom operates as a space conducive to feminist sense-making and meaning-making in two distinct yet interrelated ways. Firstly, fandom emerges as an important space in which young people,

and particularly young women, come to make sense of feminism, marking the beginning of an ongoing process of feminist becoming. In some cases, this marks fans' first sustained encounter with feminist discourses, concepts, and frameworks, wherein in media res fan-created paratexts circulated within feminist-fannish spaces gradually interrupt and redirect readings of a text, subsequently initiating the process of feminist becoming as one begins to re-evaluate their interpretative frameworks. In media res paratexts, in this sense, can be understood as operating in a consciousness-raising capacity that makes feminism more accessible to younger fans. These accounts tend to frame this broader process of feminist becoming through discursive themes of transformation and change.

Secondly, in other narratives which adhered to this broader theme, fans' self-narratives of feminist becoming emphasise that, while fandom might mark their first *explicit* encounter with feminist discourses, concepts, and frameworks, they had long had feelings, beliefs, and experiences consistent with feminism. In these narratives, fans emphasise that their engagement with feminist fandom helped them to cultivate the shared language, concepts, and frameworks through which they came to recognise, evaluate, and make sense of *pre-existing* feminist narratives of the self already at work. In these accounts, the multi-generational community of like-minded fans, and the in media res paratexts they produce, are framed as an important part of this process of feminist becoming and coming to recognise oneself as a feminist fan. Additionally, these narratives subsequently frame the process of feminist becoming through discursive themes of transformation, revelation, and self-recognition.

In the next section, I will explore how pre-existing and self-identified feminisms can guide fans' entries into texts, functioning as a kind of *entryway paratext* in narratives of feminist becoming. Notably, the two paratextual narratives of feminist becoming that I explore here are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Once fans have had their reading of a text interrupted and often redirected by in media res paratexts, they take these interpretative strategies forward into the texts they encounter hereafter. The fluidity and nonlinearity of this process of paratextual feminist becoming is thus important to consider.

"Feminism is always in the front of my mind.": Translating Feminism to Fandom

While many of my participants emphasised that their feminist becoming was initiated both within and through fandom, a significant number positioned themselves as having always been feminists. In these self-narratives, fans' pre-existing feminisms were often positioned as the result of particular social and cultural prerequisites. Like in many other accounts of feminist becoming (see Hercus 2005, Marine and Lewis 2014), my participants often discussed the significance of other feminist role models in their lives to their increased feminist consciousness. Many of the responses discussed the impact of mothers, sisters, and other female relatives to their feminist becoming, as well as the impact of sympathetic friends, teachers, and colleagues. Guilia (#3), for example, told me, "I was raised by a single working mother which has always relied on her strength and resources to achieve success through her life ... she was my first point of reference for understanding feminism." Other respondents, particularly from North American and Western European countries, additionally discussed the significance of being raised in middle-class "liberal" households and educational environments to their feminist identities. As Emily X (#328), a twenty-five-year-old from the US, explained, for example, "My parents both consider themselves feminists, and I think my grandparents do as well, so it's something I've always been around ... I grew up in a family that talked about it a lot, and went to a liberal arts college where discussions of feminism were frequent in most of my classes, regardless of what the official topic of the course was." For these respondents, a long-term awareness of issues surrounding feminism, social justice, and progressive politics inflected their approach to cultural consumption, production, and critique, both in a fannish context as well as more broadly. These self-narratives thus frame participation in feminist fandom as the extension or transference of a feminist predisposition. In doing so, they focus less so on the process of becoming feminist, and more so on how they integrated their feminisms into their fannish practices, and their orientation towards fandom more broadly.

Throughout these self-narratives, fans' pre-existing understanding of, and affiliation with, feminism operates as a kind of entryway paratext, wherein one's pre-existing feminist identity structures and guides entry into a text, as well as fandom more broadly. As I discussed earlier, entryway paratexts preface a work and guide us *into* it. They shape the reading strategies that we take forward into a text and provide the interpretative frameworks which we use to examine, react to, and evaluate cultural consumption. Entryway paratexts, Gray (2010, 36) argues, provide 'an initial context and reading strategy for the text ... they control our interactions with and interpretations of texts.' In these self-narratives, feminism structures fans' relationship to fandom. As Shea (#246) explained:

> When analysing media or creating fandom-related works feminism is always in the front of my mind. It is very interesting to me how different identities are presented and how interactions between people of different identities are depicted. I think my interactions with fandom itself are also significantly influenced by feminism.

Here, twenty-three-year-old Shea, who noted that they have always considered themselves a feminist, explains that their feminist subject position has a significant influence on the way they interact with fandom and the fantext. Feminism, they write, "is always in the front of my mind." Similarly, tiny-steve (#232) tells me that, "my feminism has always been linked to how women are portrayed and perceived through film and television," and April (#94) explains that, "feminism shapes everything I do." Similarly, C (#187; their emphasis) writes that "feminism has shaped my view of the world, so it affects the kind of content I consume and how ... I feel that I engage in fandom *through* feminism, rather than the other way around." Thus, Gray's understanding of entryway paratexts as establishing the parameters that surround media consumption, deflecting readers from certain texts or inflecting their reading when it occurs, offers a valuable framework for analysing self-narratives of feminist-fans who position themselves, first and foremost, as feminists who take their feminism forward into their encounters with fandom. Averita's (#177) self-narrative offers a good example of this. Averita, a twenty-six-year-old, who emphasised that "I don't remember ever *not* identifying as a feminist,"

explained that her pre-existing feminism often governs the popular cultural texts (and, in turn, fantexts) she engages with:

> A lot of my interaction with fans and with fan communities is around what I'd like to see canon doing better, and seeing fans take matters into their own hands when it fails to. Whether that's just in terms of female characters and female-driven storylines, or if it's a matter of diversity in other areas, I'm finding that the older and more aware I become, the more I seek out media that works to promote diversity and particularly well-written female characters. If a show doesn't do that, I'm not going to be interested.

While Gray's focus on paratexts centres *texts,* and I am more broadly exploring narratives about feminist fan subject positions and identities, the impact of a feminist predisposition on one's fannish identity often manifests *textually* through acts of cultural consumption and production in ways that suggest a similar function to entryway paratexts. Thus, I am adopting Gray's notion of entryway paratexts more loosely as a way to interpret fans' self-narratives which position their pre-existing feminisms through discursive themes which resemble Gray's description of entryway paratexts. Many self-narratives under this theme, for example, emphasised how their pre-existing feminist subjectivities inflected their approach to the fantext and the kinds of pleasures they want it to produce. Consider twenty-five-year-old centrumlumina's (#298) narrative, for instance, which explained how her feminism inflects her reciprocal *consumption* and *production* of the fantext:

> I've always seen feminism and fandom as entwined. I'm a huge fan of female characters and I support (stan) them in every fandom I contribute to. I like to highlight the characters who don't get enough focus or who have very stereotyped roles by fleshing them out in fic.

Noting that she has always understood her feminism and fandom as intertwined, centrumlumina explains how it structures how she enacts her feminist fan identity. She notes, for example, how she centres "female characters" in all of the fandoms she contributes to. Building on this, she explains that she enjoys writing about female characters in the fanfiction she creates in order to further develop their narratives and characterisations.

Centrumlumina's description of this process is reminiscent of fan studies perspectives which emphasise the role of fannish cultural production as a means for fans to 'fill the gaps' (Fiske 1992, 33) in a text according to their needs and desires (see Busse 2017, Hellekson and Busse 2014, 2006, Jenkins 1992). Additionally, centrumlumina's conscious production of female-centred fanfiction adheres to Narai's (2017) concept of 'homoaffection fic' – that is, a genre of fanwork that 'centres and revalues' women's experiences.

Many of my respondents similarly reported how they actively sought to centre girls and women, and other intersecting marginalised identity positions, in the fanworks they produced. Cultural production thus emerges as an important site at which my participants carried their feminism forward into their fandom. Elsie (#247), for example, wrote that she always makes sure that "female and non-binary characters in my fics are empowered," and emphasised that she always seeks out other fanworks which demonstrate "an awareness of feminist issues and gender representation." Bomberqueen7 (#142) similarly told me that, "I make choices in the stories I tell, which characters I give agency, what kind of emotion I want to prioritise," and Rowan (#306) emphasised that they are "very big on writing fanfiction that focuses on women and their

Figure 4: "Feminist Agenda" by Karen Hallion, November 2016.

relationships." We can see this ethos at work, for example, in popular fanart such as Karen Hallion's, which centres female characters from a range of popular media fandoms surrounded by text which reads, "Ask us about our feminist agenda" (Figure 4). Created following the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, Hallion's fanart accrued over 1,500 notes on Tumblr and was reblogged with affirmative comments and expressions of solidarity including, for example, "me," "this," and "hell yes!". In many of my participants' accounts, both producing and consuming such fanworks were positioned as a form of feminist DIY media praxis (see Ferreday 2015). Trans respondent Jack (#137), for example, explained that one of the most significant ways in which he carries his feminism forward into is fandom "is simply by creating." For Jack, writing slash fanfiction "in a safe and accepting space" offers an important space for him to "share my ideas and develop them even further." He relates this more broadly to his orientation towards fandom, explaining that on his Tumblr blog "there's also a lot of sharing posts that express feminist beliefs and outrage at the status quo." Here, through Jack's responses, we can see how Tumblr users bring together popular culture, popular feminisms, and media fandom. Additionally, while my participants may have produced such fanworks as a result of their pre-existing feminisms structuring their entry into the text, operating as a kind of entryway paratext, it is also important to consider how these fanworks might operate for other fans within the community as in media res paratexts.

For centrumlumina (#298), such processes of feminist and fannish cultural production are just one of the ways she understands her feminism and her fandom as intertwined and indistinct. Additionally, as she explains, the reciprocal relationship between her feminism and her approach to fandom is also inflected by her other salient identity categories. Namely, she told me, it is inflected by her position as a bisexual woman. She later explained:

> I've always shipped F/F more than any other kind of pairing, and my femslash blog tries to support queer women in fandom to relate their experiences to the characters onscreen, whether or not the character is canonically queer. We also run events to boost the representation of minorities within F/F, such as Femslash Diversity Bingo, a tongue-in-

> cheek way for writers to create 5 fics featuring diverse women and NB [(non-binary)] people along axes such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, body type and class.

Reflecting on her broader orientation to the fantext, she explains that she has always been more drawn to female/female (also known as "femslash" or "wlw") pairings than any others, and she co-created a secondary blog alongside a friend to focus on these pairings specifically. As Hellekson and Busse (2014, 11) note, fandom has often been positioned as a space in which fans can 'explore feminist and/or queer identity issues.' Centrumlumina co-runs this blog, she explains, as an attempt to offer support to other queer women in fandom, and runs "events" to encourage other fans to produce fanworks that centre femslash pairings through an intersectional lens. This is something I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. Centrumlumina's positionality as a queer woman and a feminist thus inflects her entry into, and production of, the fantext in line with a feminist politics of recognition, as well as her interaction with the community of fans surrounding it. Jokesandgays (#163), like centrumlumina, also explained that, "because my network on Tumblr is so extremely wlw-heavy, feminism is just sort of an intrinsic part of that experience."

Many narratives of feminist transference, like centrumlumina's, positioned fandom as a space in which their identities as feminist fans are continually constructed, negotiated, and experienced alongside other salient aspects of their identities. The process of transferring one's feminism into fandom was thus often codified in different ways according to one's pre-existing feminisms, social positionalities, and identity categories. For instance, seventeen-year-old Grace (#264), framed her self-narrative of feminist becoming, and the transference of her feminism into fandom, as being inextricably linked to her position as a half-Taiwanese, half-Singaporean Asian American girl. As she explained, "feminism and race are so intertwined for being me that I can't separate them into separate experiences ... feminism is tied strongly to my race and how, I, as an East Asian girl, am seen." Grace explained that her sense of self as a racialised girl has always structured her understanding of fandom and how she encounters and reproduces the fantext. When discussing the reasons she created her Tumblr blog, she explained, "I only made a Tumblr

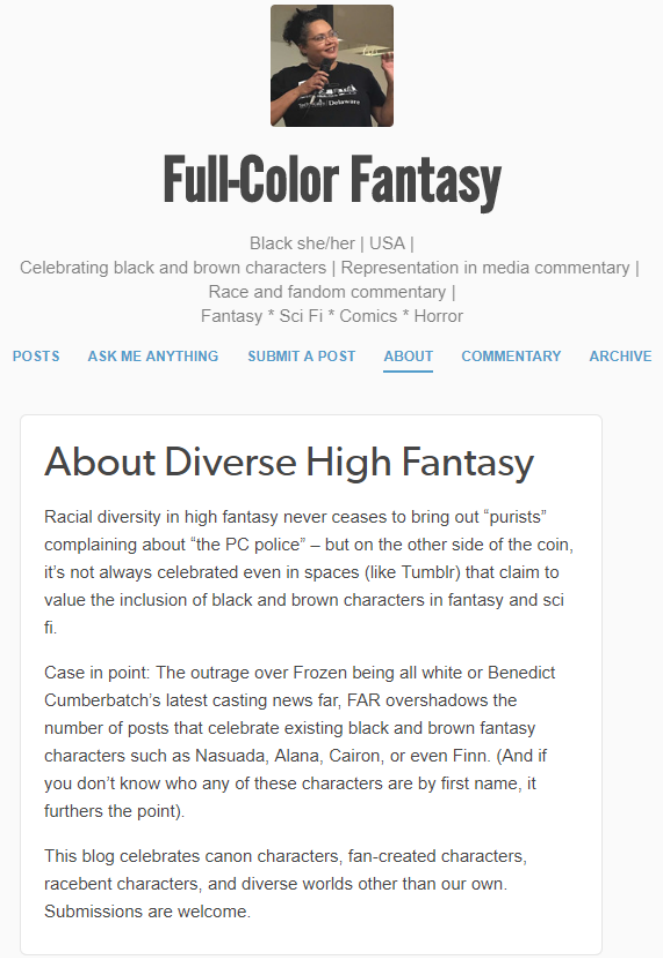

Figure 5: Diverse High Fantasy Tumblr blog. Featured with permission of blog owner.

last year ... for writing and following the community of kpop and a specific KDrama after anonymously following a lot of blogs, including Diverse High Fantasy and others like East Asians on Western Screens." Thus, her entry into the fantext was mediated by her the inseparability of her feminism and her anti-racism, and her subsequent desire to seek out fannish texts and spaces which centre people of colour. As Grace explains, she initially created her blog to engage with fans of musical and televisual Korean genres and to follow fan blogs which examine the representation of East Asians in Western media cultures. She cites two Tumblr blogs in particular, *diversehighfantasy* ("Diverse High Fantasy") and *eastasiansonwesternscreens* ("East Asians on Western Screens"), as examples of this. Blogs such as *diversehighfantasy*, which position themselves as multifannish blogs offering intersectional analyses of race, representation, and fandom (Figure 5), operate in this sense as a form of 'critical paratextuality' (Gray 2010) and can play a key role in constructing

interpretative communities of fans. For Grace, such blogs provided an important space for her to learn more about "social injustices and how they can translate to shows and fandom, even." In Grace's self-narrative, she emphasises that this was particularly important to her in terms of engaging in discussions about race, fandom, and representation. Grace's experiences demonstrate how salient identity categories can inform and structure the process of transferring one's pre-existing feminisms across to fandom, as well as govern one's engagement with a feminist politics of recognition. For Grace, her anti-racism and feminism influence the fandoms she engages in, the blogs she follows, and how she interprets the fantext. Her transference of feminism into fandom thus relates to the specificity of her experience and identity as a fan of colour, and specifically as an Asian American girl.

For many fans of colour, like Grace, fandom does not operate as a moment of feminist awakening or becoming precisely because they have long been aware of difference and otherness, and this has subsequently inflected their approach to fandom. As one anonymous respondent told me, "I engage in fandom to create media where I see people like me. I am a woman of colour. *I don't know how to engage with anything in my life in a way that isn't feminist or diverse*" (Cara, #334; my emphasis).

Thus, throughout the self-narratives which adhere to this discursive theme fandom operates as a space not for feminist becoming per say, but for the transference of a pre-existing feminism across into one's fannish practices and activities. These pre-existing feminisms thus establish the parameters that shape fannish media consumption, operating as a kind of entryway paratext. Their narratives reveal that this process of transference varies according to one's social location, and position DIY cultural production as a particularly fruitful site for the unification of pre-existing feminisms with fandom.

"I feel like I'm having feminist awakenings all the time.": Fans' Emergent Feminisms

The final theme in my participants' becoming a feminist fan narratives moves us away from the (para)textual grounding of the first two themes. In this theme,

participants emphasised that their process of feminist becoming was still *ongoing.* These self-narratives highlight that to be a feminist fan is not to occupy a static, fixed, and uncomplicated identity position. Rather, to be a feminist fan is to engage in a *continuous* and *ongoing* process of feminist becoming. These self-narratives utilise an understanding of the self as open, flexible, creative, emergent, and in process. April (#95), for instance, told me that, "I feel like I'm having feminist awakenings all the time." As Currie et al. (2007, 2009) highlight, becoming a feminist is a much more complex and ongoing process than typically acknowledged: one is not positioned simply 'inside' or 'outside' feminism by taking up a subject position within feminist discourse. Feminism, and feminist identities, are often complex and 'emergent' (Budgeon 2001, Harris 2010, Keller and Ryan 2018). Additionally, Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016, 150) emphasise that contemporary feminisms are imbued with 'becomings, processes, and thresholds.'

The ongoing process of feminist becoming is framed throughout these narratives as deliberative, social, and communal, positioning fandom as a site at which fans collectively struggle over meanings of feminism more broadly. They emphasise how fandom has provided them with opportunities to discuss and refine their understandings of multiple feminisms, both in theory and practice, and position themselves as open to new concepts, discourses, and practices. Many of my participants explained, for instance, how they first learned about issues such as intersectionality and privilege through their engagement with one another within fandom, and they subsequently highlight that they are constantly in the process of reconsidering and reworking their identities and practices as feminist fans in relation to the new knowledge they develop. Like Taft's (2011) girl activist interviewees, they tend not to think they have found the definitive 'answer' to a given political problem, but instead strive to create opportunities for young people to discuss issues, learn from one another, and develop responses together.

Throughout these narratives, my participants position the process of becoming a feminist fan as a form of group 'identity work' (Wexler 1992, Best 2011). For them, feminist fandom can be understood as a work in progress marked by continuous growth and change. As I discussed earlier in relation to the *fantext,*

fan studies scholars argue that the notion of ‘a work in progress’ is central to both fandom and the study of fandom (Hellekson and Busse 2006). This understanding of fandom as a work in progress can be carried over to my participants’ understandings of *feminist fandom* as a work in progress. A number of the self-narratives which positioned feminist fandom as a work in progress, as a form of group identity work, did so through discursive themes of youth and adolescence. For instance, a fourteen-year-old respondent, Starshine2375 (#311), explained, “I'm young, I'm sometimes under-informed on issues that I should be more aware of and then I try to fix that, it was only recently that I made my own account to be more active and able to engage with these issues.” Similarly, a sixteen-year-old respondent, Vakyrath (#310), explained, “I’m a child. I’m unaware, and am still developing my opinions. I’m sure I’ll be a louder advocate as I grow older, but for now I’ll cheer for those who are doing what I believe in when I can’t.” In these narratives, my teen participants position their feminist becoming using discourses about adolescence as a time of formation and exploration of the self (Lesko 1996, Wyn and White 1997). Additionally, as Smith-Prei and Stehle (2016, 150) highlight, fourth wave feminisms’ focus on ‘becomings, processes, and thresholds’ aligns them with an inherently adolescent aesthetic. However, while these teen participants emphasise their desire to develop their understandings of feminism, how they do so, positioning themselves as “unaware” and “under-informed”, unwittingly reproduces the long-standing idea that youth experiences are primarily relevant for how they impact the supposedly more ‘real’ and ‘legitimate’ world of adulthood (Gordon 2010, James et al. 1998).

Alternatively, many of my participants’ self-narratives positioned this group identity work as corresponding to broader shifts within feminist theory and discourse that inform the social and cultural practices of feminist fandom. Many narratives, for instance, emphasise how their feminist fan identities have evolved alongside a broader shift from “mainstream feminism” or “white feminism” towards a more “intersectional feminism” over the past decade (see Flood 2019, Kanai 2020). Dace’s (#21) self-narrative offers an insight into this process. Dace, a twenty-four-year-old from Latvia, who explained that, while

she grew up in a sheltered environment and was ignorant of social issues for much of her childhood, she began to identify as a feminist after being exposed to more perspectives and current affairs from “around the world” after joining Tumblr. For Dace, being exposed to transnational feminisms was an important part of her feminist awakening. The fandom blogs she followed, she explains, introduced her to commentary about social justice issues such as race, sexuality, and gender for the first time and thus initiated her feminist becoming. “I thought that,” she told me, “of course I am a feminist because I care about these issues.” Tumblr was important to this process, Dace explains, “because I could easily access a million different sources and blogs that focused on specific topics.” For Dace, a particularly transformative moment in her feminist becoming took place during the aftermath of events in Ferguson, Missouri, USA, in August 2014. Following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, by police officer Darren Wilson in August 2014, and the subsequent emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (see Freelon et al. 2016, Jackson et al. 2020), Dace explained that:

> After Ferguson in the USA, Tumblr completely changed and almost everyone I followed changed their blogging style and started talking more about topics of race, feminism and other issues ... Back then it was much simpler to identify as a feminist because it meant you supported equality. Now feminism has so many different layers, and you have to actively work on it so that your feminism would be intersectional, etc.

For Dace, what she felt to be a marked shift in the kinds of feminisms circulating within fandom on Tumblr prompted her to re-evaluate and re-negotiate her understanding of feminism and her own identity as a feminist. In doing so, she explains that she moved away from a relatively singular understanding of feminism as supporting “equality” towards a more multiplicitous and multivalent understanding of feminism. Wendy (#295) similarly explained, “I started to get really involved after Michael Brown’s death.” Dace and Wendy’s accounts of their emergent fannish feminisms align with recent feminist accounts which examine an ‘intersectional turn’ (Carbin and Edenheim 2013) in feminist discourses over the past decade, wherein intersectionality has become something of a ‘buzzword’ (Davis 2008, Flood

2019) within academic and popular domains (Villesèche et al. 2018, Rivers 2017, Kanai 2020).[23] For Dace, her emergent understanding of feminism accounts for "so many different layers," and she emphasises that she is well aware that her feminism is something she must actively work on. Dace's account demonstrates how feminisms articulated by fans correspond to broader discursive shifts taking place within feminism. These modes of fannish feminist becoming do not take place in a vacuum but are contingent upon the specificities of the broader social, cultural, and political context of these becomings. As Morimoto and Chin (2017, 181) note, 'fandom is always performed against a backdrop of real-world events, constraints, and subjectivities.'

Many of these self-narratives mobilise anxiety-laden discourses about regulating, disciplining, and improving the feminist (and fannish) self. In many cases, these are bound up with anxiety about privilege, normative identities, and the spectre of "white feminism". The term "white feminism" is used to describe 'any feminism which comes from a white perspective, *and* universalises it' (Aziz 1992, 296). As Jonsson (2014, 1014) notes, "white feminism" as a critical-descriptive term has in recent years 'been revitalised and gained increasing traction' within feminist discourses (see Kendall 2020, Olufemi 2020, Kanai 2020). A participant named MsSunflower (#24), for example, told me that her feminism initially "evolved into a level of (now cringe-worthy) White Feminism in high school when I got involved in gay rights groups. I now consider myself an intersectional feminist who is constantly trying to educate herself and trying to shut up and let people speak for themselves, promoting platforms for voices rather than being on it myself." In this narrative, MsSunflower describes her earlier "white feminism" through discourses of embarrassment, regret, and shame, and emphasises that she has since become an "intersectional feminist" who consciously engages in an ongoing process of self-education. Likewise, rileybl00 (#106) lamented, "for a few years, I was unfortunately only exposed to white feminism," and Maaike (#35) reflected that:

> Over time, I realised that I was practicing a very simple form of feminism, with just some mainstream facts and anger. White feminism, if you will.

> Some of my mutuals started getting more into intersectional feminism and I realised that this was the way to go.

For Maaike, the process of reflexively developing her understanding of feminism was prompted by the social context of fandom, wherein her fandom friends' ("mutuals") burgeoning understanding of more intersectional feminist frameworks motivated her to re-evaluate her own perspective. She described this process as "very enlightening", and later explained that, "now I try to focus my social activism on a broad range of feminist issues, not just the classic wage gap things."

My participants also mobilised anxiety-laden discourses about privilege and self-awareness of their normative identity positions. For example, Willow (#75) reflected that the first time they became aware of the concept of privilege was "a lightbulb moment" in their feminist becoming, and has prompted the re-evaluation of their frameworks and practices since. As they explained, "The dawning understanding that I was far too comfortable in cis white feminism while trans and non-white sisters had things so much worse got me back into actually thinking about things instead of congratulating myself on being so progressive." My participants' articulation of privilege counters perspectives such as Keller's (2016a, 34-5), who noted that her young feminist research participants rarely recognised their privileged identities. Instead, Keller observed, 'my participants did not verbally articulate their normative identities in the same explicit ways in which they addressed their marginalised identities.' Many of my participants emphasised that recognising their privilege was an important part of their ongoing process of feminist becoming. The articulation of privilege and the performative disavowal of "white feminism" thus formed the core work of many of my respondent's self-narratives of becoming, wherein feminist becoming is entangled with practices of disciplining the feminist self. This identity work, they emphasised, was often undertaken through their engagements with fandom, and they position fandom as a productive site for this work. My participants' performative disavowal of "white feminism" supports Akane Kanai's (2020) research, which positions 'interrogations of whiteness' (32) and a disavowal of complicity with white self-interest as central to feminist identity work. Crucially, she emphasises, this

pursuit of a supposedly intersectional feminist identity often obscures the reinvigoration of practices of middle-class whiteness centred on individual self-monitoring and self-discipline.

However, the learning of intersectional frameworks was also an important part of the self-narratives of my participants with more marginal identity positions. Several participants emphasised that their ongoing process of feminist becoming is entangled with their burgeoning awareness and understanding of their marginalised identities, particularly surrounding race and ethnicity, as well as gender and sexuality. For example, Izzy (#269), a twenty-one-year-old African American, explained that her emergent feminism is tied to moments of disconnect between her identity as an African American woman and the types of feminism she initially embraced during high school:

> I'd initially begun identifying myself as a feminist in high school and it took the form of "girl power" ra-ra "girls can be just as strong as boys" sort of deal. I didn't really begin to critically think about feminism and my relationship to it until my freshman year of high school when I began to read more works by the likes of bell hooks and people like her. When I began to think, or rather more readily reflect on the intersection between my race and my status as a woman was when I realised that a significant amount of mainstream feminist rhetoric (or rather feminist rhetoric that had begun to be popularised or even discussed) quite often left out race and I couldn't truly connect with it in a way that I had wanted to.

For Izzy, her ongoing feminist becoming was not tied up in the burgeoning awareness of her privileged identity position, but rather her increasing self-awareness of her marginalised identity position, “the intersection between my race and my status as a woman.” Izzy explained that fandom has since operated as a useful conduit for her to further explore intersectional feminism. She tells me that she enjoys engaging in discussions “of race and the intersection between race and sexuality or race and gender” in fandom, for instance.

Likewise, twenty-four-year-old Canadian Josie (#227) explains that, while she occupies some privileged identity positions, her feminism has evolved as she

has become increasingly aware of her positionality as a Métis[24] person and "as a product of colonisation":

> When I first got started, it was pretty basic stuff. I didn't think about the interplay between all these other paradigms. Racism? Homophobia? Ableism? Islamophobia? I was very much a White Feminist Woman and didn't see beyond how sexism impacted me. I think the few political things I cared about was white feminism and the environment. By the end of high school, I started reading more about Indigenous issues (mostly because it started to hit home that as a Métis person, I was a product of colonisation) ... At this point, I'm not sure if I can articulate what feminism means to me. It... encompasses more than before. For me, it involves a lot of listening. Caring about other people. Lot of empathy. But also action.

Josie described her process of feminist becoming as a transformative "journey", and, like many of my other participants, positioned her earlier understanding of feminism as "embarrassing". She emphasised that Tumblr was an important platform for her feminist becoming and for expanding her understanding of feminism to incorporate intersectional and indigenous frameworks. She explained, "Tumblr has been pretty important for me. It helped me realised I'm not straight. Helped me get the confidence to actually learn about my Métis heritage and get involved in my community."

Elsewhere, the process of feminist becoming was framed alongside other processes of identity development and emergent self-awareness. Sonseulsoleil (#74), a non-binary and trans twenty-one-year-old, for example frames their process of feminist becoming through the lens of their gradual acceptance of their identity as a trans and non-binary person and their increasing immersion in "social justice communities" on Tumblr:

> My [definition] of feminism has certainly changed. I used to be a lot less intersectional. But now that I've come to terms with being trans and nonbinary, not to mention my attraction to women, and the more I've immersed myself in the social justice communities on Tumblr and educated myself, I see feminism as about so much more than just white women. It's about racial equality, it's about fighting transphobia and

> homophobia and ableism and honestly fighting oppressive capitalism. I want to fucking dismantle everything at this point.

This, they explain, has subsequently led to the expansion and re-evaluation of their understanding of feminism, and themselves as a feminist, to incorporate a much broader range of progressive and emancipatory politics.

Many of these narratives of ongoing identity work are underpinned by an understanding of feminist fandom as a pedagogical space. Notably, while I will explore the pedagogical function of feminist fandom on Tumblr in more depth in Chapter 5, it is worth briefly examining here with regards to the process of feminist becoming that my participants describe. Narratives of becoming a feminist fan that emphasise the processual nature of the identity also emphasise a commitment to an ongoing process of learning and self-improvement. Josie (#227), for example, emphasised, "I fully expect I will constantly have to check myself and learn/unlearn new ways of thinking." This, she explained, was motivated by her intention "to not become complacent." Similarly, sugarcoatish (#304) explained that becoming a feminist fan "was a slow process and I am still learning." These narratives bear resemblance to those articulated by Jackson's (2018) research participants. In her research on girls' digital feminisms in New Zealand, Jackson notes young people's commitment to identity work and self-development in their feminist frameworks, observing that 'the construction of feminism within a pedagogical framework was striking ... girls commonly located themselves within a developmental trajectory as "growing" in their feminism through using social media sites as a learning tool' (41). Similarly, Kanai's (2020, 11) feminist research participants emphasised that 'self-education was a highly important facet of life that was almost taken for granted as an everyday, responsible feminist activity.' This understanding of feminism as an ongoing learning process is something many feminists articulate (Ahmed 2017).

Thus, throughout these self-narratives, we witness a move away from the paratextual grounding of the first two discursive themes and can instead identify an emphasis on the processual nature of fannish feminist becoming. These narratives position fandom as a site where fans collectively struggle over meanings of feminism, and position feminist becoming as an ongoing

form of group and individual identity work that corresponds to broader discursive shifts in feminism taking place within both academic and popular domains, particularly concerning concepts such as “intersectionality” and “white feminism”. Additionally, these narratives of feminist becoming are punctuated by anxiety-laden discourses about regulating and improving the feminist (and, thus, fannish) self. In most cases, these are bound up with anxiety about the articulation of privilege and normative identities, although several respondents also explore youth and marginalised identity positions through this discursive framework. More broadly, these self-narratives can be unified through their emphasis on the importance of self-awareness, ongoing processes of education and learning, and a broader commitment to the group identity work taking place within feminist fandom.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explored my participants’ self-narratives of becoming a feminist fan to reveal how digital media fandom might offer a pathway that is conducive to feminist becoming. In doing so, I move away from popular narratives within feminist cultural studies which position formal education contexts and participation in largely ephemeral and episodic acts of digital feminism as dominant pathways towards feminist becoming, and instead examine the processes of feminist becoming which are unique to the cultural and social specificities of media fandom. Through examining my participants’ self-narratives, I also reveal how the relatively dichotomous understanding of identity development within both feminist cultural studies and fan studies does not account for the nuances and complexities of my participants’ self-narratives, which in many cases utilise discursive themes of both continuity and change.

While media fandom does not, of course, *determine* or guarantee feminist becoming, my participants’ self-narratives offer insight into how, under certain circumstances, it does provide a space conducive to it. Additionally, these narratives should be interpreted within their broader social, cultural, and

political context. As my participants' narratives of emergent feminisms indicate, the kinds of feminism articulated by fans correspond to discursive shirts in feminism taking place within both the academy and the popular domain. These self-narratives also correspond to the social locations and positionalities of individuals. My participants' self-narratives point to the importance of identity markers such as race, gender identity, and sexuality, in narratives of becoming a feminist fan. These differences, in turn, subsequently shape fannish activities and practices, as well as fandom more broadly. Thus, to identify as a feminist fan is to inhabit a fluid and emergent identity position that is contingent upon other salient identity markers and social, cultural, and political contexts.

In the following chapter, I will move away from narratives of becoming and will instead examine my participants' understandings of belonging within feminist fandom.

Chapter 4: Belonging as a Feminist Fan

Over the past two decades, the concept of belonging has become a subject of lively sociological inquiry. Building upon critically oriented conceptual and theoretical understandings of identities as fluid and processual, as I discussed in the previous chapter, scholars such as Elspeth Probyn (1996) argue that conceptualisations of belonging can augment our understandings of identity. The concept of belonging, Probyn argues, allows us to account for the relational aspects of identity. It accounts for 'what identity really is for' (9). The concept, she argues, thus:

> [C]aptures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state. (Probyn 1996, 19)

In these discussions, too, belonging is tied to becoming, and is similarly approached as multiplicitous, dynamic, and processual (May 2011, 2013, Bell 1999, Stahl and Habib 2017, Hopkins 2010, Farrugia and Wood 2017, Probyn 1996).[25] In their overview of the use of the concept of belonging in contemporary research, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016, 242) argue that belonging comprises of 'situational relationships with other people and social and cultural practices stemming from these relationships, which are fundamentally political and include emotional and/or affective orientations.' More broadly, the concept of belonging is taken up as a framework for examining the entanglement of the multiple and intersecting spatial, temporal, cultural, and socio-political dimensions of identity.

Unlike the self-narratives of becoming that I explored in the previous chapter, which were often self-contained within responses to specific questions on my survey, my participants' accounts of belonging within feminist fandom were dispersed across their responses to my survey (Q2-7). Examining these accounts grants us insight into the ways in which feminist fan communities on Tumblr bring together fannish and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities. Due to the taken for grantedness of notions of belonging (May

2011), as an everyday mode of being that is largely habitual, unmomentous, and unconscious (Felski 2002), my analysis of my participants' experiences of belonging had to account for the *implicit* ways in which notions of belonging were embedded into my participants' discursive understandings of concepts such as community, inclusion, participation, recognition, and reciprocity within the context of feminist fandom.

In this chapter, I examine my ethnographic data in order to explore the interrelated affective, spatial, and relational dimensions of belonging within feminist fandom. To do so, I focus on three key themes that emerged across my participants' responses: imagined community, spatial belonging, and non-belonging. The first two themes represent two of the dominant and interrelated narratives of belonging that emerged across my data set. Firstly, I explore how feminist fandom is discursively (re)produced as an imagined community of "like-minded" feminist fans by my participants, as well as the importance of shared *feeling,* of shared affective states, to a sense of belonging within this imagined community. Secondly, I explore how my participants' pursuit of connection with like-minded fans works to produce spatial understandings of belonging to feminist fandom closely tied to the perception of Tumblr as a "safe space". Within these accounts of spatial belonging, Tumblr is positioned as a "safe space" because of its reputation as a space conducive to counterpublic address, as well as the sense of privacy produced by the technological affordances of the site. Building upon these claims, I argue that my participants' positioning of Tumblr as a safe space to engage with feminist fandom without fear of judgement counters recent claims within fan studies about the mainstreaming and increasing acceptance of fandom and fan cultures within the twenty-first century (Jenkins 2006a, 2007, Coppa 2014, Jenner 2017, Booth and Kelly 2013, Gray et al. 2007).

In the final section of this chapter on non-belonging, however, I explore responses from my participants which trouble these dominant understandings of belonging within feminist fandom. These responses grant us insight into the social processes of inclusion and exclusion that unevenly distribute access to belonging within feminist fandom. They highlight how normative assumptions

about gender and race (re)produce non-belonging. In doing so, these accounts interrogate the positioning of belonging as an ideal state, revealing both the inherent contradictions contained within my participants' dominant understanding of belonging to feminist fandom as well as the interplay and fluidity between categories of belonging and non-belonging. My participants' accounts of (non-)belonging captured in the final section of this chapter disrupt normative assumptions within fan studies scholarship about fandom as inherently progressive or resistant (Coppa 2014). My analysis subsequently contributes to an emergent body of literature which examines and interrogates the structuring force of whiteness within both fannish (Pande 2018, Woo 2018, Warner 2018, Morimoto 2018) and feminist online spaces (Daniels 2016, Loza 2014).

"I feel like I'm amongst equals": Imagined Community and Affective Belonging

The most prominent theme across my participants' accounts of feminist fandom was the importance of online community to their sense of belonging. As Sarah (#64), for example, explained, "That sense of community is, to me, one of the most integral aspects of fandom. I can't really consider myself part of a fandom unless I'm engaging on a pretty deep level with other people in it." Morgan (#322) similarly positioned community membership as the "primary experience of being involved in fandom." The term "community", as well as synonyms and derivatives such as "communal" and "collective", were mentioned over three hundred times across my data set, and many responses established strong demarcations between the first subjective appearance of individual fannish identities and first "real" encounters with fandom through access to a community of fans. Belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of feminist fans, based not in geographic proximity but in mutual recognition of shared practices, identifications, and norms, is thus highly important and meaningful to my participants. Community, in this sense, 'exists in the *minds* of its members' (Cohen 1985, 98; my emphasis).

The concept of community has been taken up in many iterations within fan studies (Jenkins 1992, Baym 2000, Bury 2005, Hellekson and Busse 2006, Sandvoss and Kearns 2014), and Morimoto and Chin (2017) observe that the understanding of media fandoms as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) forms a 'central truism' (174) of English-language fan studies. They add that the concept of imagined community within contemporary fan studies foregrounds 'the transborder, transnational reach of the Internet in creating a sense of a simultaneous, shared popular culture experience' (174). My research includes participants from 39 countries in total, although the vast majority were from Anglophone countries in the Global North. Nevertheless, the understanding of fandom as an imagined transnational and transborder community rooted in shared popular cultural experience was articulated by a number of my respondents. Florangel (#9), for example, explained that she loved fandom because of "how united and connected I felt with people from many different backgrounds and places in the world." Likewise, HelloMissSunshine (#8) told me that she enjoys "the open and friendly community from all over the world," and TheGirlNoOneKnows5 (#61) wrote that she loves fandom because it provides a way to "communicate" and "share interests" with "people from all over the world that you may never have met otherwise."

For Laura (#40), the benefits of belonging to a seemingly transnational community of feminist fans were twofold: "I like it because it includes people from all around the world and it gives you that bit of anonymity that makes you feel safe even if you are talking/interacting with people you don't know personally." Laura not only values the understanding of fandom as a transcultural space, she also values the relative anonymity that it affords. For Laura, the sense of anonymity within an imagined community of fans helped her to feel a sense of safety. The importance of "feeling safe" within Laura's response highlights the interplay between both the relational and affective content of belonging (see Murphy 2011, May 2011).[26] While the invocation of a 'sense of belonging' is itself affective (see Ferreday 2011), belonging is often described in affective terms as feeling 'safe' (Ignatieff 2001) or feeling a 'sense of ease' (May 2011, 2013, Miller 2003, Lugones 1990), and many of my

participants articulated their understandings of the imagined community of feminist fans using similar affect-laden descriptions that evoke safety, comfort, and ease. Twenty-three-year-old Alicia (#128), for example, explained that it "felt cosy and nice", Alejandra (#16) described the community as "supportive", and tiny-steve (#232) described it as "welcoming". Similarly, Sabrina (#205) used the phrase "family-like feeling" to refer to her experiences, while Renee (#42) described the community as marked by a "feeling of union". These affect-laden descriptions produce a sense of closeness, trust, and connection that are important to the constitution and maintenance of feminist fandom as an imagined community.

Many of my participants emphasised the importance of feminist fandom as a space to connect with "like-minded" people and forge new friendships based on mutual recognition. As Gauntlett (2000, 13) notes, coming into close proximity with 'like-minded people' online is crucial to the formation of online communities (also see Korobkova 2014, Mendes et al. 2019). Elly (#108), for example, explained how her engagement with fanfiction led her to engage with a community of like-minded fans who shared her tastes, practices, interests, and worldview. For Elly, connecting with like-minded fans produced powerful feelings of inclusion and recognition:

> I found the fanfiction community and started reading everything – good, bad, great, awful. And then I started talking to the people behind the stories. They are awesome. I feel like I'm amongst equals of the mind and it doesn't matter who we are on the other side of the screen. (Elly, #108)

Beyond shared interests, one important criteria for determining like-mindedness across these responses was through a sense of shared 'affective practice' (Wetherell 2012) between oneself and other members of the imagined community of feminist fans. Many participants emphasised the significance of not only interacting with "like-minded" people, but more specifically interacting with "people who *felt the same way*" (theclexachronicles, #80; my emphasis). Here, the sense of *shared feeling,* of shared affect, within feminist fandom is crucial to theclexachronicles' sense of belonging, weaving together both the affective and the relational. Indeed, both feminism and fandom have been described as deeply affective. As numerous

fan studies scholars have highlighted, affect plays a key role in the formation of both individual and collective fannish identities (Duffett 2013, Grossberg 1992a, Sandvoss 2011, Busse 2013, Stein 2015), and intense affective experience is fundamental to the formation and operation of media fandom (Stein 2018, 2015). Similarly, feminist theorist Hemmings (2012, 150) asserts that affect 'gives feminism its life', and Stanley and Wise (1993, 66) highlight that 'feminism appeals because it means something – it touches deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions.' It is 'suffused with feelings, passions, and emotions' (Gorton 2007, 345). Fandom and feminism can thus be understood as intensely affective, and for many of my participants the shared experience of these 'affective intensities' (Papacharissi 2014) formed an important aspect of belonging to an imagined community constituted by both its *fannish* and *feminist* valences. As McCracken (2017, 153; my emphasis) notes, Tumblr users are 'bonded primarily by common, passionate affective *and* progressive interests.'

Across their responses to my survey, my participants used a wide range of terms, both positive and negative, to describe their affectively charged engagements with the fantext and with feminist fandom. These include, for example, terms such as "happy", "overwhelmed", "thrilled", "excited", "awe", "love", "enjoy", "hate", "touched", "passion", "fascinating", "annoyed", "obsessed", "adore", "squee", "frustrated", and "upset". Zellieh (#87), for instance, reported feeling "overjoyed" upon discovering fandom, while Lane (#63; original emphasis) explained that she was "THRILLED" to discover other fans like her. Similarly, theclexachronicles (#80) reported feeling "awe and general happiness when realising that there were fellow people out there feeling the same way as me." Here, the affective intensities produced by these feelings of recognition fulfil the desire for attachment that Probyn (1996) argues is central to belonging. Not only do these accounts support May's (2013, 93) assertion that 'a sense of belonging can lead to experiences of joy, contentment, happiness, or fulfilment,' they also demonstrate how the act of articulating emotional states can create imagined communities of feeling (Ferreday 2011, 2003).

Two of the most prominent shared affective states that emerged across the responses were both *passion* and *anger.* Passion most often emerged in reference to participants' shared interest in the fantext, wherein a sense of belonging was expressed in relation to the recognition of shared passion toward the practice of consuming and producing the fantext. Seventeen-year-old Max (#112), for example, explained:

> Fandom is something that is very present in my everyday life, ... it's something my friends are also involved in. I feel like fandom can be a wonderful thing that brings people closer and has them bond over stories, and characters they both love and/or identify with. (Max, #112)

Here, Max emphasises how shared passion for the fantext can "bring people closer", wherein shared passion for the fantext becomes a source of connection and bonding between fans. The feelings of contentment produced by this are clear through Max's description of this as a "wonderful thing" that is very present in their everyday life. Similarly, Morgan (#322) also articulated a sense of belonging not only through shared interest but through a shared *passion* for the fantext. Morgan emphasised that the expansion of his "sense of connectedness to others through the things I had passions for" was central to his involvement in media fandom, going so far as to describe it as his "primary experience" of fandom. The recognition of shared passion and the feelings of connectedness it produces is thus important to a sense of belonging within feminist fandom.

On the other hand, many of my participants also explained how important shared anger and frustration is to their sense of belonging within the feminist fan community. Sarah (#308), for example, explained the feeling of catharsis produced by discovering other fans who shared her sense of frustration with the object of fandom. A fan of the American fantasy-drama television series *Supernatural* (2005-2020)[27], she wrote that:

> I got sucked into the [Supernatural] fandom because I was no longer satisfied with the content and tried to reach out and see if other people felt the same way. I honestly thought I was the only one in the world to be depressed because of a TV show, so it was a nice surprise to find other people who took it as personally as I did. (Sarah, #308)

Above, she describes the importance of connecting with like-minded fans who shared her feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction towards the object of fandom. Discovering other fans who also felt so intensely about the show was a "nice surprise", and helped to reduce her sense of isolation. The recognition of these intensely affective states in others, who "took it as personally as I did", thus provided an important sense of belonging for Sarah. As Ferreday (2011) notes, such moments of recognition often come to be articulated as a sense of belonging. Affective belonging to an imagined community of fans therefore rests on the recognition of shared intense affects that are not only positive (joy, celebration, passion) but also negative (anger, frustration, upset).

As I previously argued, fandom can operate as an interpretative tool to *make sense of* feminism, as well as *make feminist sense* of fandom and all that it encompasses. In turn, many of my participants made sense of, organised, and articulated, their shared affective investments in the fantext through feminist frameworks. When I asked Sarah (#308), for example, to elaborate on the feelings of frustration that she shared with other fans, she explained that many of her frustrations coalesced around a central "feminist debate" within the community of *Supernatural* fans to which she belongs: "where are the women and why do they keep dying?". Here, Sarah frames fans' shared feelings of frustration with the fantext through feminist discourses about cultural representations and media critique.

Across the survey responses, this process of articulating shared affects through feminist frameworks applied to feelings of anger and frustration as much as it did passion, and in many cases my participants reported feeling both passion and anger, often simultaneously, towards the fantext. This is typical of the kinds of impassioned fourth-wave feminist critique that I discussed in Chapter 1. Media fandom is marked by expressions of both 'frustration and fascination' (Jenkins 2006a, 247), as my participants' experiences confirm, just as feminist popular culture critique can be characterised by its displays of 'outrage and delight' (Piepmeier 2009, 174). Molly (#342), for example, explained how belonging to a community of feminist fans provides her with a space to work through shared feelings of both passion and anger towards the fantext with like-minded fans who also *make feminist*

sense of the fantext. Her fannish affective investments in popular cultural texts are subsequently framed and articulated through feminist discourses about cultural representations:

> Fandom is a great way to keep track of what media is known for good female characters and which media continues to be really horrible to its female characters. It's a way to vent to like-minded people about franchises you love, and how much you wish they would do better on representation of women and minorities. (Molly, #342)

For my participants, the affective intensities of their fannish investments in texts are organised and reproduced by their feminism, and vice versa. Furthermore, for participants such as Zellieh (#87), the affective intensities produced by their fannish investment in media texts and those produced by their identities as feminists are indistinct. As Zellieh reflected, "there was never a fannish experience for me that was separate from criticism and analysis of the source media, and that naturally included feminism, equal rights, representation, and racism and homophobia, etc." Autumn (#31) similarly emphasised the reciprocity between her fandom and her feminism, highlighting the pleasure she derives from engaging in feminist commentary and critique with an imagined community of like-minded fans:

> Many of the fandoms I'm involved in have something to do with feminism, whether it's just the fans themselves or also the content we love. In the fandom, I love discussing the importance of representation, and listening and learning from people about their thoughts and experiences. (Autumn, #31)

Shared feminist interpretative frameworks thus operate as a way for participants like Sarah, Molly, Zellieh, and Autumn to organise their affective investments in texts and connect with like-minded fans. It is in this sense that Grossberg (1992b) argues that affect organises and structures *why things matter*. Within the imagined community of feminist fandom, then, connection with "like-minded" fans rests not only on shared interests and the recognition of shared affective investments in the objects of fandom, but also on the affective force produced by shared feminist identities, and how these feminist identities influence one's relationship to and interpretation of the fantext – be

that through feelings of fascination or frustration. Feminist fandom is thus imagined by my participants as a fruitful space to engage and establish connections with other "like-minded" fans who share their affective investments in feminist causes as much as they do fannish ones. Building upon the work of Hemmings (2012), Keller et al. (2016) refer to such feminist connections rooted in shared emotional responses as a form of 'affective solidarity' which, they argue, can provide comfort and connection. This was certainly true for my participants, who positioned shared feelings and emotional responses as central to the production and maintenance of an imagined community of feminist fans.

Lauren Berlant's notion of intimate publics subsequently offers a useful framework for understanding the complexities of affective belonging within feminist fandom. Berlant (2008, viii) argues that the intimacy of an 'intimate public' lies in 'the expectation that consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (original emphasis). Thus, Renee's (#42) description of a "feeling of union", or Morgan's (#322) description of feeling a "sense of connectedness to others through the things I had passions for" adhere to this understanding of shared emotional and cultural knowledge derived from common experience central to Berlant's notion of an intimate public. Moreover, the expectation of a shared worldview also mirrors my participants' expectation of like-mindedness central to their understanding of feminist fandom as an imagined community. Berlant (2008) later adds:

> An intimate public is an achievement. Whether linked to women or other non-dominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x.* (Berlant 2008, viii)

Berlant's characterisation of intimate publics easily fits my participants' experiences of affective belonging within feminist fandom, in that it accounts for their understanding of feminist fandom as a place where like-minded strangers with shared affects, affinities, knowledge, and experiences come together and experience a sense of belonging. Moreover, the concept of the

intimate public encapsulates a ‘common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community’ (Berlant 2008, 10) in a manner that also speaks to my participants’ common sense of belonging to an *imagined community.*

However, while Berlant’s notion of intimate publics offers a useful framework to consider my participants’ accounts of affective belonging within feminist fandom, it does not account for their spatial understandings of belonging to feminist fandom. In the following section, I revisit Nancy Fraser’s (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics to explore how my participants’ pursuit of connection with an imagined community of like-minded fans works to discursively produce spatial understandings of belonging to feminist fandom.

“I love the way Tumblr makes me feel safe to be myself”: Spatial Belonging on Tumblr

In Chapter 3, I examined the self-narratives produced by my participants which locate Tumblr as an important space for the development of young people’s feminist identities. My participants’ situated the platform as their first sustained point of contact with feminist frameworks, concepts, and discourses. It is therefore not surprising that they subsequently reported seeking out an imagined community of like-minded feminist fans on the platform, particularly given that the need to connect with like-minded people (Enli and Thumim 2012) and feel a sense of belonging has been cited as a significant motivator for use of social networking sites (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012, Agosto et al. 2012). My participants’ pursuit of connection with an imagined community of like-minded fans produces understandings of belonging to feminist fandom that are not only *affective* but *spatial.*

Many scholars have noted that affective dimensions of belonging are often articulated through spatial frameworks. The experience of belonging within particular spaces is, for example, marked by what Thrift (2004) describes as ‘intensities of feeling’, or what Anderson (2009) calls the ‘affective atmospheres’ of place (also see Brennan 2004, McCann and Southerton 2019). Affective belongings can subsequently ‘stick’ (Ahmed 2004a) to specific

spaces, and the affective component of belonging is often 'spatially situated' (Carrillo 2005, 26). Sociologists of youth suggest that virtual spaces are particularly important for young people to negotiate their identities and develop a sense of belonging (boyd 2014, Ito et al. 2009, Bennett 2004, Bennett and Robards 2014), and online communities have in turn been described as fostering place-connected identities and belongings (Habib and Ward 2019, Baym 2015). This has been explored, for instance, in relation to both feminist (Miño-Puigcercós et al. 2019, Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a) and fannish (Stein 2015) online communities. Young people's sense of belonging within these spaces is frequently theorised using spatial metaphors and frameworks (Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008, Lincoln 2012, 2014, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2004). Within fan studies, for example, online fandom has been characterised as a feminist room of one's own (Bury 2005, Busse 2006, Warner 2015), while feminist scholars including Larson (2016), Retallack et al. (2016), and Keller (2016b) have positioned social networking and microblogging websites, including Tumblr, as 'safe spaces' for feminist consciousness-raising.

One of the most significant ways that my participants constructed a sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr was by positioning the platform as a *safe space.* While I briefly explored the importance of feeling "safe" to affective belonging earlier, it is worth considering in more detail with regards to the concept of spatial belonging. Initially emerging out of feminist, queer, and anti-racist social movements in the late-twentieth century, the concept of the safe space, as Kenney (2001, 24) explains, refers to 'a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance.' More recently, the concept has been adopted as a framework to explore feminist understandings of 'safe spaces' within a digital context (Miño-Puigcercós et al. 2019, Clark-Parsons 2018, Keller 2016a, Shaw 2013). The repeated, almost ritualistic, invocation of Tumblr as a "safe space" across my survey responses suggests that, for my participants, Tumblr provides them with the sense that they are able to openly discuss experiences, share interests and information, and connect with like-minded fans "without shame" (Tabitha, #185), and "without fear of being judged" (happyb33ps, #284). For example, when reflecting upon her experiences with feminist fandom on Tumblr, Alicia (#128)

noted the sense of solidarity she felt with other fans who "were all like me and wanted to just talk about something they liked without being judged." Happyb33ps (#284) similarly positioned Tumblr as a "way to connect with likeminded people and to enthuse about passions without fear of being judged."

Across many of these responses, my participants express fear about being negatively judged by peers due to their participation in fandom as well as their feminist identities. As many scholars have noted, the forms of transformative fandom associated primarily with girls and young women are often subject to public ridicule based on negative fan stereotypes that are inherently gendered (Busse 2013, Scott 2011, 2019, Pinkowitz 2011, Dare-Edwards 2015, Cann 2015, 2018, Hannell 2020a). As Gray (1999) highlights, there has frequently been a gendered element to the pathologisation of the fan, and girls' and young women's fandom is cast in 'disparaged terms' (Pomerantz 2008, 50). Behaviour perceived as fundamentally irrational, excessively emotional, and passive has made the fan decisively, normatively feminine and youthful – leading to what Dare-Edwards (2015), building upon Jensen's (1992) notion of 'fandom as pathology', describes as '*fangirl* as pathology'. Anti-fandom is often configured explicitly along gendered lines, through which the affective intensities of fandom are 'criticised for being *too girly* or *too juvenile*' (Busse 2013, 76; my emphasis). My participants' fear of judgement can thus be interpreted in relation to this broader cultural context.

Moreover, these negative fan stereotypes can be understood in contrast to broader debates in fan studies about the mainstreaming and acceptability of fandom and fannish practices in the twenty-first century (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, Sandvoss 2005). For example, Booth and Kelly (2013, 69) argue that the visibility of online fandoms in the twenty-first century has had a 'mainstreaming' effect, making fan cultures a '*more visible* and thus *more acceptable* a cultural identity' (original emphasis). Elsewhere, fandom has been described as the dominant mode of consumption in late modernity (Gray et al. 2007, Jenkins 2006a), leading to the 'fanification' (Nikunen 2007) of media audiences. For instance, fans are increasingly hailed as a lucrative target market (Jenkins 2007)[28], and the sharing economy of fandom is often

used as a key method for marketing texts (Affuso 2018). Jenner (2017) draws upon the phenomenon of 'binge-watching' as an example of the mainstreaming of fandom. She argues that the contemporary media environment strongly encourages fan-like behaviours such as binge-watching and live-tweeting in ways that blur the lines between fans and non-fans (see Gray 2003). For Jenner (2017, 314), binge-watching typifies the process wherein fan discourses and practices, as well as a 'close audience-text relationship', are adopted as mainstream media practice. Through the normalisation of such behaviours, fannish practices, such as binge-watching and engaging in detailed close analysis of a text, that enable audience-text closeness are increasingly positioned as a form of 'socially legitimised excess' (317). Many fan studies scholars have built upon these debates about the mainstreaming of fandom to dispute Henry Jenkins' (1992, 23) early claim that 'to speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticised.' However, my participants' fear of being negatively judged for their participation in fandom highlights the limits of debates about the mainstreaming of fandom, particularly for young people, and those with other intersecting marginalised identities, who engage in transformative fandom. My participants' positioning of Tumblr as a safe space where they can enjoy common understanding and acceptance with like-minded fans without fear of judgement, of alignment with negative fan stereotypes, thus adheres to Kenney's (2001) understanding of safe spaces as spaces containing a certain license to speak and act freely. Moreover, it also affirms Scott's (2019, 13) assertion that fan culture's broader shift from the 'margins to the mainstream' has been unevenly distributed, having (re)produced a 'structured secondariness' (5) for fangirls, fans of colour, and queer fans and their preferred modes of engagement with popular culture.

For my participants, the sense of freedom to act without fear of judgement on Tumblr produced a sense of comfort, security, and ease central to their sense of spatial belonging. Seventeen-year-old Camila (#107), for example, emphasised the feeling of safety and freedom on Tumblr, writing that, "I love the way Tumblr makes me feel safe to be myself, to show how weird I really

am." For Camila, the sense of safety she experiences on Tumblr reduces the fear of judgement and thus mitigates the need for practices of self-censorship, allowing her to feel safe to "be myself." The ability to "be myself" is something that Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter's (2014b) participants also emphasised in relation to participating in media fandom on Tumblr.

Many of the survey responses which emphasised this sense of comfort and ease frequently employed spatial metaphors to position Tumblr as a "home". Tiny-steve (#232), for example, noted that, while she has been less active in fandom in recent years since graduating from university, Tumblr nevertheless "was home for a very long time, the people on my dashboard providing familiarity and comfort." Bobbisnose (#251) also positioned Tumblr using similar discursive themes, noting that while she has "been on and off it since high school," she ultimately "never really found anywhere else I can comfortably fit in." Rebecca (#129) similarly remarked that "Tumblr remains my home base," while Lily (#53) explained that Tumblr "still has my community on there. It's my place." Here, participants describe their experiences of belonging within feminist fandom through descriptions of Tumblr as a *built space,* as not only a "safe space", but a "place" and a "home". Belonging within feminist fandom is thus both spatially and temporally situated. Notably, similar understandings of Tumblr have been articulated within fan studies. Stein (2018, 87), for instance, makes use of spatial metaphors to describe the relationship between fan communities and Tumblr, remarking that the platform 'remained (and remains) a home to fan communities.' As many sociologists have noted, belonging is often discursively associated with the trope of home through the entrenched understanding of belonging as 'feeling at home' (Yuval-Davis 2006, Fortier 2000, May 2011, 2013, Ferreday 2011, hooks 2009). In my participants' accounts of spatial belonging, their framing of Tumblr as a "home" produces an understanding of Tumblr as a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, safety, security, ease, and emotional attachment. In doing so, the affective experience of feelings of comfort and safety become anchored to Tumblr, and spatial belonging on the site subsequently has a deeply affective character. As Kuntsman (2012, 6) notes, internet sites can in this sense operate as 'objects and anchors of feeling'.

Many of my participants positioned Tumblr as a safe space because of its 'platform vernacular' (Gibbs et al. 2015) as a multimodal, multivocal, and multiplicitous site whose users are committed to 'social justice' (see Sills et al. 2016, Guillard 2016, Schwartz 2016, Stein 2018, McCracken 2017, Kohnen 2018). Gibbs et al. (2015) emphasise that platform vernaculars emerge as the result of the interaction between, on the one hand, the technological affordances of particular digital platforms and, on the other, the mediated practices and communicative habits of the users of the platform. They emerge from *within* platforms through the interaction between technological affordances and use (Warfield 2016). For many of my participants, the platform vernacular of Tumblr, the unique combination of both affordances and use, positions it as a safe space for feminist fans to openly discuss experiences, share interests and information, and connect with like-minded people. Sanne (#155), for instance, explained that Tumblr is her favourite digital platform because the interface enables her to easily combine her interests within a singular space. She explained, "Tumblr has been my favourite platform so far because there's a mix of different things that I enjoy: fan-related content, feminist/social justice content and also very importantly, lots and lots of deadly funny content." Sanne's sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr, then, relies not only on the wide range of content produced and circulated by its users but on the ways in which Tumblr's technological affordances enable this content to circulate and 'spread' (Jenkins et al. 2013). Similarly, jokesandgays (#163) explained:

> I like that Tumblr is anonymous ... and it's just kind of a space where I can dump all of that stuff without needing to sift through it or worry about how to present it. My blog is also a hot mess, it's my personal blog and a political blog and a fandom blog all at once, so that also makes it easier in that I don't have to worry about fitting a theme or anything else. (jokesandgays, #163)

While I will examine the importance of anonymity and privacy to spatial belonging in more detail shortly, here jokesandgays more broadly highlights how the interaction between affordances and use produced particular modes of expression central to her sense of belonging on the platform. Like Sanne,

jokesandgays draws attention to the value in being able to mix up a range of personal and political material on her blog, and the sense of freedom this affords in terms of self-expression. She explains, “It’s my personal blog and a political blog and a fandom blog all at once.” Sanne and jokesandgays thus position their Tumblr blogs as multiplicitous repositories of their interests, emphasising the ease with which they mix up personal and political interests and modes of expression in a manner that echoes Harris’ (2008b) description of online DIY cultures discussed in Chapter 1.

One of the most important communicative aspects of Tumblr’s platform vernacular is the prevalence of discourses about feminism and social justice on the platform. As noted earlier, the networked nature of Tumblr brings discourses of media fandom, feminist activism, and media consumption into contact with each other (McCracken 2017, Naylor 2016, Hillman et al. 2014a), and, for my participants, the prevalence of feminist discourses across Tumblr is central to their sense of safety and spatial belonging. Sahvana (#321), for example, described Tumblr as her “primary fandom platform”, and explained how the “attitude towards social issues that Tumblr [users] generally [have]” makes her “feel safe”:

> When I first forayed into fandom, I used Facebook group pages for a brief amount of time. I quickly transitioned exclusively to Tumblr, which is my primary fandom platform. It feels like an actual community, I like the aesthetic, I like the dashboard setup, and most importantly I prefer the attitude towards social issues that Tumblr generally has. Tumblr's general commitment towards reacting against bigotry has kept my fandom experience "clean" so to speak and has made it infinitely more enjoyable. Without Tumblr, I don't think I'd be able to stay as involved in fandom ... I feel safe with the commitment Tumblr has towards speaking out against injustice and bigotry. (Sahvana, #321)

Sahvana constructs an opposition between the “attitude towards social issues” on Tumblr and other social media platforms, such as Facebook, explaining that she much prefers engaging with fandom on Tumblr because of the platform’s “general commitment towards reacting against bigotry”. Sahvana’s response positions the integration of a feminist social justice politic into media

fandom as a central to Tumblr's platform vernacular, and as an important aspect of her sense of spatial belonging. Additionally, Sahvana's emphasis on the sense of safety and comfort produced by Tumblr users' active commitment to "speaking out against injustice and bigotry" adheres to The Roestone Collective's (2014, 1348) understanding of a 'safe space' as a form of 'relational work'. Their relational understanding of safe spaces accounts for the situatedness and multiplicity of the concept, and allows an understanding of safe spaces as the fluid and reflexive result of interpersonal social processes, much like those described by Sahvana. Across their responses to my survey, many of my participants perform a willingness to undertake the relational work required to create and maintain their understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as a safe space, particularly with regards to reflexively *listening* and *learning* as part of their processual and ongoing feminist becoming. Recall, for example, Josie's (#227) willingness to "check myself and learn/unlearn new ways of thinking." This is something that I will explore in more depth in Chapter 5.

Moreover, such an understanding of Tumblr's platform vernacular, as a space committed to open and progressive dialogue about pertinent social issues, adheres to Nancy Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of 'subaltern counterpublics', as 'parallel discursive arenas' (67) that elaborate alternative styles of political behaviour and norms of public speech' (61). Indeed, as I noted in Chapter 1, the analysis of online feminist communities often draws upon Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics, and Tumblr has been described as particularly conducive to 'counterpublic address' (Renninger 2015, 1513) through its communicative 'affinity with social justice dialogues' (Sills et al. 2016), as well as various technological affordances which I shall discuss in more detail shortly. As I argued in Chapter 3, fan-created paratexts circulated on Tumblr can prompt powerful processes of transformation in fans' development of a feminist identity, providing fans with a framework through which they come to both *make sense of* feminism as well as *make feminist sense* of texts. This process adheres to Fraser's conceptualisation of counterpublics as spaces that permit members of subordinated social groups to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to

formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990, 67). While, due to the nature of my research, many of my participants discussed the process of formulating oppositional interpretations of their identities with regards to their feminism, many also referred to other salient aspects of their identities. Alex (#278), a bisexual and transgender man, for example, explained how fandom called his attention to a myriad of social issues and subsequently led him to reinterpret his own identities, interests, and needs. While he cautions against the tendency to ascribe utopian forms of resistance to fandom (which I shall discuss in more detail shortly), Alex nevertheless describes fandom as his prototypical safe space:

> Fandom is where I met people against bi-erasure, not my first LGBT groups IRL/in meatspace. Fandom is where I met my first trans mentors, genderqueer folks, other spoonies, and we could hear each other out without reservations or doubts. It is not a perfect space and there are many problems, ... and overall we fans are less "woke" than we pat ourselves on the back for -- but it was a safe space for me before I knew about the idea of safe spaces. It helped me question. (Alex, #278)

Many of my participants emphasised the importance of privacy to spatial belonging on the platform. This is in part due to the technological affordances of the site, as well as the broader privacy norms of fandom. My participants' sense of privacy on Tumblr thus emerges from the interaction between technological affordances and use, and can be considered as another important aspect of the site's platform vernacular. Unlike social networking sites such as Facebook, where explicit 'identity cues' (Baym 2015), including one's real name, age, location, occupation, relationship status, etc., are required for meaningful participation, the only identity information Tumblr requires a user to provide is their age, email address, and a username. Tumblr therefore affords users a high level of control over their self-presentation that many other social networking sites do not (see boyd 2012, Renninger 2015). The Tumblr platform interface does not seek to engineer self-presentation by providing pre-determined sets of identity categories through which users are expected to build digital identities. Instead, it operates as a relatively 'sparse-cue' (Baym 2015, 130) platform which affords users a high level of control over

the identity information they disclose. This is something my participants highly valued. As joslynnyc (#157) noted, “I appreciate that there is less expectation on Tumblr to reveal details of yourself [in real life], there is more [of] a culture of anonymity.”

What is invoked in many of these accounts of spatial belonging is the construction of spaces both real and virtual which are imagined, or in some cases lived, as either *less safe* or *unsafe* (see The Roestone Collective 2014) compared to Tumblr. Unlike multi-generational platforms such as Facebook, where a user’s profile is associated with one’s real name and tightly wedded to unmediated social communities based on familial, educational, and occupational networks (see van Dijck 2013), the technological affordances of Tumblr enable young people to create ‘firewalls of visibility’ (Jenkins, Ito, et al. 2016, 57) and evade surveillance from peers and adults (Marwick and boyd 2014, Shorey 2015, McCracken 2017, boyd 2014, Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). Recent studies have indeed noted the discomfort many young people experience using Facebook due to the risk of being monitored by adults in their lives (Madden et al. 2013). For many of my participants, the perceived risk of surveillance by peers and adults on platforms such as Facebook is compounded by the fear of negative judgement and alignment with negative fan stereotypes that I discussed earlier. As Dinah (#98), for example, explained:

> I never use Facebook for fandom purposes … because Facebook is my most public profile, in my opinion. I'm friends with family friends, my mom's co-workers, distant family members, etc. I don't want the parts of me I hold dear-especially more controversial parts-on that profile. (Dinah, #98)

Moreover, as I discussed in my Chapter 2, while Tumblr is not a closed-access or password-protected site, and users can even browse through personal blogs and tracked tags without an account, many online fan spaces are commonly perceived as semi-public, if not private, and therefore as safe from censorship and incursion from those unfamiliar with fannish norms and practices (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, Busse and Hellekson 2012). Many

scholars have explored how fannish identities and practices can restructure notions of public/private (Harrington and Bielby 1995, Duffett 2013, Zubernis and Larsen 2012), and, within fandom on Tumblr, participants are expected to adhere to an 'implicit code of conduct' (boyd 2014, 35) that privileges an expectation of privacy (Shorey 2015, McCracken 2017). To expose a fellow fan through the loss of privacy without their consent is considered a gross 'norm violation' (McLaughlin and Vitak 2011) on Tumblr. Exposure can seriously undermine one's sense of comfort, safety, and belongingness within feminist fandom. For example, twenty-year-old Sarah, following the discovery of her Tumblr blog by acquaintances she knew in real life, subsequently withdrew from publicly engaging in fandom for three years:

> When I was 14, I withdrew from public fandom activity due to my Tumblr being discovered by acquaintances I knew in real life, though I still wrote (or attempted to write; a vast majority of the stories I attempted were never finished) fic in private. I spent a few years lurking extensively through so many fandoms ... I didn't start publicly posting my work again until I was 17. (Sarah, #64)

The sense of privacy afforded by Tumblr and the feelings of spatial belonging it produces is important to my participants precisely because it, to a certain extent, reduces the risk of exposure to the negative fan stereotypes I discussed earlier by those unfamiliar with the norms, values, and practices of feminist fandom. My participants' descriptions of adverse reactions to their fandom from peers and acquaintances, or their fear of exposure to their friends, family, and colleagues, once again highlights the limits of debates about the mainstreaming of fandom. As joslynnyc (#157) explained, the sense of privacy afforded by Tumblr "allow[s] a pure expression of fannish love that I think is less possible on [other platforms] unless you have a protected or entirely anonymous account." Indeed, previous research on the relationship between anonymity and self-disclosure online indicates that users who feel a stronger sense of anonymity often feel that they can self-disclose more freely, more often, and more intensely than they would in person (Suler 2004). This is reflected in joslynnyc's comments, and she later added, "Tumblr was the

first place I truly saw fans be their unbound, unapologetic fangirl selves, so I will always be grateful for it for that alone."

While, as Sarah's (#64) experience indicates, the privacy norms and technological affordances of Tumblr cannot definitively protect users from exposure or harm, more broadly my participants' affectively experience Tumblr as feeling *more private* and thus *more safe* than other online spaces. The sense of privacy afforded by the architecture of Tumblr, as well as its reputation as a platform conducive to counterpublic address, thus demarcates the platform as a safe space and as an important site of spatial belonging for my participants. The discursive construction of Tumblr as a safe space by my participants can subsequently be understood in contrast to their broader understanding of other online spaces as *less safe,* if not entirely *unsafe.*

For my queer participants who explore their gender and sexuality through fandom, the lack of anonymity on more public platforms such as Facebook, which are more or less 'tied to the maintenance of a true identity' associated with one's 'real name' (Renninger 2015, 1519), puts them at risk of significant harm and thus positions these alternative online spaces as *unsafe* in ways that work to reinforce a sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr. For these feminist fans, the consequences of exposure to unsympathetic family members or peers are potentially severe. For Nicole (#101), a twenty-one-year-old who describes herself as queer and pansexual, visibly engaging with her queerness through feminist fandom on platforms such as Facebook could expose her to harm because of her identity as a queer and closeted young woman. For Nicole, the risk of surveillance of her online activity by family members could thus have "catastrophic consequences". The sense of privacy afforded by Tumblr is thus crucial to her sense of safety and wellbeing. She explained:

> I would never ever ever use Facebook for any fandom activity because I need to keep my private interests separate from my Facebook, especially now that I have family members as friends who can see my profile. My family isn't the most supportive of anything LGBTQ* centred and they don't know about my own orientation so I avoid posting on platforms

> where they can easily find me to avoid any suspicion/possible catastrophic consequences. (Nicole, #101)

Many scholars have explored fandom as a site for queer-identity work (Russo and Ng 2017, Lothian et al. 2007, Anselmo 2018, Hellekson and Busse 2014). For young people like Nicole, the use of fandom as a site for such queer identity work requires that the spaces in which she engages in fandom are not visible to her family members and acquaintances. For Nicole, the sense of privacy afforded by Tumblr is crucial, providing a space "to freely engage in queer content and be myself on a platform that I feel I can't really do elsewhere." Mai (#327) similarly explained:

> [Tumblr] is a huge source of support for me. Without Tumblr, I wouldn't have found my queer identity or recognised my own mental health issues. Both of those things are unknown to the people around me, making Tumblr an important safe space for self-expression, comfort and validation. (Mai, #327)

Mai's remarks reveal, once again, how the platform vernacular of Tumblr designates it as a "safe space" in ways that are central to my participants' sense of spatial belonging. For Mai, the interaction between the sense of anonymity and privacy produced by Tumblr's technological affordances, combined with the platform's popularity amongst queer and trans youth (Cho 2015, Fink and Miller 2013, Dame 2016, Mondin 2017, Wargo 2017, Cavalcante 2019) made it an important space for "self-expression, comfort and validation." As Baym (2015) notes, the anonymity afforded by sparse cue online spaces, such as Tumblr, enables people to engage in riskier acts of self-disclosure which, when affirmed, can create positive changes in people's self-concepts. For Mai, then, the anonymity afforded by Tumblr enabled her to engage in acts of self-disclosure about her queer identity which were then affirmed by other queer users on the platform.

The relationship between Tumblr's platform vernacular and spatial belonging was particularly importance for my young, queer, and *rural* participants. For example, fifteen-year-old Tizzy (#50), like many of my participants, also positioned feminist fandom on Tumblr as one of the few spaces in which she

could speak freely about her sexuality. However, she also emphasised that, as a young person living in a rural area without access to "support structures or even an LGBT+ group," her ability to "openly" engage in acts of self-disclosure about her sexuality on Tumblr was a crucial source of support. She explained:

> When I was about to turn thirteen, I started properly using [Tumblr], and I have done so since. I use the platform very often, as it is to this day my only social media profile on the major sites, and to be honest, despite many of the problems with it and the things I have seen on here, I keep using it because it is one of the only places I can talk about my sexuality really openly without making people feel uncomfortable. ... I don't live in a big town with support structures or even an LGBT+ group, so the internet, or Tumblr specifically, is pretty much the only place I can talk about things like my sexuality. (Tizzy, #50)

According to youth sociologist Mary Gray (2009), rural life for queer young people increasingly involves the types of 'entanglements' with online spaces that Tizzy describes, wherein rural queer youth use new media technologies to 'enhance their sense of inclusion to broader, imagined queer communities beyond their home towns' (Gray 2009, 15). These experiences of spatial belonging on Tumblr thus not only highlight the tightly wedded relationship between platform vernacular and notions of safety, but also how one's sense of spatial belonging is configured in accordance with one's identities.

As Bondi and Rose (2003) note, perceptions of safety are socially, spatially, and temporally contingent, varying greatly according to one's positionality, yet the idea of safety generally relies on the perception of an underlying threat of physical and/or symbolic violence. For many of my participants, the perception of such an underlying threat goes beyond both the fear of judgement and alignment with negative fan stereotypes, as well as the fear of surveillance from unsympathetic peers and adults. While my research more broadly concerns the relationship between fourth wave feminism and media fandom, feminist scholars have emphasised that we need to 'think together' (Gill 2016a, 617) the rise of popular feminism and new forms of feminist practice and activism alongside, and in tandem with, 'new mediations of gender and sexual

violence' (Phipps et al. 2017, 2). Research suggests that popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2015a, 2018) and anti-feminism (Anderson 2015) is steadily increasing, as new forms of 'networked misogyny' emerge (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015, 171).[29] Just as social networking websites can become key spaces for feminist education and activism, they can also become 'aggregators of online misogyny' (Rentschler 2014), giving rise to new forms of 'networked harassment' (Marwick and Caplan 2018, Filipovic 2007, Megarry 2014). This online misogyny is compounded when it intersects with racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism (Gray 2012b, Noble and Tynes 2016, Daniels 2009). The broader demarcation of Tumblr as a *safe* space by many of my participants is thus significant given this context.

Drawing upon this broader social and cultural context, a number of my participants' accounts of *unsafe* spaces framed their sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr through the anticipation of symbolic violence and online harassment elsewhere, particularly through reference to platforms such as Reddit and 4chan, which are discursively associated with the 'toxic technocultures' (Massanari 2017) of popular misogyny. As Nagle (2017, 69) notes, Tumblr is often positioned as 'very much the reverse mirror image' of sites such as Reddit and 4chan, and my participants' responses reinforce this. Damdamfino (#147), for example, explained, "I refuse to use Reddit. From what little experience I've had with it and from other's accounts, it seems pretty toxic. Many people I know have experienced extreme sexual and emotional harassment [there]." Likewise, Shea (#246) emphasised, "I have avoided Reddit because I have an expectation of an anti-feminist atmosphere on that platform," and Sara (#288) explained that, while she "lurks" on Reddit, "it's generally too white and/or male-dominated for me to want to engage." While these alternative digital platforms are, of course, not inherently misogynistic or anti-feminist, the hypervisibility of Reddit as a 'nexus for various toxic technocultures' (Massanari 2017, 333) nevertheless designates the space as largely *unsafe* for my participants and works to reinforce their sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr. As Portwood-Stacer (2012) notes, personal politics, as well as resistance to wider cultural phenomena, may factor into decisions to resist participation on certain social networking websites.

Throughout this section, I have examined my participants' accounts of spatial belonging to feminist fandom on Tumblr, which primarily revolve around the discursive construction of Tumblr as a safe space. Within these accounts, Tumblr is designated as a safe space due to its platform vernacular on account of both technological affordances and use. Firstly, the prevalence of discourses about feminism and social justice across the platform, in contrast to other popular social networking sites such as Facebook, are central to my participants' sense of safety and spatial belonging on Tumblr. Such an understanding of Tumblr's platform vernacular adheres to Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of subaltern counterpublics as parallel discursive arenas that enable members of marginalised social groups to develop and circulate counterdiscourses. The introduction of Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics allowed me to account for the specific ways in which my participants described their sense of spatial belonging on Tumblr as tied to the platform's reputation as a space conducive to counterpublic address. Secondly, the combination of the technological affordances of the platform, combined with the privacy norms of fandom, produces a sense of both anonymity and privacy for my participants that enables them to affectively experience Tumblr as feeling safer than other online spaces. Here, being able to participate in feminist fandom without fear of judgement and alignment with negative fan stereotypes was highly important to my participants. My participants' desire to find common understanding and acceptance with like-minded fans without fear of judgement troubles dominant narratives within fan studies that emphasise the 'mainstreaming' of fandom in the twenty-first century (Booth and Kelly 2013). My participants' experiences reveal how these narratives risk flattening difference and obscuring the extent to which this process of 'mainstreaming' has been unevenly distributed (see Scott 2019). Moreover, the role of privacy in the platform vernacular of Tumblr emerged as particularly important for my younger participants who wished to evade surveillance from their peers and adults, as well as my queer and trans participants who wanted to use fandom as a space for practices of self-expression, comfort, and validation. Within these accounts, the interaction between affordances and use produce particular modes of expression central to my participants' sense of spatial belonging.

Henceforth, the spatial, affective, and imagined notions of belonging that I have discussed represent two of the dominant and interrelated narratives of belonging that emerged across my data set. In the following section, I will explore my participants' responses which raised questions about the differential access to feelings of belonging within feminist fandom on Tumblr.

"If we're all just replicating the racist and patriarchal focus on white men, then what even is the fucking point?": Whiteness and Non-Belonging

Thus far, I have explored two interrelated narratives of belonging that represent my participants' dominant understanding of belonging to feminist fandom, focusing on the interrelated spatial, affective, and imagined notions of belonging. However, across the responses to my survey, I have also identified several counter-narratives of non-belonging. Despite my participants' shared identities as feminist fans, not every participant who responded to my research survey reported feeling an overarching sense of belonging to feminist fandom. While it is possible to identify oneself with a particular group, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016, 240; original emphasis) highlight that 'in order to belong, the question is whether the person *can* belong or not.' These counter-narratives of non-belonging thus complicate the dominant narratives of belonging detailed above in several ways. Firstly, the experiences captured within these counter-narratives highlight how the dominant narratives of belonging discursively produced by the majority of my participants' risk obscuring the social and structural barriers which can prevent access to belonging within feminist fan communities on Tumblr. Belonging, of course, *presupposes* access (Anthias 2002, Christensen 2017), and, as May (2013, 126) highlights, a focus on belonging must, in turn, be attentive to the 'barriers that may obstruct a person's ability to feel they belong.' Secondly, these experiences of non-belonging interrogate the normative positioning of belonging as an ideal state and instead offer an insight into the negotiation of more tentative, contingent, and precarious modes of 'differential belonging' (Carrillo 2005) within feminist fandom. Thirdly, they reveal the fluidity between categories of belonging and non-belonging (Savage et al. 2005, Christensen

2017), emphasising that belonging is always a dynamic, fluid, and contingent process, rather than a 'reified fixity' (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199).[30] It is in this sense that these counter-narratives highlight how the perception of a sense of community is fluid, unstable, and ephemeral (Beck 1992). Finally, these counter-narratives more broadly make the politics of belonging visible, and disrupt normative assumptions about fandom, both within fan studies and fandom itself, as an uncomplicated and inherently progressive, resistant, or emancipatory space.

Multiple non-belongings were articulated across the responses to my survey which correspond with various degrees of access to and identification with power. Several respondents articulated a lower sense of belonging, for example, due to their reduced or intermittent levels of activity within feminist fandom, subsequently describing themselves as more "passive" fans or as "lurkers" (see Preece et al. 2004). In turn, several of my participants used anxiety-laden discourses to express concern about the extent to which they felt they could claim an identity within fandom without being continuously textually productive (Fiske 1992). Here, we may return to some of the anxiety-laden discourses about regulating and improving the feminist and fannish self that I discussed in Chapter 3. MB (#228), for example, wrote, "I wouldn't really consider myself part of a fandom other than being a viewer/reader, a passive fan," and Ludmila (#125) explained, "I love fandom, but I'm kind of a passive participant, I never wrote any fanfics or produced any gifs or fanart." These fans notably replicate narratives within fan studies which operationalise a binary between participatory and non-participatory fans (Hellekson and Busse 2006), which have been criticised for devaluing and deemphasising the myriad practices engaged in by 'non-participatory' fans (see Gray et al. 2007, Sandvoss 2005, Bury 2018). Thus, fluctuations in fannish productivity and participation, in the level of contribution one makes to the production of the fantext, reduced some participants' access to a 'sense of *continuous* belonging' (Kanai 2017, 300; my emphasis), highlighting how belonging to feminist fandom is often both fluid and temporally contingent.

Meanwhile, other participants expressed concerns about language and cultural barriers preventing them from accessing feelings of belonging. For

example, the dominance of monolingual English speakers, particularly from Anglophone nations in the Global North, within feminist fandom proved daunting for a number of my participants who speak English as a second, or even third, language. Carolina (#120), a twenty-three-year-old from Brazil, for example, explained, “English is not my first language, so I have a little bit of struggle to express myself.” She later noted, “That doesn't happen when I write in Portuguese.” Similarly, Ukrainian nineteen-year-old Marichka (#86) described the feelings of alienation that result from the perceived lack of linguistic diversity on the platform, writing that, “I still find total domination of English language is what makes it feel distant and detouched for many people.”

Language barriers proved particularly troublesome for my participants within the context of engaging in discussions about feminism within fandom. Participants once again employed anxiety-laden discourses to express concern about how their communicative competence in English might hinder their ability to fully participate in feminist discussions and debates within feminist fandom. Participants such as Giorgia (#301), an Italian who speaks English as a second language, explained that “most of the time there may be a language barrier. Talking about feminism isn't easy when you're talking in a language that isn't your first language.” Similarly, a German participant named mybabysteps (#82) told me that “it's not easy for me to explain complex social issues in a language that isn't mine.” For mybabysteps, this apprehension towards engaging in feminist debate in her second language, and the resulting risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted, reduced her level of activity within feminist fandom, producing fannish practices and behaviours more in line with the “lurking” that I discussed earlier. Language barriers, she explained, are the reason “why I limit my interaction to reblogs.” Within these narratives of non-belonging, then, language barriers thus reduce access to feelings of belonging within feminist fandom. As Latina and Docherty (2014, 1104) ask, who might be excluded from participating in feminist discourse ‘by way of not knowing the languages that are being spoken?’[31]

Cultural barriers also prevented access to feelings of belonging within feminist fandom. While many of my participants emphasised the pleasures of shared

intense affective investments in predominantly Anglo-American objects of fandom, several participants subsequently expressed concern about the overwhelming focus on discussing feminist issues within a US-centric context. Belgian Dreamywritingdragon (#22), for example, noted that "lots of what we talk about is US-centric," and Norwegian Ylva (#31) lamented that "the discourse is so USA-centric in many cases it's not even funny." However, for my participants from the Global South, such as Rebecca (#129), a twenty-three-year-old from Iran, the privileging and hypervisibility of white, Western, and Anglo-American feminisms within feminist fandom produced more pronounced feelings of alienation in ways that expose the uneven distribution of power within feminist fandom. She explained:

> I still think my take on feminism is entirely different from a person living in the USA or Europe or Japan. Based on my culture and my country's history, I have some very specific factors that I as, an Iranian feminist, care about that might seem like second nature to someone elsewhere or absurd and unacceptable to another. (Rebecca, #129)

Here, Rebecca's account raises questions about the transnational and transcultural reach of the feminist discourses that circulate within media fandom. As many feminist scholars have noted, mainstream digital feminism has often excluded the voices of non-white and non-Western women (Daniels 2016, Loza 2014), and has rather myopically focused on the North American and European context (Altınay 2014, Kim 2017, Losh 2014), thus extending the forces of neocolonialisation and neoimperialism within a digital age (Maxfield 2016, Taylor and Zine 2014). Rebecca's account thus raises questions about the extent to which feminist media fandom might reinscribe these unequal digital feminist hierarchies, and the impact this may have on different feminist fans' access to belonging.

Like Rebecca, many of my participants who articulated a sense of non-belonging often did so at the level of social location, demonstrating the myriad ways in which intersecting relationships between gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and other social divisions are central to identities and belonging (Christensen 2017, Yuval-Davis 2006). As Carrillo (2005) notes, the presumption of belonging and belongingness often implicitly reproduces

dominant identity formations, such as whiteness (see Anthias 2015). Within the context of belonging, these dominant identity positions tend to be 'naturalised' (Yuval-Davis 2006), and are only articulated or interrogated when exposed by those who do not inhabit them. This is much the case for my research data. Many of my participants' accounts of non-belonging referred to the ways in which fannish spaces are often structured around the valourisation of white characters, and particularly canonically heterosexual and cisgender white men (Pande 2018). For eighties (#111), for example, the dominant focus on white and cisgender men within fan communities risks excluding fans with trans, non-binary, or genderqueer identities:

> I think that a lot of the time fandom can perpetuate stereotypes and problematic opinions without even meaning it. There are still primarily ships which only involve two males, often two cisgender, white males - which means that a lot of the approach is very inherent on the white, cisgender LGB experience, which can leave out a lot of people that don't conform to these categories. (eiqhties, #111)

Indeed, trans participant Jason (#224) explained his difficulty reconciling his fannish interests in "male/male content" with his emergent identity as a transman, explaining that:

> I have only recently discovered I am trans and I am still coming to terms with it. I am learning how my views on feminism and the female experience still affect my life, and how I view my own body since I am pre-everything. Tying that to fandom and the ships that I am interested in has also added a twist to this process. (Jason, #224)

Elsewhere, participants of colour emphasised how feminist media fandom's broader 'elevation of white characters' (Pande 2018, 94) within the fantext shapes and reinforces their sense of non-belonging. My participants of colour discussed their uneasy relationship with the lack of representation of people of colour within the fantext. For example, Ashling (#305), an Asian American twenty-three-year-old, discussed her concerns about the predominant focus on white men within the fantext and broader fan community, particularly within the context of fanfiction. She wrote:

> I am worried that fandom ... is subconsciously training people to write, think, and care about white men more at the expense of everybody else. In most fandoms, a m/m fic about white boys will get the most views, kudos, likes, reblogs, whatever. I am deeply worried about the cultural implications of this. Fanfiction can serve as a mechanism by which internalised misogyny and racism is reinforced, and that's just not what I want from it at all. (Ashling, #305)

While Ashling's critique centres fanfiction, her comments reflect broader claims about the reification of privileged racial and cultural representations within fan communities (Pande 2018, Warner 2018, 2015). Additionally, the experiences of feminist fandom captured within Ashling's responses subsequently raise questions about the extent to which my participants' emphasis on the importance of centring women in their production of the fantext, as I discussed in Chapter 3, extends to women of colour.[32] To what extent is whiteness centred as the invisible norm in the project of feminist fandom? As many scholars of critical whiteness studies have noted, whiteness tends to be invisible or unmarked to those who inhabit it (Frankenberg 1993, Dyer 1997). Yet, as Ahmed (2004b) notes, for those who do not inhabit whiteness, it has always been visible as a racialised identity. Participants of colour thus express frustration with, firstly, fandom's elevation of white characters, and, secondly, its subsequent failure to address whiteness itself 'as a racialised identity' (Pande 2018, 82). For instance, Alex (#28), a Latinx twenty-five-year-old from the United States, discussed the hostility and backlash she encounters when trying to engage in critical discussions about problematic aspects of feminist fandom when it comes to race and whiteness:

> I have dear friends who are still not all there when my feminist rant involves race. It's been very difficult to even bring up facts that whole *x* female character is treated badly, *x* female character of colour is treated worse. So that's the major issue. Tumblr has grown into this place where a conversation can't happen without insults, people don't like to feel uncomfortable and want to learn, but part of that is learning to deal with their own guilt instead of lashing out. (Alex, #28)

Alex's reference to the reluctance of (assumedly white) feminist fans to engage in dialogue about race, lest they "feel uncomfortable" adheres to Robin

DiAngelo's (2011, 2018) notion of white fragility, which has been used to explain the tendency of white people to flee from racial discomfort. White fragility, DiAngelo argues, is the 'state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves' (2011, 54). These defensive moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, or behaviours including argumentation, silence, or even flight from the racial stress-inducing situation. This becomes particularly problematic in spaces which are envisioned as progressive, such as feminist fandom, wherein 'white people's moral objection to racism increases their resistance to acknowledging their complicity within it' (DiAngelo 2018, 108). We can see these defensive moves at work in Alex's description of her white friends' feelings of guilt and subsequent "lashing out" in response to Alex's attempts to integrate an intersectional feminist framework into her participation in feminist fandom. Alex's description of her friends' reluctance, if not refusal, to engage in dialogue about these issues is significant, and it has important implications for the feelings of belonging Alex can, or rather *cannot,* access within this context. If, as Ferreday (2011) observes, belonging within online communities arises from one's willingness to engage in 'acts of self-erasure' (101), to become *unmarked* by difference, it follows that my participants' non-belongings rest precisely on their refusal to perform the role of the unmarked, and thus implicitly *white*, subject (see Frankenberg 1993, Dyer 1997). Alex's experience highlights how this refusal to go unmarked within feminist fandom can be disruptive and can produce in others the defensive moves symptomatic of white fragility.

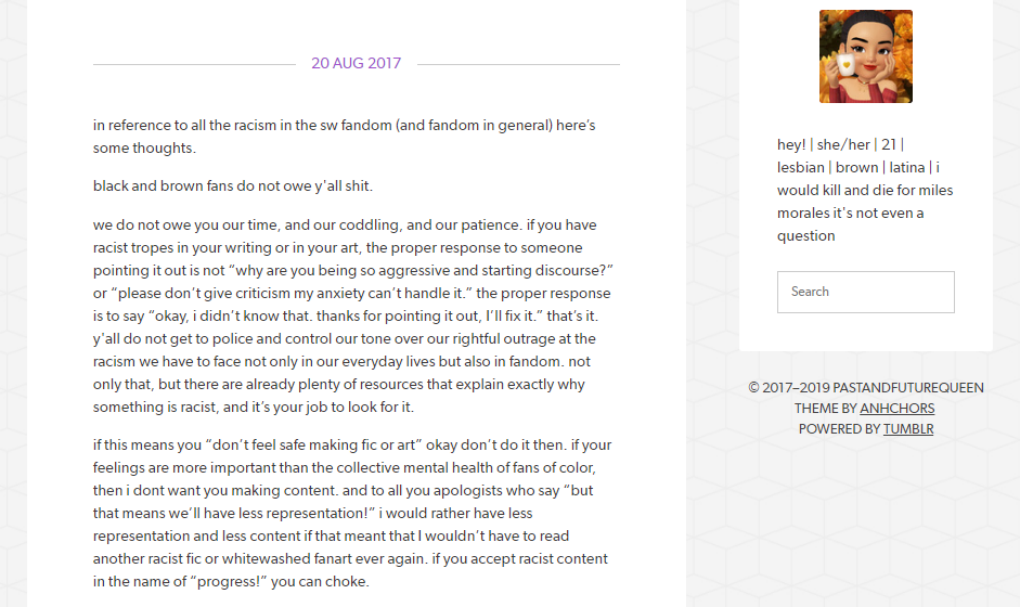

Figure 6: A blog post by pastandfuturequeen, August 2017. Featured with permission of blog owner.

These defensive moves are similarly alluded to in a Tumblr blog post by *pastandfuturequeen* (Figure 6), who expresses frustration with the strategies employed by white fans who have been criticised by fans of colour for their use of "racist tropes" in their production of the fantext. In this blog post, *pastandfuturequeen* centres her positionality as a *marked* subject, describing herself as lesbian, brown, and Latina, and emphasises that "black and brown fans ... do not owe you our time, and our coddling, and our patience." Within feminist fandom, then, the operation of white fragility works to stifle discussions which address or challenge racism, subsequently producing feelings of non-belonging for feminist fans who occupy more marginal identity positions.

According to my participants, such moments of racial tension between white fans and fans of colour often results in fans of colour relegating these critical discussions to more private fora as a strategy to mitigate exposure to the hostility produced by the defensive strategies of white fragility. It is in this sense that the platform vernacular of Tumblr does not produce feelings of safety to speak and act freely, openly discuss experiences, share interests and information, and connect with like-minded people for *all* of my participants. Thus, while feminist fandom might operate as a safe space for, say, queer (white) women to openly discuss their sexuality, as I discussed earlier, this feeling of safety does not necessarily extend to fans with other intersecting

marginalised identity positions. For example, Yasmin (#1), a mixed-raced twenty-six-year-old, explained that, despite her desire to integrate her intersectional feminism into her fandom experience on Tumblr, she noted, "often I just don't have the energy to get into prolonged debates with people, so I won't discuss these issues publicly and will usually reserve them for group messages with close friends."[33] African American nineteen-year-old bobbisnose (#251) similarly discussed the feelings of exhaustion produced by the overwhelming whiteness of feminist fandom. She lamented, "fandom is large, and many times White Feminism seems to reign, which can be exhausting. So a lot of times it's block and move on."

For Ashling (#305), the choice to continue actively engaging with feminist fandom on Tumblr in a public capacity inevitably involves employing a range of discursive strategies to alleviate the white fragility of other members of feminist fandom. Discussing her experiences running a blog exclusively for engaging with the fandom surrounding the television series *Peaky Blinders* (2013-), a British crime drama set during the early-twentieth century, she explained:

> I have one freewheeling personal blog and one blog that's strictly *Peaky Blinders*, and the way that I approach intersectional feminism on them is radically different. In the former, I mostly do what I want. In the latter, it's a predominantly white, European crowd of women, and sometimes I feel I have to be more diplomatic because there's more internalised misogyny in that crowd, a lot more irrational hating of women or double standards. Navigating that (which is a more recent project of mine) has been uncomfortable at times, and I sometimes think that if I abandon that fandom it may make life easier. Nonetheless, I've made some friends and I'm fond of the canon, so...It's just weird. I'm not sure. (Ashling, #305)

For Ashling, engaging in a predominantly white, European, and female fandom on her secondary fandom-specific blog produces engagements with "intersectional feminism" that are "radically different" to those she performs on her "personal blog." Ashling explains that she feels she has to be "more diplomatic" when engaging with feminist fandom in a predominantly white and European setting in order to accommodate the white fragility of other fans. She

describes this process of negotiating her engagement with (white) feminist fandom as “uncomfortable at times,” and even notes that she has considered abandoning fandom entirely. Ashling’s experience thus highlights how this process of negotiation can produce feelings of unease and discomfort, and subsequently generate ambivalence towards and alienation from feminist fandom, which ultimately results in feelings of non-belonging. However, her admission that she has nevertheless made some meaningful friendships within feminist fandom points to the possibility of being able to negotiate more marginal, precarious, contingent, and at times contradictory, forms of belonging to feminist fandom.

Carrillo’s (2005) conceptualisation of ‘differential belonging’, offers a useful framework to consider how my more marginal participants negotiate a more marginal sense of belonging to smaller enclaves of feminist fandom. Carrillo offers the concept of ‘differential belonging’ as a way for subjects to reverse processes of interpellation and to resist the ‘discourses of hegemonic belonging’ (28) which centre whiteness and heterosexuality. Differential belongings allow for contextual movement between various modes of belonging according to one’s needs. This process, she writes, involves negotiating the navigation ‘across such boundaries of different to build intimate knowledge of that which lies between self and other’ (38). Due to broader lack of resources, fans of colour ‘have long had to “make do” and consequently will recalibrate the limits of fandom experience to suit their own need for participation and community amongst themselves’ (Warner 2018, 256). As Pande (2018, 100) notes, marginal fans often have to employ ‘contradictory strategies’ to keep enjoying fannish spaces. Ashling’s description of modifying her behaviour to be “more diplomatic” so as to alleviate the white fragility of other Tumblr users, despite her overall understanding of feminist fandom as a mechanism through which racism may be “reinforced”, serves as a good example of such contradictory strategies. Under Carrillo’s (2005) schema, Ashling’s negotiation of this process allows for movement between various modes of belonging according to her desire to continue to meaningfully engage with the fan communities surrounding the objects of fandom in which she is invested.

Sara (#288) similarly described her process of negotiating a more differential, contingent, and precarious form of belonging to feminist fandom. While she explained that fans of colour "still have to deal with a lot of racism and sexism from fandom as a whole," feminist fandom was nevertheless important to her because it provided a space where she could establish meaningful connections and solidarities with other women of colour:

> It is the only place where I can choose to primarily engage with other WOC, which makes participating in fandom a lot more bearable. We still have to deal with a lot of racism and sexism from fandom as a whole (as well as canon content itself), but it's easier to deal with when people call it out along with you rather than call you oversensitive for critiquing it. (Sara, #288)

Such accounts highlight how the fans who cannot access the feelings of belonging captured by the dominant narratives of belonging to feminist fandom, may, under some circumstances, negotiate a more precarious, ambivalent, and marginal form of belonging to feminist fandom.

More broadly, these accounts of non-belonging and, to some extent, differential belonging, trouble how fan communities are often imagined, both within fandom itself as well as within fan studies. As Pande (2018) notes, progressive ideals have, to some extent, been imposed upon media fandom by the utopian framings of media fandom within scholarly and popular commentary alike. Within fan studies, for instance, media fandom is normatively framed as subversive, liberatory, and resistant due to its willingness to explore gender and queer sexualities (Coppa 2014, 2006, Lothian et al. 2007).[34] These assertions are likewise mirrored within popular journalistic commentary, particularly concerning the fan communities that convene on Tumblr (Madden 2019, Watercutter 2019). However, Pande (2018) also notes that these ideals are circulated within media fandom itself (also see Stein 2015, 2018). Indeed, my participants' dominant constructions of belonging to feminist fandom detailed earlier demonstrate how this progressive vision of media fandom is explicitly declared and circulated within fannish spaces. This normative framing of feminist fandom, within both fandom and the study of it, elides the structural forces which differentially distribute

access to belonging within feminist fandom. This is something that Ashling (#305) notably alluded to in one of her responses to my survey. She explained:

> Fandom is often looked at as a vehicle for progressive, intersectional, and feminist values. But in action, it often reinforces the patriarchy instead by training young writers to value white men characters and relationships involving white men characters. ... People can yawp all they want about the transformative powers of fanfiction, but if we're all just replicating the racist and patriarchal focus on white men that's already present in the Western canon, then what even is the fucking point? You know? Tumblr is a part of this. (Ashling, #305)

Without an intersectional lens, it's relatively easy to be seduced by the utopian promise of these celebratory framings of feminist media fandom as a "vehicle for progressive, intersectional, and feminist values." However, when considered within the context of the experiences of non-belonging, or perhaps differential belonging, detailed by participants like Ashling, the dominant celebratory narratives about media fandom are rendered increasingly complex and contradictory.

The counter-narratives of non-belonging produced by my participants complicate dominant constructions of belonging to feminist fandom in several ways. Firstly, they reveal how understandings of feminist fandom as a utopian imagined community flatten difference (see Morimoto and Chin 2017), and risk obscuring the embodied raced, gendered, and classed hierarchies that extend into the virtual world (Nakamura 2002, Hobson 2008, Kolko 2000). Consider Elly's (#108) remark that I discussed earlier, for instance: "I feel like I'm amongst equals of the mind and it doesn't matter who we are on the other side of the screen." To what extent do such remarks flatten difference and assume whiteness? To what extent is whiteness a 'condition of belonging' (Carrillo 2005, 29) to feminist fandom? These counter-narratives of non- or differential belonging raise questions about the extent to which feminist fandom is imagined as a homogenous and assumedly *white,* Anglophone community, wherein feeling a sense of belonging with "like-minded" individuals naturalises dominant hegemonic identity positions.

Secondly, these counter-narratives of non-belonging complicate the positioning of feminist fandom as a "safe space" for all. As these counter-narratives highlight, not *all* of my participants affectively experienced participating in feminist fandom on Tumblr as *safe.* As Clark-Parsons (2018) notes, the relational work required to establish and maintain safe spaces inevitably creates boundaries, and the process of cultivating a safe space often raises questions of difference (The Roestone Collective 2014). While the technological affordances and platform vernacular of Tumblr, as discussed, produces certain types of belonging for my participants, they do not necessarily extend access to belonging for my participants with more marginal intersecting identities and social locations. For instance, as I discussed earlier, the platform vernacular of Tumblr positions the platform as particularly conducive to counterpublic modes of address, particularly around issues pertaining to gender and sexuality. Yet, as the experiences of participants such as Alex (#28), Sara (#288), and Ashling (#305) indicate, this does not necessarily extend to all forms of counterpublic address, particularly concerning counterhegemonic discussions about race, racism, and whiteness. The experiences of these participants demonstrate that, despite feminist fans' broader willingness to performatively position themselves as 'intersectional' feminists, as I discussed previously, this does not necessarily produce a willingness to thoroughly attend to the lived particularities of *all* intersecting identities and experiences (see Rivers 2017, Pande 2018, Kanai 2020). As Flood (2019, 424) notes, 'it is all too easy to claim an intersectional identity but not actually live out an intersectional politic.'

These counter-narratives thus raise additional questions about whether my participants' anxiety about privilege, normative identities, whiteness, and white feminism does the anti-racist and intersectional work that it purports to. As Sara Ahmed (2004b) notes, even when white people learn about racism and learn to recognise whiteness as a structure of racism and white supremacy, this does not necessarily challenge racism. For white people, recognising and declaring whiteness is often understood as in itself an anti-racist act, whereby the declaration of whiteness is assumed to put in place the conditions in which racism can be 'transcended'. As I noted earlier, many of my participants

performatively position themselves as intersectional feminists, demonstrating awareness of white feminism and openly critiquing, if not disavowing, it (see Kanai 2020). Yet, the experiences of my more marginal participants of colour detailed throughout this section suggest that this does not necessarily extend to the *doing* of feminism within feminist fandom. Their experiences reveal the 'fault lines' (McCracken 2017, 160-1) between the convergence of the affective investments of fandom with progressive and intersectional feminist politics, distinguishing between 'users who can shift out of progressive politicised media reception from those who cannot' on the grounds of their more marginal social locations.

My participants' narratives of non-belonging, and resulting critique of the celebratory framing of feminist fandom, subsequently mirror broader debates taking place within intersectional feminist theory about the dominance of white cisgender women as the 'architects and defenders of a particular framework of feminism in the digital era' (Daniels 2016, 42). Their accounts reveal how mainstream digital feminism's extension of 'a cultural map of assumed whiteness' (Kolko 2000, 225) subsequently pervades feminist fandom. As many of my participants have emphasised, digital feminist spaces, including those occupied by media fandom, undoubtedly facilitate consciousness-raising and community building. Yet they, as Fischer (2016) argues, do not miraculously provide transformative political participation and engagement precisely because intersecting oppressions, and particularly the 'centrality of whiteness' (756), continue to permeate and structure these spaces in ways that resonate throughout feminist fandom. This once again reminds us that fannish engagements with feminist identities, discourses, and practices do not take place in a vacuum, but remain embedded within social, political, cultural, and economic processes and structures that reproduce uneven power differentials.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have detailed the various interrelated narratives of affective, spatial, and relational belonging to feminist fandom produced my

participants in their responses to my research survey. I explored my participants' dominant positioning of feminist fandom on Tumblr as an imagined community, highlighting how their desire to seek out like-minded fans who felt the same way revealed the affective character of belonging to feminist fandom. Secondly, I examined their accounts of spatial belonging in order to highlight how the platform vernacular of Tumblr produced a sense of both safety and privacy for my participants. Combined, these two narratives represent my participants' dominant understandings of belonging to feminist fandom. Finally, I explored the counter-narratives of non-belonging produced by my participants with more marginal identity positions in order to reveal how access to belonging within feminist fandom is unevenly distributed.

I drew upon several theoretical frameworks to explore these accounts of belonging and non-belonging. Firstly, I positioned the imagined community of feminist fandom as a kind of intimate public (Berlant 2008). This enabled me to account for my participants' experiences of everyday affective belonging within feminist fandom, wherein like-minded strangers with shared affects, affinities, knowledge, and experiences come together and experience a sense of belonging. Berlant's understanding of intimate publics as involving a common sense of belonging to a community also lent itself well to my participants' understanding of feminist fandom as an imagined community. Secondly, I drew upon Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of subaltern counterpublics in order to understand how my participants' positioning of Tumblr as a space conducive to counterpublic forms of address about issues related to feminism and social justice helped to produce an understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as a safe space. Fraser's conceptualisation of counterpublics allowed me to capture some of the discursive, as well as spatial, aspects of my participants' experiences of belonging to feminist fandom in a way that Berlant's notion of intimate publics did not. However, in turn, theorisations of counterpublics often overemphasise the 'convertibility to politics' (Berlant 2008, 25) at the risk of obscuring the more ordinary and everyday scenes of identification and belonging that are captured within my participants' articulations of feeling a sense of belonging to an imagined community of feminist fans. My use of Berlant's concept of intimate publics in

conjunction with Fraser's theorisation of subaltern counterpublics thus works to produce a more holistic understanding of my participants' dominant experiences of belonging to feminist fandom. Any single framework, while offering useful ways of examining my participants' experiences of belonging, cannot account for the totality of these accounts.

However, neither of these frameworks adequately allow for the accounts of non-belonging I explore in the final section of this chapter. For instance, the experiences of my participants of colour highlight how Tumblr is not conducive to *all* forms of counterpublic address, particularly in relation to counterhegemonic discussions about race and whiteness. They also demonstrate that not all of my participants' experienced shared affinities, knowledge, and affects within the imagined community of feminist fandom, instead locating feminist fandom as a site of contention, whiteness, and white fragility. Furthermore, while feminist fandom might be *imagined* by many of my participants as a *community*, a number of my participants' experiences of non-belonging suggest that it may not necessarily be *lived* as such. I thus introduced a critical race studies framework in the final section of the chapter to unpack these counter-narratives and trouble dominant narratives of belonging to feminist fandom.

The narratives of belonging captured within the first and second section of this chapter produce a decidedly utopian vision of feminist fandom as an inherently progressive space, in many ways affirming dominant conceptions of fandom circulating within fan studies as well as fandom itself. However, as the counter-narratives of non-belonging reveal, such utopian narratives often flatten difference and universalise the experiences of fans with less marginal identity positions, particularly in terms of race and the naturalisation of whiteness. These counter-narratives demonstrate the crucial need to make room for competing visions of feminist fandom and take seriously the multiplicity and multivalency of my participants' experiences.

More broadly, across my participants' accounts of belonging and non-belonging detailed throughout this chapter, feminist fandom emerges as an increasingly complex and contradictory space that can be about both upending

power hierarchies as much as it can be about reinscribing them. Throughout the process of writing this chapter, I tried to avoid hierarchical distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' feminist fans, as I feel this is not productive. Feminist fandom is meaningful to *all* of my participants, as evidenced most saliently by the depth and breadth of their responses to my research survey as well as their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, and in many cases, it produces powerful feelings of safety, comfort, recognition, and belongingness. However, it is also important to critically attend to the ways in which crucial power differentials nevertheless structure these spaces and unevenly distribute access to these feelings of safety and belonging. As Cervenak et al. (2002, 346) note, 'the condition of subordination does not prevent us from reproducing similar dynamics of power.' Feminist fandom can be fraught and messy in ways that are not conducive to easy formulations of subversion and resistance found within various scholarly accounts of fandom (Coppa 2014, 2006, Lothian et al. 2007).

While fannish spaces and communities can facilitate feminist becoming, they can also operate as spaces of contention and conflict over the meanings of feminism, and over which identities, practices, and positionalities are most salient to the feminist project. We see this emerge most prominently in the accounts detailed in the final section of this chapter on non-belonging. Nevertheless, for many participants whose responses emphasised non-belongingness, their narratives of non-belonging were often configured through feminist intersectional frameworks, and many articulated some form of oppositional or differential belonging within smaller enclaves of feminist fandom. This works as a particularly notable example of how feminist fandom operates as a site of struggle over the meanings of contemporary fourth-wave feminism. Through the discrepancies between the accounts of belonging and non-belonging detailed throughout this chapter, we can see how competing understandings of feminism operate within feminist fandom in complex and contradictory ways.

Looking forward, the developmental trajectory of feminist fan identities might offer a productive and more promising outcome for feminist fandom through its emphasis on the value of learning and self-education. My participants'

emphasis on the processual nature of feminist fan identities that I discussed in Chapter 3 offers a potentially productive avenue towards improving the conditions and conduct of digital feminist and fannish spaces. My participants' insistence on locating themselves within a developmental trajectory of feminist growth and self-learning, emphasising their willingness to commit to the ongoing identity work required of feminism, as well as the ongoing relational work involved in crafting and sustaining feminist spaces, might offer a more hopeful future for feminist fandom. This is something I will explore in more depth in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Fandom and/as Feminist Pedagogy

Both fannish and feminist digital spaces have long been lauded for their pedagogical potential for young people. As I noted in Chapter 1, a significant number of feminist researchers have emphasised the pedagogical value of platforms like Tumblr for social justice and feminist-oriented praxis (Guillard 2016, Seidman 2013, Sills et al. 2016, Keller 2016a). For instance, they have highlighted how feminists cultivate new modes of feminist cultural critique online, creating feminist memes (Thrift 2014, Rentschler and Thrift 2015a) and critiquing the portrayals of girls and women in popular media culture (Eckert and Steiner 2016, 219). More broadly, self-education and the sharing of knowledge has been described as highly important to digital feminisms (Jackson 2018, Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a). Furthermore, media fandom has been described as a type of informal learning culture where fans can collectively develop critical cultural and media literacies through their attachments to the fantext (Jenkins 2016, Booth 2015, 2017, Kelly 2015, Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015). Moreover, scholars such as Lothian (2016), Coppa (2014), and Naylor (2016) have more recently emphasised the connections between media fandom and/as feminist pedagogy. For McCracken (2017, 151), the connections between media fandom and feminist pedagogy are exemplified by Tumblr's 'convergence of popular culture, socially critical discourse, and peer education.'

Indeed, my participants emphasised the pedagogical importance of feminist fandom on Tumblr throughout their responses to my research survey. Moreover, the experiences of teaching and learning within feminist fandom detailed by my participants throughout this chapter were provided without being prompted to do so. For instance, while my survey schedule of questions only mentioned learning once in Q3 when I asked participants, "Have you ever studied feminism?" (see Appendix B), my participants discussed the pedagogical potential of feminist fandom throughout their responses to my survey (Q2-7). Their accounts of fandom and/as feminist pedagogy therefore emerged organically. For instance, thus far throughout my analysis, the pedagogical function of feminist fandom emerged as important to my

participants' feminist becoming, as well as their sense of belonging to feminist fandom. Many of the themes I will discuss throughout this chapter have subsequently appeared throughout those preceding it.

For example, in Chapter 3, through my examination of my participants' accounts of the connections between media fandom and the development of a feminist identity, I revealed the role of media fandom in educating young people about different meanings of feminism. Feminist fandom, I argued, offers interpretative frameworks for young people to both *make sense of* feminism as well as *make feminist sense* of texts. I subsequently positioned fandom as an important site at which meanings of feminism are paratextually constructed, negotiated, and contested. Moreover, my participants' emphasis on the ongoing *process* of feminist becoming detailed later in Chapter 3, positioning their feminist identities as active, processual, and emergent, points to the importance of continual learning as part of the feminist group identity work taking place within fandom, fan culture, and fan communities.

Additionally, while examining my participants' experiences of belonging to feminist fandom in Chapter 4, I explored how my participants positioned Tumblr as providing a safe space for young people to learn about gender and sexuality, as well as other salient aspects of their identities. Within these accounts, the platform vernacular of Tumblr produced a sense of spatial belonging for my participants that made them feel comfortable to openly discuss their experiences and positionalities, share information and resources, and mix up personal and political material on their blogs. In doing so, I argued, they developed shared emotional and cultural knowledge derived from shared experiences and identities. However, later in Chapter 4, I questioned the extent to which my participants' performance of a willingness to undertake the ongoing group identity work required of "intersectional" feminist fandom produced a willingness to attend to the lived particularities of *all* intersecting identities and experiences. The accounts of participants of colour which detail encounters with white fragility within feminist fandom raise questions about the extent to which my participants', alongside the wider cohort of feminist fans they represent, are more broadly willing to unlearn the trappings of 'white feminism' (Jonsson 2014, Kendall 2020) discussed in Chapter 3.

In this chapter, I subsequently attend to the complex relationship between fandom and feminist pedagogy in more depth. Firstly, I explore the role of feminist fandom as an informal learning culture that fosters the development of critical feminist media literacy. My analysis locates feminist fandom as a site at which feminist media critique is routinely produced and circulated in an informal and everyday setting. Discussion of media texts within feminist fandom thus offers an informal and accessible entry point for fans to move outwards from the text to address broader social issues from a feminist and social justice-oriented perspective, subsequently serving a consciousness-raising function within the feminist fan community. Moreover, many of my participants emphasised how the processes of informal learning they accessed within feminist fandom enabled them to redress some of the constraints produced by the social, cultural, and educational norms of their local contexts, providing them with access to information and knowledge they would otherwise seldom access. In doing say, my analysis complicates the work of fan studies scholars such as Booth (2015) who position fandom as a *supplementary* educational space.

Secondly, I explore how the critical feminist media literacies my participants developed both *within* and *through* feminist fandom are carried forwards into their communal production of the fantext. I subsequently frame the circulation of fan-created paratexts informed by these critical media literacies as a valuable mode of feminist knowledge sharing. Feminist knowledge sharing, I argue, forms a core part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan. Drawing upon my participants' accounts of feminist knowledge sharing, I challenge Schuster's (2013) claims about generational divides within digital feminist spaces and instead position feminist fandom on Tumblr as a space conducive to multi-generational dialogue and knowledge exchange about feminism. Additionally, while I situate my participants' accounts of reciprocal feminist knowledge sharing within fandom's gift economy logic (Hellekson 2009), I also more critically locate these acts of knowledge exchange within a wider context and consider how, when interpreted as a form of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995), the performance of the possession of feminist

knowledge might reinforce hierarchical processes of exclusion within feminist fandom.

Finally, I return my earlier understanding of feminist identities as active, ongoing and processual to explore my participants' accounts of engaging in an open-ended and lifelong process of *learning* and *unlearning* within feminist fandom. Listening, I emphasise, is central to this pedagogical process. Situating pedagogical listening within the context of debates about "lurking", I draw upon my participants' accounts of reflexively *lurking as listening* to problematise scholarly accounts which implicitly or explicitly position lurking as a less active, less participatory, and ultimately less important mode of engagement with fandom (Baym 2000, Hills 2002, Hellekson 2018). Drawing upon feminist perspectives on the relationship between feminist pedagogy and learning *through* listening, I position listening as central to the 'relational work' (The Roestone Collective 2014) required of creating and maintaining participants' understanding of feminist fandom as a safe space. Additionally, I examine my participants' commitment to an ongoing process of not only *learning* but *unlearning*, exploring how my participants pedagogically approach the project of unlearning one's hegemonic understandings of social and cultural phenomena and instead work towards crafting a more oppositional, nuanced, and empathetic understanding of a wide range of intersecting identities and social issues.

"Tumblr taught me so much about representation tho": Media Literacy and Informal Learning within Feminist Fandom

In Chapter 3 I discussed the role of fannish paratexts, through the lens of the *fantext*, and their role in the development of feminist identity. Across my participants' responses to my survey, they emphasised the importance of the fantext to the continuous, informal process of learning about feminism *through* fandom. I subsequently argued that the paratextual framing and reframing of texts within feminist fandom is important to the process of *making meaning of feminism,* and hence to feminist becoming, as well as to the process of *making*

feminist meaning of texts. While I discussed the process of *making meaning of feminism* in considerable depth in Chapter 3, here I would like to attend to the process of *making feminist meaning* in more detail as it grants us considerable insight into the pedagogical value of feminist fandom. Across my participants' responses, they positioned feminist fandom as a pedagogical space wherein, through routine and everyday fannish practices, fans learn about a wide range of issues concerning media representation and diversity, social justice and inequality, digital technologies, and the media industry – all from a feminist and social justice-oriented perspective (see Kohnen 2018). As a Tumblr post written by a user named frostygrace noted, "Tumblr taught me so much about representation tho[ugh].... today I literally can't watch a film without thinking "why is everyone so white" [or] "why is everyone straight"" (Figure 7). The popular post, which at the time of the writing has accrued almost 250,000 notes, has been reblogged countless times with the addition of hundreds of affirmative comments such as "this!!", "for real", and "me". In many ways, this Tumblr post captures the sentiments expressed by many of my participants about the role of feminist fandom in developing critical media literacy. The term "representation", for example, appears more than sixty times across my dataset, while the term "learned" is mentioned almost ninety times. Zellieh (#87), for instance, reflected, "there was never a fannish experience for me that was separate from criticism and analysis of the source media, and that naturally included feminism, equal rights, representation, racism and homophobia, etc." For Zellieh, then, engaging in critical media discussion from

Figure 7: Post by frostygrace. User deactivated.

a feminist perspective is intimately and innately intertwined with her fannish experience, and with the pleasures of engaging in the practices of fandom.

We can also see a similar process at work in Isolde-thelady's (#315) account, which I also discussed in Chapter 3, of learning how to critically engage with texts through fandom. She explained how the process of developing her critical skills "started small," involving "reading [Tumblr] posts and articles about how the world works and microaggressions and studies about stereotypes," before "snowballing" into a more complex and comprehensive understanding of "patriarchy and systematic racism and ableism and every other ism." Here, Isolde-thelady highlights the importance of engaging with media critique on Tumblr, in the form of the "posts and articles" she mentions, to the process of developing her feminist media literacy, as well as her broader understanding of intersectional feminism, as captured by her knowing reference to "and every other ism." Thus, the same fan-created paratexts that can interrupt and redirect interpretations of a text, in turn, can function as feminist teaching moments that enable fans to develop critical media literacy. De Kosnik (2016, 179) highlights that these paratexts have an educative function through the 'internal changes that such [fanworks] might effect in fans themselves,' and it is in this capacity that, as Booth (2015) notes, 'one's fan identity might be the catalyst of critical intellectual shifts.' Indeed, participants such as Elizabeth (#303) noted how engaging with feminist fandom on Tumblr opened her "eyes to different ways of thinking" and ultimately transformed her entire "belief system."

Across my participants' responses, engaging with feminist fandom on Tumblr thus emerged as an important pedagogical space for enabling young people to develop critical feminist and social justice-oriented media literacies. According to Kellner and Share (2007, 4), the concept of critical media literacy:

> Expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication and popular culture as well as deepens the potential of education to critically analyse relationships between media and audiences, information and power. It involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticise stereotypes,

> dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts.

Furthermore, Kellner and Share emphasise that feminist pedagogical approaches to critical media literacy emphasise the importance of 'addressing principles of equity and social justice related to representation' (10) and subsequently attend to issues of gender, race, sexuality, and power. These processes of developing skills in analysing media codes and conventions, criticising representational stereotypes, and questioning dominant values and ideology within media texts, all while attending to principles of social justice from a feminist perspective, are evidenced across my data and are subsequently central to the operation of feminist fandom.

Within feminist fandom, the cultivation of this feminist media literacy is primarily interest-driven, and is, in many cases, fuelled by the fans' desire to foster a greater level of understanding of the fantext in line with their identities as both feminists and as fans. Moreover, as Jessica (#280) highlights in a response that is worth citing at length, discussions of media texts offer an informal and accessible entry point for fans to address broader social issues, thus functioning as a democratising pedagogical force. She explained:

> In real life, I talk about discrimination in fandom a lot, often through dialogue with similarly minded friends, but also through challenging people in my life ("why do you think Kylo Ren is a more sympathetic character than Finn? I don't know much about *Star Wars*, but I know one is pretty unambiguously the villain and one is black, so..."). The media we consume is sometimes an easier way to talk about tendencies of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. than our everyday lives, because while we often associate very closely with things we love, to criticise, say, the choice to make Jughead a character who pretty clearly experiences sexual attraction in *Riverdale* when he's canonically asexual, doesn't come across as a personal attack on the fan. ... I engage with issues of oppression and inequality in just about everything I do, to the extent that sometimes my family roll their eyes at me, and fandom is no different. We can't talk about how much we love Tolkien if we don't unpack what it means that *The Hobbit* has no female characters, that the dwarves are pretty heavily Jewish-coded, and so on. We can't talk about the

> historically progressive nature of the *Star Trek* fandom without discussing some of the fairly heavy racism underlying Spock/Kirk fic, especially since the release of the recent movies. (Jessica, #280)

Here, Jessica's (#280) response reveals how the interest-driven nature of feminist fandom on Tumblr enables feminist fans to learn about feminism in an 'intense, autonomous, and interest-driven way' (Ito et al. 2009, 28), wherein one's feminist and fannish interest in the fantext provides a shared framework for cultivating critical feminist media literacies. Furthermore, note that Jessica's commentary moves far beyond the representational politics of just gender. Here, she refers to the representational politics of (a)sexuality, race and ethnicity, religion, and other salient identity markers, demonstrating her knowledge of the 'intersectional turn' (Carbin and Edenheim 2013) within digital feminist spaces. Like Jessica, joslynnyc (#157) also noted the interest-driven nature of learning within feminist fandom. She reflected that, within feminist fandom, "We use the things we love as a jumping off point to examine feminist issues and share things we've learned." As a result, she later noted, "I've learned a ton about queer and intersectional feminism through Tumblr and fandom and I use the platforms to listen and engage with other women/[non-binary] people."

For projecitdespatio (#165), the interest-driven process of learning on Tumblr was central to her continued use of the platform. She explained, "I continue to use Tumblr because it has such a diverse community coming together to celebrate and appreciate different things, but at the same time enables you to learn about diversity and experiences faced by other people." Similarly, Jessica (#280) highlighted that "Tumblr is my biggest location for fandom activity because it allows me to do my favourite thing: lurk, learn, and shape my own views and opinions." Here, Jessica (#280) derives pleasure from the process of learning itself in relation to fandom. Jessica's main motivation for engaging in fandom on Tumblr is its role in facilitating the interrelated processes of lurking, learning, and subsequently shaping her views and opinions. Jessica's primary interest is thus the processes of learning that are facilitated by fandom. Thus, from this, we can see how the interest-driven

processes of learning on Tumblr are central to the pleasures my participants' derive from participating in feminist fandom.

Like projecitdespatio and Jessica, many of my participants reported using these spaces to learn about, and then make appeals for, what Beltran (2010) describes as 'equitable representation' and 'meaningful diversity' beyond the mere inclusion of actors and characters who occupy more marginal social locations. Peyton (#59), for example, noted that "I think that joining fandom has really increased my understanding of how important and great it is to actually have diverse characters and casts in our media," and C (#187), explained that her identity as a feminist and fan "pushes me to seek more female "heavy" and diverse content and be more interested in those characters and points of view." Moreover, participants such as Sarah (#308) emphasised the importance of more *meaningful* forms of diversity, highlighting that "being diverse just for the sake of it often leads to stories that just don't work." This is something that Kohnen (2018) also noted in her research on Tumblr pedagogies, highlighting that 'fandom on Tumblr often includes discussions of diversity in media representation and the intersections of fandom and social justice' (465). McCracken (2017, 157) takes this one step further, noting that 'media representation is a chief concern' to Tumblr users, forming 'the subject of much of their sophisticated criticism, creative production, and pleasure.' Tumblr has subsequently secured a reputation for its users' 'in-depth analysis of representational politics' (McCracken 2017, 158) and social issues that is reaffirmed by my participants' experiences.

Many of my participants emphasised the transformative power of learning within feminist fandom beyond critical media literacy. In addition to the powerful processes of feminist becoming, my participants also discussed how their time within feminist fandom had fostered a greater level of self-awareness and self-assuredness and had helped them to further develop their sense of empathy and understanding towards others who do not share their positionalities and social locations. Josie (#227), for instance, noted the transformative educational function of fan-created paratexts, not only for developing critical media literacy but also for learning interpersonal skills

through fostering a greater understanding of other fans within the feminist fan community:

> People spend so much time thinking and writing and engaging in discussions about reasons behind/implications of so many things (and not just in source material, but also within the fandom). … *Reading about what other people have to say deepens my understanding not only of the source material, but also of other people.* (my emphasis)

These acts of informal learning within feminist fandom emerged as particularly important to my queer and gender nonconforming participants, who used fandom to "explore and learn about … different sexualities and genders" (Lunylovegoodlover, #96). Bisexual and genderqueer twenty-four-year-old Gull (#32), for example, explained how they learned about bisexuality and genderqueer identities through their engagement with feminist fandom, and particularly through consuming the fanworks produced by other feminist fans. Reflecting on their experience reading slash fanfiction, they explained:

> [I was] learning a lot about myself thanks to being involved in fandom. I read a lot of slash fic and became a lot more comfortable thinking about/talking about sex, and I would definitely attribute my finally coming out to myself as bisexual (and, later, genderqueer) as greatly influenced by the widespread acceptance I saw in fandom. (That, and Tumblr genuinely had a lot of good information about what it meant to be bisexual, which I hadn't encountered anywhere else in my life and hadn't really realised it was even much of an option). (Gull, #32)

Additionally, Gull emphasises that the information they encountered on Tumblr about gender and sexuality was not available to them elsewhere. As they noted, they hadn't had access to "good information about what it means to be bisexual ... anywhere else in my life." Xyresic (#97) similarly noted that "fandom tries to open the conversation to more than what you would hear in everyday life. I discovered who I was and my sexuality by reading through some things and going "hot damn, that sounds exactly like me". I learned that it's okay to like what you like and to be open about it to people."

As I discussed previously, feminist fandom on Tumblr operates as a counterpublic in that it functions as a space that permits members of subordinate social groups to 'to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990, 67). This performed a particularly important educative function for my queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming participants. For instance, I discussed the example of Alex (#278), a bisexual and transgender man, who explained how feminist fandom was the first place he had encountered "people against bi-erasure," which he notably contrasted to his experiences in LGBT groups "in real life", as well as the place where he met his "first trans mentors, genderqueer folks, other spoonies." He explained, "we could hear each other out without reservations or doubts." While I previously explored Alex's experiences in relation to his sense of safety and spatial belonging on Tumblr, experiences like his are also worth considering regarding their pedagogical value. Like Gull (#32), Alex (#278) notes that engaging in feminist fandom on Tumblr granted him access to other people who shared experiences and identities he could learn from and be affirmed by. This is a typical feature of feminist pedagogy and it echoes many claims about feminist consciousness-raising. As Shrewsbury (1993, 13) argues, 'the personal can be recognised as political in a classroom with some sense of mutual community,' wherein 'students may find connections with themselves, their individual and collective pasts, with others, and with the future.' Feminist fandom's function as a counterpublic space where members of subordinated social groups are able to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities therefore enables participants like Alex (#278) to engage in the feminist pedagogical practice of coming to recognise the personal as political. According to Naples (2013, 661), this process is a core feature of intersectional feminist pedagogical practice, wherein safe spaces provide the deliberative 'context in which individuals can critically reflect on their experiences' and generate situated knowledge 'in dialogue with others.' Moreover, Cervenak et al. (2002, 345) argue that feminist pedagogies work to produce the modes of 'oppositional thinking' captured within Alex's response.

McCracken (2017, 156) subsequently notes that Tumblr has increasingly become a centre for 'the kinds of non-normative sexual or queer expression,

identity formation, education, and support that are otherwise publicly unavailable for youth and/or can put them at risk.' Similarly, Alex also emphasises that such shared experiences were absent elsewhere in his life, thus serving as a crucial resource for connecting to and learning from queer and gender-diverse peers. As hooks (1994b) argues, for subordinated people, formal education can be a place of punishment, confinement, and control, rather than of learning and enrichment. My research subsequently affirms the research findings of Byron et al. (2019), whose participants described learning about gender fluidity, nonbinary genders, experiences of asexuality, and distinctions between bisexuality and pansexuality through Tumblr. Many of my participants thus associate Tumblr with learning about their own identities, as well as the textual representations of these identities within popular culture, in ways in which they otherwise would be unable to access. Although, as J's (#90) experience highlights, this education is not limited to one's own identities and social location, but rather extends to a much broader knowledge of social issues surrounding gender and sexuality:

> Tumblr allowed me to read posts by other queer people and connect with them. That exposure helped me feel less alone in my discovery of my queerness, and I think that was an important step along the way to engaging with queer issues, not just in terms of my identity, but in terms of activism. Tumblr is one of the only places that I've read personal accounts of nonbinary and trans people, for example, which helped me understand a side of feminist/queer activism that I'm not sure I would have learned about in the same way otherwise. (J, #90)

For many of my participants, the processes of informal learning they accessed within fandom enabled them to redress some of the constraints produced by the social, cultural, and educational norms of their local contexts, providing them with access to information and knowledge they would otherwise seldom access. Eighteen-year-old, Sahvana (#321), for instance, wrote in length about the significance of fandom as an informal learning opportunity that she otherwise wouldn't experience in her predominantly white, rural, and conservative community in Idaho, USA. She explained:

> I grew up in a tiny North Idaho town that was only 20 minutes away from the founding place of the Aryan Nations. It was very homogenous, very white, very straight, very Christian, very Conservative, and very misogynistic. ... Once I left that town and was exposed by fandom to new concepts, less "socially acceptable" (in my hometown) concepts, I learned to actively work against my own racism. This opened the doors to learning to stop being bigoted in other senses: ableism, transphobia, and misogyny as well. The biggest part in my journey to becoming a feminist wasn't actually letting go of misogyny, it was letting go of the passive racism that had prevented my enlightenment in other social aspects. There was no actual moment that made me say "I'm a feminist". It was just a long process of detoxing my bigotry that ended with me as a better person in general. (Sahvana, #321)

While she frames this experience more broadly with reference to the process of becoming feminist, she touches on a range of hugely transformative learning experiences she accessed through feminist fandom. As Jenkins, Ito, et al. (2016), the interest-driven and participatory forms of learning detailed by my participants were previously only available to privileged young people with access to specialised enrichment activities, as well as access to further education. Yet, the advancement of new media technologies has lowered the barriers to accessing these spheres of community-oriented and interest-driven informal learning. For many of my participants, the opportunity to share resources, information, experiences, and knowledge with like-minded feminist fans who shared their interests is subsequently of immense value. Like Sahvana, a South African respondent named Isa (#104), for example, positioned feminist fandom as “incredibly freeing,” and as a safe space to learn about concepts and worldviews “frowned upon in my conservative community.” Similarly, sixteen-year-old HelloMissSunshine (#6) from Germany commended the educational value of the imagined transnational nature of feminist fandom, explaining that “fandom taught me a lot by showing new perspectives and differences around the world.” Meanwhile, twenty-six-year-old Martina (#33) from Slovakia emphasised the role of feminist fandom in accounting for the shortcomings of the formal education she had accessed in Slovakia. She explained how she relied on her access to Tumblr to teach

her about social issues from a feminist perspective, “Tumblr taught me about [feminism], because sadly in my country no one will ever teach you about it or other social problems. Which sucks.” For these respondents, then, the pedagogical value of feminist fandom on Tumblr lies primarily in its ability to redress the learning constraints of one’s local context and facilitate processes of ‘transcultural and transnational awareness and education’ (McCracken 2017, 154).

Thus, my participants’ understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as an imagined transnational and transborder community rooted in shared popular cultural experience worked to reinforce their understandings of feminist fandom as a pedagogical space that fostered the development of, firstly, critical media literacy, and, secondly, a broader awareness and understanding of social issues from a feminist perspective.[35] Moreover, responses from participants like Martina (#33) and Sahvana (#321), which emphasise the role of feminist fandom in addressing some of the shortcomings of their formal education, problematise perspectives from fan studies scholars, such as Booth (2015), which position fandom as a *supplementary* educational space. Booth describes fandom as ‘the classroom of the future’, highlighting that it ‘may be one of the few places where people are encouraged to think critically, to write, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture *once formal schooling is complete*’ (my emphasis). As the responses from some of my participants emphasise, for many young people feminist fandom is one of the *only* spaces they can access the kinds of informal learning opportunities detailed above. As McCracken (2017) notes, platforms like Tumblr are increasingly operating as an alternative means of education for young people in the contemporary era:

> In an era in which traditional educational institutions have faced the narrowing of their curriculum in the areas of critical thinking, the arts, sex education, and progressive politics, it is in social media’s spaces of community and contestation that many young people develop their critical skills, engage in creative work, and construct a sense of themselves as desiring individuals and social actors.

Throughout this section, I have explored the processes of informal learning taking place within feminist fandom, particularly with regards to the concept of critical media literacy (Kellner and Share 2007). My participants positioned learning as an interest-driven and pleasurable process to which feminist fandom is central. Moreover, they described learning not only about media representation but about a wide range of social issues beyond popular media culture. This was particularly important for my queer and gender nonconforming participants, who described feminist fandom on Tumblr as a space to connect with, and learn from, queer and gender-nonconforming peers. More broadly, I argued that my participants' emphasis on feminist fandom as a space that redresses some of the educational constraints produced by their local contexts challenges perspectives which position fandom as a *supplementary* educational space (Booth 2015). In the following section, I explore how my participants recognise the educative function of feminist fandom and take what they have learned forward into their reproduction of the fantext on Tumblr, and how, in doing so, they engage in the process of feminist knowledge sharing.

"I reblog and repost ideas, trying to spread them as far as I can": Fandom and Feminist Knowledge Sharing on Tumblr

My participants emphasised that they were not only learning about feminism through fandom, but were also actively engaged in the ongoing project of educating their peers about feminism in turn. Many of my participants, for example, discussed how the critical feminist media literacies they had developed within feminist fandom are carried forwards into their communal production of the fantext. As Kellner and Share (2007, 4) note, these kinds of cultural production can encourage young people to 'challenge media texts and narratives that appear natural and transparent,' and thus perform an important pedagogical function. For example, Acme146 (#54) explained, "if my fandoms have disappointed me in terms of representation, I do my best to address that in my fanfiction." While these forms of cultural production operate as a way for young people to put their feminist knowledge into practice, they also have the

potential to function as teaching moments for other fans. The circulation of fan-created paratexts within fandom, then, functions as a valuable means of feminist knowledge sharing.

Knowledge sharing thus forms a core part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan. Like the teen feminists Keller (2016a, 61) researched, who felt that 'the practice of educating their peers about feminist issues and feminism itself' was immensely important, my participants also emphasised how important teaching other fans about feminism and feminist issues is to them (also see Taft 2011). They framed feminist knowledge sharing as an obligation and as a central component of participation within feminist fandom. Dinah (#98), for example, who noted that she was "introduced to important threads I missed, issues I was blind to, through Tumblr and Twitter," emphasises that she, in turn, puts a great deal of effort into seeking out information and helping to share it with other Tumblr users. Max (#112) similarly positions themself as the agent of feminist knowledge sharing, explaining that, "I try to do my part teaching the people around me about intersectional feminism by amplifying the voices of the marginalised people who speak up about it." Not only does Max frame feminist knowledge sharing, or "teaching", as an obligation, as doing "my part", within feminist fandom, they also highlight the pedagogical importance of sharing the feminist knowledge produced by more "marginalised people", thus marking an attempt to engage with more intersectional approaches to feminist knowledge sharing and commit to learning across difference. Max later emphasised their awareness of the *work* that goings into producing and sharing feminist knowledge on Tumblr: "I'm very grateful to all those who take the time to provide us with information, explanations and testimonies, which is time-consuming and mentally/physically exhausting."

Even for feminist fans unable to produce pedagogical materials first-hand, sharing and passing on feminist knowledge they encountered on Tumblr remained highly important and meaningful. Emmie (#164), for example, explained:

> I engage with feminist issues in fandom mostly through reblogging posts that I come across that bring light to or engage with important issues - poor treatment of women in fandom, or fanworks, or in the film/TV industry, or in the source material, or lack of representation or intersectionality in any of these spheres. I don't really dedicate time to producing this sort of content myself, but I think it's important to amplify these discussions and voices when I see them. (Emmie, #164)

Across my participants' responses, the practice of reblogging feminist knowledge on Tumblr operates as a form of *sharing feminist knowledge.* Reblogging feminist knowledge, and thus recirculating information to one's own network of followers, on Tumblr thus 'extends that critique beyond the individual, where it can continue to live and resonate with others' (McCracken 2017). Many of my participants did so with the hopes that doing so might facilitate the educative process of feminist consciousness-raising amongst their peers. Indeed, participants such as Ingrid (#313) noted the personal pedagogical impact of these processes of feminist knowledge sharing. Writing about her process of feminist becoming, she explained how following a particular Tumblr blog that routinely shared information about feminism, particularly concerning disability, taught her a great deal about feminism and initiated a long-term process of self-education:

> I didn't really start understanding feminism until one of the authors from AO3 I was following reblogged a post about a Tumblr that helped writers find people they could talk to if they needed to understand a particular culture or disability or circumstance to write about it sensibly. That Tumblr had a database of people offering their services, which I browsed through, and found a particular profile that interested me, possibly only because the person sounded nice. I followed the link to their Tumblr. That was how it all really started. ... I felt like they kept explaining things that I had always felt to be true but had never really considered, or would've had the words to explain ... I became obsessed with that Tumblr [blog] for what must've been months. Most of my early feminist learnings came from it, although only about a few weeks in I must've started following other feminist Tumblrs. I identified as a feminist the moment I learned what the word

> really meant. I never really studied it formally, but since then I've been educating myself constantly. (Ingrid, #313)

By engaging in this reciprocal and ongoing process of knowledge sharing, my participants use the gift economy of fandom, combined with the technological affordances of Tumblr, to engage in acts of feminist knowledge sharing. Fandom, as Hellekson (2009) argues, involves three elements of exchange that, together, comprise fandom's gift economy: *giving*, *receiving*, and *reciprocity*. The 'gifts' that fans exchange take many forms, and might include, for example, fanworks such as fanfiction, fanvids, or fanart, meta analysis, or other aggregates of information. These gifts, Hellekson (2009, 115-6) argues, 'are designed to create and cement a social structure ... with the goal of creating and maintaining social solidarity.' The gifts exchanged between fans contribute to the overall composition of the fantext, as well as the constitution of a given fan community. When applying this understanding of fandom's gift economy to my participants' experiences, the sharing of feminist knowledge thus becomes a 'gift' that one anticipates other fans to 'receive' and 'reciprocate' in turn.[36] For example, one fan's blog post detailing the kinds of critique described by Emmie (#164) that "bring[s] to light or engage[s] with important issues" from a feminist perspective operates as a *gift* that, through the act of reblogging, Emmie can *receive* and then *reciprocate* the act of *gifting* by *regifting* the blog post to her own followers, in turn. From this, we can see the relationship between fandom's gift economy and feminist knowledge sharing on Tumblr.

Moreover, as Turk (2014) notes, 'fandom's gift economy is not just an accumulation of contiguous reciprocal relationships between individuals but a complex system in which the reciprocation of gifts ... is distributed across the community rather than concentrated in a single transaction.' Similarly, Baym (2015, 94-6) argues that collaboratively building a replenishing repository of public goods and information is central to the operation of a given online community. These public goods and information, she argues, are intended for use by imagined and unknown recipients one might never encounter again, and one might not expect the recipient to reciprocate immediately. From this, feminist fandom's gift economy results in the establishment of a broader

repository of public goods and information intended for use by other feminist fans. Thus, under this schema, the reciprocal sharing of feminist knowledge functions as a form of 'open-ended gifting' (Turk 2014) within feminist fandom that has a powerful educative function. The process of producing feminist knowledge within feminist fandom is thus 'collaborative' (Naples 2016) in nature. Furthermore, such open-ended and reciprocal practices and processes of knowledge sharing is integral to 'individuals and groups to acquire the skills they need to participate meaningfully' within a given community (Jenkins, Ito, et al. 2016, 31).

Another important aspect of feminist knowledge sharing on Tumblr is its multi-generational character. While Tumblr is culturally and discursively associated with youth (McCracken 2017), and the modal age of my participants was twenty-one years-old, many of my participants nevertheless emphasised the multi-generationality of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom. For example, in Chapter 3 I explored Emily's experiences of feminist becoming which emphasised the significance of multi- and inter-generational feminist knowledge sharing. In her responses, Emily (#71) explained:

> I don't think I really identified as a feminist until I joined the [*A Song of Ice and Fire*] fandom and decided to stan for Sansa Stark and interacted with other Sansa stans who were older and gave me a lot of words and pedagogy and theory for things I had felt and experienced but didn't have the verbiage to explain.

Here, Emily explicitly aligns the multi-generationality of Tumblr with its pedagogical value. For Emily, interacting with older fans was central to her process of feminist consciousness-raising, enabling her to learn about, and name, the things she "had felt and experienced but didn't have the verbiage to explain." As McCracken (2017, 154) noted, the kinds of intra- and inter-generational mentoring Emily alludes to here are 'an important aspect of the cultural functioning of the [Tumblr] platform.' Likewise, many of my other participants also discussed similar processes of inter-generational mentoring and consciousness-raising. For instance, Carla (#211), when reflecting on her process of feminist becoming within fandom, noted that "there were always

older women I could talk to and ask questions about my feeling towards things and that influenced me a lot." Sabrina (#25) also discussed the value of multi-generational mentoring:

> Older people in the fandom usually helped me realise how to be a better person/feminist regarding women in fandom. ... It was very useful to me that older fans provided examples on how to grow and be as people. In retrospect, I also appreciate that these older fans very much kept their distance from younger fans, but didn't shy away from providing advice to them, again, whether in life or writing or whatever. (Sabrina, #25)

Sabrina later explained how she carried forward this ethos into her approach to feminist fandom as she herself grew older. She wrote, "as well, I think especially I got older, I tried to create safe, open platforms. I didn't engage in fandom "drama", but would try and write work that represented women and LGBTQIA+ people well." Here, we can see the gift economy of fandom at work in Sabrina's desire to re-gift the knowledge she was gifted by older fans through the process of crafting safe and open platforms for younger fans to engage with.

My older respondents often demonstrated awareness of their roles in this capacity. For example, forty-year-old Willow (#75), when responding to a question about how she primarily engages with feminism through fandom, responded that she felt engaging "in conversation with other women, especially younger women" was a fundamental part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan. Once again, here we may return to the idea of feminist knowledge sharing as an *obligation* one takes on if they are to meaningfully participate in feminist fandom. Playfully and ironically referring to herself as a "Tumblr old", Willow expressed her sense of "responsibility for this." She later added that these conversations can be a productive place to share knowledge about and "explore intersectional feminism" through the lens of fandom:

> I think that the issues of relevance to feminism in canon/source material can be a safer platform for discussion than making people expose themselves and their lives. In particular, it's a slightly removed place to

> explore intersectional feminism. When we discuss [the] lack of female agency in [the] source material, and then talk about how black women are portrayed differently, and then how sex work is always viewed as either desperate or amoral, and also a black women's space - we can start to understand how images harm everyone. I really wish we could discuss this over a pot of tea. (Willow, #75)

Thirty-three-year-old laughingpinecone (#259) similarly discussed taking on a role that younger people within the community would benefit from, explaining that, "I think a good deal of the content I create is stuff that would've helped a younger me feel like she belonged." Older members of feminist fandom are thus positioned as particularly knowledgeable, and thus more able to engage in acts of feminist knowledge sharing that can facilitate the process of feminist consciousness-raising.[37] This is something that participants such as forty-three-year-old Zellieh (#87) articulated, explaining that:

> I mostly feel like fandom and media criticism ... it's more about what used to be called 'consciousness-raising' - the first part of the process of making change, which is important because we need to keep doing that for every new generation of teens and young adults who are coming to these ideas for the first time.

It is in this sense that my participants' narratives adhere to Stein's (2015, 175) understanding of contemporary media fandom as a 'safe but multi-generational environment,' wherein multi-generational dialogue can offer 'an empowering route to knowledge within a supportive community.' With regards to feminist fandom, this functions as a route to *feminist* knowledge within a largely supportive and multi-generational community. More significantly, however, the experiences of multi-generational feminist knowledge sharing and mentoring detailed by my participants trouble Schuster's (2013) claims about generational divisions within digital feminist spaces. Schuster largely renders older feminists invisible in her account of digital feminist spaces, implying that older generations of feminists are yet to make the 'shift from offline to online methods of feminist work' (13). The experiences of my participants, and their responses to my research survey which emphasise the value of multi-generational knowledge sharing, imply otherwise.

Thus far, I have discussed the relationship between fandom's gift economy and feminist knowledge sharing, as well as the multi-generational character of feminist knowledge sharing on Tumblr. Now, I will move on to discuss the responses of one of my participants, named centrumlumina (#298), in more detail to examine some of the ways in which an individual fan might approach the work of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom. This helps to grant us more detailed insight into how feminist fans facilitate the process of feminist knowledge sharing on an individual level. Firstly, I will attend to her involvement in the *femslashrevolution* Tumblr blog before discussing her AO3 Fandom Statistics project.

Centrumlumina's (#298) role as the co-creator of a Tumblr blog named *femslashrevolution* ("Femslash Revolution") offers a useful example of how an individual feminist fan might approach the work of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom. Notably, while discussing centrumlumina's responses in Chapter 3, I explored how her positionality as a queer woman and a feminist inflected her entry into, and production of the fantext. Here, I will attend to the ways in which her approach to the (re)production of the fantext, particularly through her involvement with *femslashrevolution* as well as her AO3 Statistics project, has a pedagogical impetus. *femslashrevolution*, which centrumlumina describes as a "pan-fandom F/F blog", was created in late 2013 and operates as a collection of fanworks, meta analyses, advice, and fannish commentary all centred around female/female, also known as "femslash", "wlw", or "f/f", relationships (see Figure 8). The blog compiles and archives a wide range of Tumblr posts from other users featuring fanworks that centre female/female

Figure 8: Femslash Revolution Tumblr blog. Featured with permission of blog creator and administrator, centrumlumina.

relationships within popular culture texts, thus functioning as a public repository of fanworks that centre female/female relationships. Such fanworks might include, for example, fanart, fanfiction, fanvids, and meta analysis. In doing so, *femslashrevolution* adheres to McCracken's (2017) characterisation of a particular type of Tumblr fan blog 'run by groups of moderators devoted to specific intersections of popular culture and politics (and/or social marginalisation) about which they offer advice and counsel.' Beyond offering a space for queer women to congregate and celebrate their shared identities and fannish interests, *femslashrevolution* more broadly calls attention to the invisibility of queer women within contemporary Anglo-American media culture. As a multifannish and multivocal "pan-fandom" blog, *femslashrevolution* operates as a form of 'critical paratextuality' (Gray 2010) that teaches its readers about the representation of female/female relationships within both popular culture as well as fandom itself. Writing about the blog, centrumlumina explains:

> My femslash blog tries to support queer women in fandom to relate their experiences to the characters onscreen, whether or not the character is canonically queer. We also run events to boost the representation of minorities within F/F, such as Femslash Diversity Bingo, a tongue-in-cheek way for writers to create 5 fics featuring diverse women and NB

> [(non-binary)] people along axes such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, body type and class. (centrumlumina, #298)

Moreover, through the running of "events" to encourage other fans to produce fanworks that centre femslash pairings through an intersectional lens, as I discussed in Chapter 3, *femslashrevolution* encourages other fans to take seriously, firstly, a feminist politics of recognition, and, secondly and more specifically, the politics of the intersection of sexuality and gender with other identity markers. In doing so, they raise individual fans' awareness of the systemic biases of media representation and encourage them to think critically about how the invisibility of queer women and non-binary people within both popular culture texts, as well as within fandom itself, is multifaceted and operates along intersecting axes of privilege and oppression. In doing so they function in a consciousness-raising capacity and 'explicitly strive to increase fandom's inclusivity and diversity' (De Kosnik 2016, 183). This enables and encourages other fans to learn about feminist issues *through* their practices of cultural production, embedding the process of feminist learning into the pleasures of fannish cultural production. Moreover, through the process of sharing their fanworks with other fans, fans are in turn able to teach others through raising awareness of the lack of representation and diversity within the portrayal of female/female relationships. Thus, a continual process of learning and knowledge sharing is central to the process of cultural production within feminist fandom.

Another fan project associated with centrumlumina with huge pedagogical potential is her "AO3 Statistics" project that she has been running continuously since 2013. Archive Of Our Own, more commonly referred to within fannish spaces as the abbreviated "AO3", is a non-profit and open-source repository of fanworks, and predominantly fanfiction, created and operated by the Organisation for Transformative Works.[38] Organised and indexed through a 'curated folksonomy' (Bullard 2014) tagging system (see Price 2019), AO3's tagging system can be easily mined to generate quantitative data about the features and content of fanworks being produced and shared by fans on the platform.[39] Centrumlumina's AO3 Statistics project subsequently involves her conducting an annual content analysis of the most popular relationships, or

“ships”, within AO3 fanworks on her Tumblr blog. From a post gathering all of her work on the AO3 Statistics project (see Figure 9), you can see that this involves posting a general annual “Top 100” list of statistics, alongside annual lists dedicated exclusively to femslash ships.

In addition to this, centrumlumina also directs her readers towards a range of supplementary meta analyses she has authored over the years, written from a feminist perspective, which examine her findings with regards to the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Meta analyses such as these, I argue, have an important pedagogical function within feminist fandom on Tumblr. For example, in an August 2016 post titled “Fandom’s Race Problem and the AO3 Ship Stats”, centrumlumina draws upon her research to explore the structural racism of fannish spaces and examine how the fantext largely reproduces the pervasive whiteness of contemporary Anglo-American media cultures, as I discussed previously in Chapter 4. For example, she calls attention to the structural racism implicated in the statistics she gathered, which revealed that just 12.5 per cent of the characters featured within the

Figure 9: Centrumlumina's AO3 Statistics Masterpost. Featured with permission of blog owner.

fanworks based on Western media fandoms on AO3 are people of colour, over half of whom are mixed-raced and/or light-skinned.

Using quali-quantitative methods of data collection and analysis that would not be amiss within a university classroom, including the citation of a large-scale content analysis conducted by Smith *et al. (*2015*)* examining gender, race, and sexuality within the US film industry alongside US census data, centrumlumina draws upon her research to explore colourism and 'anti-Blackness in fandom' (centrumlumina 2016b). The methods used by centrumlumina to critically examine and reflect upon fandom are commonplace within feminist media studies, where such methods are used to 'reveal scales of presence and absence in identified texts, groups, and sites, as well as patterns of inclusion and exclusion' (Harvey 2020, 43). As Kohnen (2018) notes, fans are often deeply involved in discussing and thinking about the theoretical ideas that students may encounter in a university classroom. Similarly, Hills (2002) observes that there is much overlap between fan and academic analyses, and McCracken (2017, 152) argues that fannish pedagogies on Tumblr often reproduce 'cultural studies methods of media analysis.' She continues: 'Their priorities are very much in the tradition of media activists and scholar-fans from nondominant groups; feminists, LGBTQ persons, the working classes, and people of colour have long recognised the political import of media representation' (157). Academic language and expertise, Hills (2002) argues, 'cannot be kept safely "in" the academy' (21), and 'feminist media critique is not just the prerogative of academic researchers and authors' (Harvey 2020, 56). The circulation of these forms of feminist and fannish media critique, especially when turned inwards towards fandom itself, thus operate as a powerful and accessible form of feminist knowledge sharing. Beyond this, they play an important role in encouraging fans to more critically attend to fandom's failure to address whiteness itself 'as a racialised identity' (Pande 2018, 82).

Moreover, centrumlumina's analysis anticipates some of the 'defensive moves' (DiAngelo 2011, 54) of white fragility that I discussed in Chapter 4, and offers counter-arguments to these defensive moves in turn. Here, given that centrumlumina is white, we can see a move away from the types of anti-racist

critiques produced *exclusively* by my participants of colour detailed in Chapter 4. This is particularly evident in a follow-up blog post authored by centrumlumina titled “But! A Response to Responses”, which she describes as “a rebuttal to some of the criticisms of myself and other’s work on sexism and racism in fandom that I’ve seen in the past” (centrumlumina 2016a). She ends her “Fandom’s Race Problem” post urging other fans to learn from her observations and work towards producing “even greater moves towards diversity”:

> [F]or fandom to make good on its promises of diversity, we must all contemplate the part we play in supporting or erasing characters of colour in our fics and other fanworks. It is my hope that future AO3 Ship Stats lists will reflect even greater moves towards diversity, but this can only be achieved by a conscious, concentrated effort on the parts of fans. (centrumlumina 2016b)

Here, centrumlumina’s feminist pedagogical practice encourages fans to point their social and cultural critiques inward towards fandom itself, encouraging them to challenge their biases and blind spots, particularly in terms of race and whiteness, and move their production of the fantext towards a higher degree of representational diversity and inclusivity in line with the project of recognition feminism (see Kohnen 2018, De Kosnik 2016). By urging her peers to “contemplate the part *we* play in supporting or erasing characters of colour in our fics and other fanworks” (my emphasis), she encourages her peers to engage in acts of feminist consciousness-raising and self-education in line with the intersectional feminist frameworks many of my participants endeavour to align themselves with. Her call to fans to consider their complacency in reproducing the valourisation of white characters, and particularly canonically heterosexual and cisgender white men (see Pande 2018), within the fantext exposes whiteness as a racialised identity and thus functions as an act of intersectional feminist knowledge sharing. Notably, here we can once again see how the kinds of feminisms articulated by fans correspond to broader discursive shifts taking place within both the academy and the popular domain with regards to the ‘intersectional turn’ (Carbin and Edenheim 2013).

The circulation of her “Fandom’s Race Problem” blog post within Tumblr is punctuated by comments and contributions from other users adding additional commentary and analysis to the post. While some of the users’ responses are symptomatic of the kinds of white fragility detailed earlier, a significant number of the responses add additional insight to centrumlumina’s original meta analysis, thus contributing to a communal process of feminist knowledge production and feminist knowledge sharing on Tumblr.[40] Moreover, through the visibility of these discussions on Tumblr, people far beyond those immediately involved can ‘listen in’ (Thelandersson 2014, 529) and learn from the knowledge being shared between users. As Keller et al. (2016, 8) note, the visibility of these discussions helps to ‘generate a wider feminist consciousness.’ Listening thus forms an important mode of participation in knowledge sharing within feminist fandom. This is something that I will explore in more detail shortly in the final section of this chapter.

Centrumlumina’s experiences demonstrate the high value my participants place on the importance of both educating oneself as well as educating other members of the feminist fan community. For many of my participants, the act of taking their feminist critical media literacy forwards into their production of the fantext – be that through the production of fanworks, through engaging in critical discussion, or through producing meta analysis as centrumlumina does – operates as a way of *sharing* their feminist knowledge with other members of the fan community. As I highlighted in Chapter 3 while discussing Isolde-thelady’s (#315) experiences, these meta analyses function as a form of ‘critical paratextuality’ (Gray 2010) and have the capacity to radically interrupt and redirect interpretations of a text, teaching other fans about feminism in turn.

The pedagogical impact of centrumlumina’s analyses was mentioned by another one of my participants in their response to my research survey. Ashling (#305) notably alluded to centrumlumina’s production of knowledge in her responses to my survey, as well as during our follow-up interview. When describing her concern over the elevation of white characters within fandom, she suggested that I “look at centrumlumina and the many other Tumblr’s that

conduct fandom statistics analysis for this." Two things are worth noting here. Firstly, Ashling highlights that the kinds of feminist meta analyses of fandom being conducted by centrumlumina are also being conducted by many other fans, in turn – thus pointing to how commonplace such acts of knowledge sharing are within feminist fandom.[41] Secondly, Ashling's integration of centrumlumina's meta analyses into her discussion of feminist fandom, suggesting that I, in turn, examine them, once again demonstrates the reciprocal nature of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom and the operation of feminist fandom, as I discussed earlier, as a gift economy. As Hellekson (2009, 115) notes, meta analysis is but one of many 'gifts' exchanged between fans that are incorporated into the larger fantext as 'a part of something greater.'

As I have argued elsewhere, the successful performance of an ability to partake in feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom increasingly bears 'subcultural capital' for the beholder (Hannell 2017a). Thornton (1995) describes 'subcultural capital' as a kind of 'hipness', comprised of specific artefacts and knowledge, which confers a recognised social status and distinction on its owner. Possessing subcultural capital involves being 'in the know' (11-12) about the norms of a given subculture and being able to navigate them with ease and authenticity. Being a feminist fan therefore requires the development of a particular knowledge that functions as subcultural capital within feminist fandom. As with many digital feminist spaces, a certain fluency in feminist vocabulary and principles is required to participate (Clark-Parsons 2018, Kanai 2020). Yet, in addition to the expectation that one will be well versed in the queer and feminist subcultural vocabulary that circulates on Tumblr, one must also be well versed in popular media culture, as well as the norms and expectations of a given fan community (see Sandvoss 2011). The ability to skilfully share one's feminist knowledge with other users can increase an individual's insider status and prestige within feminist fandom. Moreover, as Naylor (2016, 41) notes, 'progressive politics and activism are increasingly a prominent part of fandom spaces on platforms like Tumblr … , and performance of them increasingly bears cultural capital within these fandom communities.' While exchanges of feminist knowledge

within feminist fandom operate as an educative tool for both identity formation, as well as community building, they also nevertheless operate as a form of distinction and exclusion. Consider, for instance, twenty-two-year-old Lily's (#53) remark that "I'm not sure how to properly express myself with important subjects like these," reveals how this uncertainty limited her ability to meaningfully engage in feminist fandom. As Hills (2002) notes in his discussion of McLaughlin's (1996) work in regards to the figure of the fan-scholar:

> These fans, who provide satisfying explanations of their fandom which may then be taken up by their respective fan cultures, are seemingly 'elite' because they articulate communal values which would otherwise remain implicit. They are also the 'elite' because they possess so much information on their chosen topic. (Hills 2002, 17)

Additionally, the processes of inclusion and exclusion produced by the subcultural capital of feminist knowledge within feminist fandom are compounded by other barriers to entry, such as the language barriers I discussed in Chapter 4 or the anxieties around adolescence as "under-informed" that I discussed in Chapter 3. The reliance on specialised queer and feminist subcultural vocabulary on Tumblr, as Dame (2016) notes, subsequently risks limiting some users' self-expression and undercuts the pedagogical potential of the space. Furthermore, possession of this feminist subcultural capital inevitably provides access to and identification with power, once again demonstrating that feminist fandom is not immune to the hierarchies and power structures it endeavours to evade. As McCracken (2017) notes, while Tumblr can operate as a highly productive space for peer-learning and knowledge sharing under the rubric of fandom's gift economy, it can also 'reproduce social inequalities or become toxic in a variety of ways.' Thus, while I earlier explored knowledge sharing within feminist fandom within the context of fandom's gift economy logic, this arguably reflects a more utopian framing of these processes of learning and knowledge sharing. It is important, in turn, to critically locate these acts of knowledge exchange within a wider context and consider how they might reinforce processes of exclusion.

Throughout this section, I examined my participants' accounts of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom. Firstly, I explored my participants' construction of feminist knowledge sharing as an *obligation* and as a meaningful mode of participation in feminist fandom, positioning the act of feminist knowledge sharing within the context of fandom's gift economy. I then explored the multi-generational nature of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom on Tumblr, drawing upon my participants' experiences to dispute claims about generational divides within digital feminist spaces (Schuster 2013). Following this, I examined the case study of one of my participants, centrumlumina (#298), who is involved in various processes of communal feminist knowledge sharing on her Tumblr blogs. I used this example to explore how knowledge sharing forms a core part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan. Finally, I positioned the ability to partake in acts of feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom as a form of subcultural capital which ultimately reproduces processes of inclusion and exclusion within feminist fandom and risks undercutting the pedagogical potential of the space.

In the following section, I turn my attention to my participants' emphasis on the processual and ongoing nature of feminist learning within feminist fandom.

"I try my goddamn best to always keep learning and growing": Reflexive Listening and Un/learning in Feminist Fandom

As I discussed in Chapter 3, my participants conceived of their feminist identities as processual and emergent. They emphasised that their commitment to an *ongoing* process of learning and self-improvement was central to the processual nature of their identities as feminist fans. They framed the ongoing process of feminist becoming as deliberative, social, and communal, positioning fandom as a site at which fans collectively engage in an ongoing struggle over meanings of feminism more broadly. Moreover, I argued that their identities as feminist fans work as a form of group 'identity work' (Wexler 1992, Best 2011) marked by a commitment to continuous

growth and change. Indeed, feminism, and feminist identities, are often complex, processual, and 'emergent' (Budgeon 2001, Harris 2010, Keller and Ryan 2018, Piepmeier 2009), and a commitment to ongoing, continual learning has long been conceived of as a central tenet of feminism. Sara Ahmed (2017, 11), for instance, writes that 'to become a feminist is to stay a student.' Likewise, the notion of 'a work in progress' is central to both fandom and the study of fandom (see Hellekson and Busse 2006). These understandings of both feminism and fandom as processual can thus be carried over to my participants' understandings of feminist fandom as a work in progress, once again demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between both feminism *and* fandom in theory as well as in practice.

Continued learning was one of the most significant aspects of the ongoing and processual nature of my participants' identities as feminist fans. Across their responses to my research survey, two interrelated modes of engaging in continual feminist learning emerged to which an ongoing process of critical self-reflection was central: *listening* and *learning.*[42] Reflexivity is more broadly central to feminist pedagogies (Shrewsbury 1993, Hesse-Biber and Brooks 2012, Hesse-Biber and Piatelli 2012), wherein practising reflexivity takes the form of critical self-reflection and conversations with the self. Shrewsbury (1993, 8-9) highlights that this commitment to growth and renewal gives feminist pedagogy its life:

> Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning – engaged with the self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge ... Fundamental to a feminist perspective is a commitment to growth, to renewal, to life. The vision itself must continue to evolve.

While many participants emphasised that engaging in the kinds of feminist knowledge sharing I detailed above is a particularly meaningful mode of participation in feminist fandom, many in turn framed *listening* as an equally important mode of participation. Ari (#182), for example, explained that while she did try to engage in feminist knowledge sharing, through contributing to

"dialogue and discourses," she more often dedicated time to "listen[ing] and try[ing] to morph and extend my personal knowledge and opinions of feminist topics." Listening attentively to the lived experiences of others emerged as an important part of the ongoing group identity work of feminist fandom, and it is something my participants took very seriously. Many of my participants, in turn, positioned listening as an *obligation* required of them as feminists.

I find Nick Couldry's (2009) understanding of the politics of listening particularly useful to consider here:

> Listening here is, first and foremost, the act of recognising what others *have to say*, recognising *that* they have something to say or, better, that they, like all human beings, have the capacity to give an account of their lives that is reflexive and continuous, an ongoing, embodied process of reflection. (Couldry 2009, 579-80; original emphasis)

Here, Couldry attends to the relationship between listening and an ongoing process of both recognition and reflection, which makes it highly compatible with feminist pedagogies. As Rinaldi (2006, 65) argues, such modes of listening produce 'sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.'

In practice, listening is akin in many ways to the act of lurking. However, unlike the anxiety-laden descriptions of lurking that I described during my discussion of non-belonging in Chapter 4, here the act of *lurking as listening* is framed by my participants in a much more agentic and positive manner, emerging as a valuable mode of participation in feminist fandom. Consider, for example, Jessica's (#280) earlier description of lurking, learning, and shaping her views and opinions as her "favourite thing" to do within feminist fandom on Tumblr. Additionally, laughingpinecone (#259) explicitly acknowledged the pedagogical benefits of "lurking" in her responses to my survey, explaining how she carried forward what she had learned while "lurking" into her own production of feminist knowledge within feminist fandom through her contributions to the fantext:

> Lurking the ongoing talks, since long before they were called discourse, made me aware of themes and issues, which naturally ended up informing my own creative output, in the ways I portray women and men as well.

As Crawford (2011) notes, to reconceptualise lurking as listening is to reframe 'a set of behaviours once seen as vacant and empty into receptive and reciprocal practices' (527). Indeed, within fan studies, lurking has acquired negative connotations. It has been described as occupying a 'less participatory' (Bury 2018, 130), less 'influential' (Baym 2000, 144-7), less 'active' (Hills 2002, 172), and ultimately less fannish (Hellekson 2018) role within the fan community, and the term is often used to imply that lurkers unevenly draw upon a community 'without contributing back' in turn (Jenkins et al. 2013, 156-9). Additionally, fan studies scholars methodologically position lurking as an ethically complicated, if not entirely problematic, position on the part of the researcher (Bury 2005, Zubernis and Davis 2016, Busse and Hellekson 2012, Phillips 2013, Christensen and Jensen 2018). Within the context of my data, reconceptualising lurking as listening, however, captures how the behaviours often understood as lurking, and thus non-participatory, provide a meaningful way to engage in an active and ongoing process of informal learning within feminist fandom. For example, Mzyraj (#217) explained that, while her shyness affected her ability to "be out in the community discussing these things," she nevertheless remained committed to "listen[ing] and always keep[ing] an open mind." Here, we can see how lurking as listening allows us to capture the active, receptive, and reflexive nature of this mode of participation within feminist fandom. Similarly, Josie (#227) positioned listening as her preferred mode of participation, noting that, "I'd much rather listen to what others have to say and share that than come up with something myself," and Di (#133) explained that, "I try to be as intersectional as possible when it comes to my feminism, and do my best at listening to others and become more knowledgeable." As Jenkins et al. (2013, 158) note, many participants in online communities learn through '"lurking" or observing from the margins.' Lave and Wenger (1991) describe such acts of observation as a 'legitimate' mode of 'peripheral participation' that is central to

the learning process.[43] Many of my participants thus frame listening as a 'transformative' (Stetz 2001) experience, and as the agent of active and ongoing change within one's understanding and practice of myriad feminisms.

My participants subsequently approach their listening pedagogically, viewing listening as a means for acknowledging difference between themselves and others without 'demand[ing] that differences be bridged' (Ratcliffe 2005, 53). For many of my participants, listening emerged as a meaningful way to reflexively acknowledge their privilege, engage with others' perspectives, and foster meaningful communication across difference. These modes of listening 'across the boundaries of difference' (Cervenak et al. 2002, 342) in order to expand one's understandings of positionalities beyond one's own are, as numerous feminist scholars have noted, central to feminist pedagogy (Butterwick and Selman 2003, Hinshaw 2011). They, Couldry (2016) argues, provide knowledge of the world that enables us to recognise and respond to issues and identities that we least understand and may rarely hear. We can see this in effect across my data. For example, Elizabeth (#303), who explicitly positions herself as a "white, heterosexual passing, physically able, mostly mentally healthy, middle-class woman," explained that her self-awareness of her privilege compelled her to "keep my mouth shut," and, instead, "listen to what other people have to say." Similarly, Star (#274) emphasised that she believed feminism involved an ongoing commitment to "advocating for listening to people when they talk about their own experiences, and boosting their voices when you can." Additionally, we can also see this at work in the responses of J (#90), who describes her ongoing process of reflexively engaging with questions of voice and listening as part of her commitment to her "work in progress" identity as a feminist:

> Currently, I am involved both at work and outside of work in feminist activism. I've been working on finding my place - as a white woman, where is my voice necessary? What other work can I do, where my voice shouldn't be the loudest, to help others be heard? Where do I need to listen and continue learning? I think it's very much a work in progress, but my feminist identity and work is very important to me. (J, #90)

My participants' commitment to reflexive listening (and the processes of learning it facilitates) is in part motivated by a desire to undertake the 'relational work' (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1348) required of creating and maintaining their understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as a safe space. Note, for example, Sabrina's (#25) comments that I discussed earlier with regards to her desire to "create safe, open platforms" based on what she had learned from listening to, and engaging with, "older people in the fandom." Moreover, my participants' responses reveal how these processes of listening as a form of relational work are motivated by a feminist ethic of care (Preissle and Han 2012) towards others that relies on a capacity for empathy, patience, and receptiveness to the experiences of others. As Collins (2009, 281-2) notes, the feminist 'ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process.' Florangel (#9), for example, explained that her approach to participating in feminist fandom is "all about listening and being listened to." She later added that this more broadly involves, "mutual understanding on respective grounds." Similarly, Josie (#227) highlighted the relationship between empathy, care, and listening within feminist fandom:

> At this point, I'm not sure if I can articulate what feminism means to me. It's... encompasses more than before. For me, it involves a lot of listening. Caring about other people. Lots of empathy.

We can also see this feminist ethic of care at work in Morgan's (#322) account of reflexively listening within feminist fandom. He explained:

> I engage in these issues by reading posts, reading new stories from new authors, and looking for conversations where I am going to learn something by expanding what I think and understand about the world, and the potential impacts of my ways of being on others. ... There is always something new to learn and grow about life. ... It's an ongoing discovery. I don't think there's anywhere to get to, so much as an intention to be the kind of person around whom people feel welcome, acknowledged. (Morgan, #322)

Morgan emphasises his commitment to personal growth and renewal, framing his experience of listening and learning within feminist fandom as an open-

ended and “ongoing discovery.” Moreover, he highlights how an ethic of care, underpinned by “an intention to be the kind of person around whom people feel welcome, acknowledged” is at work throughout this process. Thus, the act of listening, and by extension learning, that he engages in is motivated by a self-reflexive desire to extend feelings of belonging to all members of feminist fandom who coalesce on Tumblr. Furthermore, the focus of participants like Florangel (#9), Josie (#227), and Morgan (#322) on the pedagogical importance of listening to the experiential knowledge shared by others align with Black feminist epistemologies that position lived experience as an important ‘criterion of knowing’ (Collins 2009, Omolade 1987).

Elsewhere, participants spoke highly of the affective and connective power of these processes of listening and learning across difference within feminist fandom. Spelertoneel (#36), for example, described this process in some detail:

> I am a feminist, and I am one because I find that feminism empowers people, and empowers and inspires kindness amongst people. It gives voices to those unheard and a way to find perspective in those areas in which you're not a minority. It makes you critical of yourself but doesn't punish you. It teaches you - if you are allowed to be educated and you listen to those who teach you, you become a kinder person. I truly believe that.

Here, spelertoneel’s account of the impact of feminist listening across difference, of hearing the voices of those previously “unheard” not only adheres to the feminist ethic of care through her emphasis on active listening as a form of kindness and empathy, but it also adheres to feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’ (1990) theory of ‘loving perception.’ Lugones describes these moments of listening across difference as a kind of playful ‘”world”-travelling’ that speaks to ‘the acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life to other constructions of life where [one] is more or less “at home”’ (390). The forms of loving perception Lugones describes requires one to reflexively ‘look, and listen and check and question’ (Frye 1983, 60). To travel between “worlds”, then, is to be willing to listen to different ‘description[s] of experience’ (Lugones 1990, 396), and be open and receptive to the

experiences of others (Preissle and Han 2012). We can see this at work in spelertoneel's (#36) description of feminism as "a way to find perspective in those areas in which you're not a minority." Moreover, spelertoneel's (#36) description of feminism as something which "makes you critical of yourself but doesn't punish you", adding that it instead "teaches you" and makes you a "kinder person" also adheres to Lugones' (1990, 401) description of loving perception as involving 'openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the "worlds" we inhabit.' This openness to the educative function of listening thus allows spelertoneel to construct and reconstruct her understanding of the "worlds" she inhabits based on the process of actively listening to the perspectives, and lived experiences, of those around her.

Lugones' (1990) concept of 'loving perception' therefore speaks to my participants' accounts of the processes within feminist fandom that encourage active listening and self-reflection, fostering a willingness to grow and develop through reflexive forms of looking, listening, checking, and questioning. This 'loving praxis' (Cervenak et al. 2002, 352) is tied to the empathetic recognition of one another's 'complex personhood' (Gordon 2008, 5) as a meaningful source of information, education, and knowledge sharing. A willingness to *listen* thus produces a willingness to recognise and attend to the complex personhood of others, which is central, Lugones (1990, 390) argues, to an intersectional and 'pluralistic feminism.' As Cervenak et al. (2002, 353) highlight, this is hugely beneficial pedagogically:

> Taking seriously "the stories people tell about themselves" and the ways they tell them opens up multiple spaces for self-recognition, and carves out loving worlds structured by the creative and critical practice of listening and learning.

Notably, Lugones' description of world-travelling as related to one's understanding of what it means to be 'at ease in a "world"' (397) echoes Carrillo's conceptualisation of 'differential belonging' that I discussed in Chapter 4, as a mode of belonging that allows for contextual movement between various modes, or "worlds", of belonging according to one's needs.

This process involves negotiating 'across such boundaries of difference to build intimate knowledge of that which lies between self and other' (Carrillo 2005, 38). From this, we can see how the processes of listening within feminist fandom are more broadly related to the kinds of belonging one can access and inhabit.

However, Ortega (2009, 60) cautions against such utopian renditions of 'loving perception' within our understandings of feminist spaces, arguing that, in 'the relationship between some white feminists and women of colour,' there are those who 'seem to have understood the need for a better way of perceiving but whose wanting leads them to continue to perceive arrogantly, to distort their objects of perception, all the while thinking they are loving perceivers.' For instance, building upon Frye's (1983) schema of 'loving perception', Ortega (2009, 61; my emphasis) questions the distinction between those 'who *look and listen*, as Frye suggests, but do not *check and question*.' Indeed, the experiences of non-belonging that I discussed in Chapter 4 lend credence to this more critical rendition of listening across difference. While my participants might position themselves as "intersectional feminists", this does not necessarily produce a willingness to thoroughly attend to, and thus *listen to* or *lovingly perceive*, those who occupy more marginal social locations than their own. We are once again reminded of the complex and contradictory nature of the relationship between fandom and feminism.

However, in terms of Ortega's (2009) specific critique of the disjuncture between looking and listening and checking and questioning, many of my participants nevertheless emphasised their willingness to reflexively *check* and *question* as well as *learn* and *unlearn.* For my participants, listening was especially important precisely because it facilitates the ongoing process of learning and unlearning within feminist fandom. As Hoodfar (1992, 305) notes, 'developing the ability to listen and speak to other constituencies more effectively' not only 'makes working across differences more feasible,' it also contributes to the process of 'unlearning privilege'. In order to *learn,* and thus *question* and *unlearn,* one must be willing to *listen.* Unlearning has long been a feature of discussions about feminist pedagogy (Aptheker 1981, Stitzel 1979, Omolade 1987, hooks 1989), and the term is used to describe the

processes by which we seek to address, reflect upon, and dismantle our own complicity within structures of power and domination. Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1989, 46), for example, writes that 'learning about other groups ... can be a way to unlearn racism, to challenge structures of dominance.' Thus, Shrewsbury's (1993; my emphasis) aforementioned description of feminist pedagogy as involving engaging with others in an ongoing 'struggle to *get beyond* our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge' can be understood as describing the continual process of *unlearning.* Feminist pedagogy therefore involves 'learning, unlearning, and relearning' (Flannery and Hayes 2001, 34).

Many of my participants emphasised how they sought to unlearn their conscious and unconscious biases, such as racism or sexism or homophobia, *through* feminist fandom. Across these accounts, the kinds of learning facilitated by feminist fandom, as I detailed above, are central to the broader ongoing project of *unlearning* one's hegemonic understanding of social and cultural phenomena and, instead, crafting a more oppositional, nuanced, and empathetic understanding of a wide range of intersecting identities and social issues. Consider, for example, Sahvana's (#321) earlier comments about learning to "actively work against my own racism," which, in turn, "opened the doors to learning to stop being bigoted in other sense: ableism, transphobia, and misogyny as well." She described this as a "long process of detoxing my bigotry that ended with me as a better person in general." Likewise, ecoantics (#234) described how the process of unlearning not only transformed her worldview but also her sense of self:

> Then when I joined Tumblr, I followed a lot of blogs that posted social justice content, and I started to learn about intersectionality. I unlearned a lot of unconscious biases that had been inherent in the 90% white suburban Midwest culture I grew up in. I started to unlearn white feminism and started to learn intersectional feminism. … Social justice content online helped me start to understand the immense disadvantages, struggles, and biases that people with disabilities, homeless people, and people below the poverty line face. I slowly unlearned a lot of internalised homophobia and realised I was bisexual with a preference for women.

The ongoing process of unlearning described by ecoantics emerges as a way for her to reverse processes of interpellation and instead work towards further developing alternative and more oppositional interpretations of the 'identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990) of both herself and others. Thus, feminist fandom's position as a counterpublic sphere is deeply connected to the pedagogical processes of learning and unlearning detailed by my participants.

Across my dataset, a willingness to commit to a much broader lifelong, continual, and ongoing process of feminist learning and unlearning forms a core part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan and belonging to feminist fandom. As Shrewsbury (1993, 11) notes, feminist pedagogy 'takes seriously the goal of lifelong learning.' Subsequently, my participants highlighted their willingness and openness to engage in a lifelong process of learning and unlearning. Josie (#227) for example, whose account of the connection between feminist becoming and recognising her positionality as a Métis person I discussed in Chapter 3, explained: "I fully expect I will constantly have to check myself and learn/unlearn new ways of thinking." This, she explained, was motivated by her intention "to not become complacent." Later, she added:

> I'll be unlearning stuff for the rest of my life. I'm embarrassed that at one point I was very much into the "if you mess up once you're done" line of thinking, and how there wasn't room for mistakes. If you said or did something wrong, you were a bad person and there was no coming back from that. The thing is though, is that this is just so unforgiving and doesn't allow for people to learn and change and GROW. I think my early time on Tumblr was pretty bad for that. I was terrified of saying or doing something wrong. I much prefer being able to learn from mistakes. Like. I'm gonna make mistakes. But I make an effort to learn from them and make amends where possible. I also try to extend that mindset to others. People can grow. I would find it so hard to go on if I didn't believe that people could change. I have to believe that we can all be better. (Josie, #227)

Above, Josie explains how she had initially conceived of her feminism as both static and absolutist but has since come to embrace a much more fluid understanding of feminism that is committed to a vision of growth and renewal.

She also explains how she extended this approach to feminist learning and unlearning to others, producing a hopeful rendition of the belief that "we can all be better." Here, we can once again return to Lugones' (1990) loving praxis with regards to the developmental trajectory of feminist fandom. Josie's description of coming to embrace a feminism that is forgiving and open to continual change and growth echoes Lugones' (1990, 400; original emphasis) claim that: 'we are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction* … we are not wedded to a particular way of doing things.' This mode of continual feminist knowledge production and knowledge sharing is thus 'not about solving a problem but about remaining open to pursue new ways of thinking' (Cervenak et al. 2002, 354), much like the process Josie describes. Moreover, the reflexive practices of growth and self-improvement that Josie describes are typical of feminist pedagogical approaches to lifelong learning (Burke and Jackson 2006).

While my participants more broadly positioned themselves as the agents of knowledge about feminism, as detailed previously, they also position themselves as continually in pursuit of new feminist knowledge. This is something that they described enthusiastically, positioning the pursuit of new feminist knowledge as central to the pleasures of participating in feminist fandom. For example, drarry_fanatic (#141) excitedly explained that feminist fandom "continues to inspire and teach me new things everyday!" Elsewhere, Lane (#63) explained, "I love engaging in fandom and getting excited about things, but I also love everything I'm learning (and unlearning), not just about feminism but racism, classism, the world." Feminist identity work on Tumblr thus involves a pleasurable process of 'learning, realising, and discovering' (Byron et al. 2019, 2250).

Thus, actively engaging in an open-ended and lifelong process of reflexive feminist learning and unlearning is central to the pedagogical function of feminist fandom. Listening, which my participants agentically position as lurking, emerged as integral to this process of un/learning, operating as a means for participants to meaningfully and reflexively acknowledge their privilege, engage with others' perspectives, and foster meaningful dialogue

across difference. Such acts of active and engaged listening across difference adhere to a feminist ethic of care in their focus on listening as a form of kindness and empathy. They are therefore central to the 'relational work' (The Roestone Collective 2014) required of maintaining the understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as a safe space. My participants accounts of pedagogical listening, I subsequently argue, adhere to Lugones' (1990) concept of loving perception through their emphasis on the importance of exercising a willingness to grow and develop through forms of looking, listening, checking, and questioning. Moreover, such willingness to continuously look, listen, check, and question lends itself to my participants' emphasis on the importance of *unlearning,* in turn. From this, we are once again reminded of the ongoing process of growth and renewal that is central to the feminist (and thus feminist-fannish) project, producing a hopeful rendition of the developmental trajectory of feminist fandom captured across my data.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I returned to a number of the themes discussed throughout the preceding chapters in order to examine their pedagogical function within feminist fandom. My analysis is therefore not only informed by the preceding chapters, it also further shapes and enhances our understanding of them. For instance, throughout this chapter I explored the role of fan-created paratexts in the learning process, arguing that these fan-created texts have the capacity to function as feminist teaching moments that enable and encourage fans to develop their critical media literacies. Elsewhere, building upon my earlier conceptualisation of feminist identities as active, ongoing, and processual, I explored my participants' accounts of the importance of engaging in a continuous process of feminist learning and feminist knowledge sharing through their engagements with the discourses, practices, and positionalities of feminist fandom. Additionally, for my participants, the pleasures of engaging in feminist fandom were deeply

connected to the pleasures of feminist learning and knowledge sharing, and were thus central to feeling a sense of belonging within feminist fandom.

More broadly, my analysis locates feminist fandom as a fruitful site for engaging in feminist learning and knowledge sharing. Across my dataset, feminist learning is described as an ongoing, self-reflexive, multivalent, and ultimately transformative process. Learning, my participants emphasise, requires a willingness to listen across difference, as well as a willingness to check and question and, when necessary, engage in subsequent acts of *unlearning.* Feminist knowledge sharing is in turn described as an open-ended, reciprocal, and multi-generational process that many participants engage in out of a sense of duty and obligation towards their imagined feminist peers. These accounts reveal the intimate relationship between feminist fandom and feminist pedagogy and demonstrate the fundamental importance of informal and everyday spaces in which such acts of feminist learning and knowledge sharing may take place.

Throughout my analysis, I emphasise that fandom subsequently plays an important role in 'bringing feminism to a wider audience and providing spaces for the multiplicity of voices therein' (Harvey 2020, 57). In doing so, my analysis challenges perspectives which position the pedagogical potential of fannish spaces as a by-product or side-effect, rather than explicit purpose, of fannish activities and practices (Jenkins, Ito, et al. 2016). Within *feminist* fandom, actively and deliberately engaging an ongoing process of informal learning and, by extension, knowledge sharing forms a core practice of feminist fandom and is central to the group identity work required of being a feminist fan.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Bringing together feminist cultural studies and fan studies, one of the primary concerns of this thesis has been to reveal and examine media fandom's position at the intersection of the multi-directional and co-constitutive relationship between popular feminisms, popular culture, and digital cultures. Throughout this thesis I have drawn upon the insights and experiences of my participants to explicate how fannish and feminist modes of cultural consumption, production, and critique are increasingly converging, opening up informal, ordinary, and everyday spaces for young people to engage with feminism. In doing so, I have emphasised that media fandom does not exist in a vacuum, but is constituted by the same social, cultural, and political forces that have come to shape fourth wave feminisms. In turn, the experiences documented throughout this thesis speak to the ways in which broader shifts within feminist practice, theory, and activism over the past decade have shaped and informed the social and cultural practices of feminist fandom. My research subsequently forges sustained dialogue between feminist cultural studies and fan studies methodologically, empirically, and theoretically. In concluding this thesis, I summarise the themes I have discussed and developed throughout and reflect upon my key findings and the implications of these findings in relation to the research questions I set out to investigate. I also consider future directions for this area of study and reiterate the importance of approaching my ethnographic data with due criticality and respect.

Reflections on Fandom and Feminism

My research addressed three key and interrelated research questions:

1. *What is the role of fandom in the development of young people's feminist identities?*
2. *How do feminist fan communities bring together fan and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities?*
3. *How does Tumblr facilitate this process?*

My response to these research questions contributes to an emergent body of literature examining the contours of young people's engagement with contemporary feminisms within a digital context. As I discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, despite media fandom's established history of engaging with a feminist politics of recognition, as well as its central role within contemporary youth culture, it has remained markedly absent in accounts of young people's engagement with feminism and development of feminist identities. While feminist becoming has been a lively subject of inquiry over the last three decades, much of the literature on feminist becoming focuses on the significance of educational contexts as fertile ground for feminist identity development, for example focusing on university (Marine and Lewis 2014, Aikau et al. 2007, Hercus 2005) and high school (Retallack et al. 2016, Ringrose and Renold 2016, Kim and Ringrose 2018). More recent accounts have explored the significance of the internet and digital cultures (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller 2016a), as well as popular culture (Schuster 2013, Martin and Valenti 2013, Keller 2015, Taylor 2016), as conduits for feminist becoming for young people. However, such perspectives have failed to account for the role of media fandom, as a space situated at the intersection of digital feminisms, digital cultures, and popular culture, in the development of young people's feminist identities. This thesis has thus been produced by a desire to remedy this gap within feminist cultural studies.

In doing so, it can also be situated within an established body of work within fan studies examining a wide range of fan practices which, as Duffett (2013, 73) writes, offer 'a tool for social criticism' (Jenkins, Shresthova, et al. 2016, Bury 2005, Hellekson and Busse 2006, 2014, Busse 2005, Coppa 2008, 2011, 2014, Wills 2013, Warner 2015, Merrick 2009, Busse 2017). Despite the dominance of these perspectives within fan studies, the feminist valences of media fandom are too often taken for granted. They have evaded sustained scholarly analysis at the level of ethnographic lived experience, and are rarely contextualised within the broader cultural moment in which a range of feminisms have achieved a 'new luminosity' (Gill 2016b, 1) within popular media cultures. Additionally, many of these perspectives remain preoccupied with fannish textual productivity (see Fiske 1992) in ways that risk losing sight

of the importance of paratextuality and the paratextual circulation of popular culture within the communities of feminist fandom.

Likewise, while feminists have long been interested in the ways in which popular cultural texts offer interpretative frameworks for what feminism *means* (van Zoonen 1992, Mendes 2015, Bronstein 2005, Dow 1996, Taylor 2016), they often fail to account for the ways in which these cultural texts paratextually circulate more broadly within our mediated environment. What sort of 'cultural work' (Bourdage 2014, 173) do the audiences 'who populate the text' (Gray 2010, 146) undertake? In turn, in Chapter 3, I adopted Gray's (2010) theorisation of paratextual circulation to examine how the popular cultural texts *circulated, consumed*, and *produced* by fans are central to the process of feminist becoming. My analysis of my participants' self-narratives revealed how feminist identity development is organised and structured by the discourses, practices, and subject positions of media fandom. For example, the circulation of texts within the social structures of fandom on Tumblr operate as a means for establishing initial points of contact between young people and feminist discourses and practices, subsequently shaping their understandings of feminism on not only a *textual* level (their interpretation of the fan object) but at a *paratextual* level of the 'fantext' (Hellekson and Busse 2006). For my participants, the fantext – encapsulating the entirety of fan-created texts, discussions, interpretations, and analyses – introduced them to feminist interpretative frameworks, concepts, and discourses through the lens of the popular cultural texts they are interested in as fans. In doing so, I argued, the circulation, consumption, and production of the fantext initiate a consciousness-raising process that enables feminist fans to both *make sense of feminism* as *make feminist sense* of popular culture.

The paratextual circulation of popular culture thus operates as a way for fans to learn about feminism, facilitating various modes of feminist knowledge production and knowledge sharing that many of my participants would seldom access elsewhere. This is something I explored in more depth in Chapter 5, where I revealed the connections between feminist fandom and feminist pedagogy**.** A feminist politics of recognition remains central to the pedagogic impetus of feminist fandom, I argue, precisely because fans are characterised

by their sustained collective proximity, or 'critical closeness' (Stein; interviewed in Morimoto 2019), to popular cultural texts. By virtue of their fannish attachments to popular culture, they are deeply concerned with questions of representation, storytelling, and meaning-making. We saw this, for example, at work in my participants' accounts of developing critical feminist and social justice-oriented media literacies (Kellner and Share 2007) through their interest-driven ties to media fandom. Such processes of informal learning, I noted, often corresponded to their salient identity categories, such as sexuality, gender identity, or race. Crucially, many of my participants emphasised that these processes of informal learning within feminist fandom allowed them to redress some of the constraints produced by the social, cultural, and educational norms of their local contexts. My analysis subsequently complicates the work of fan studies scholars such as Booth (2015) who frame fandom as a *supplementary* educational space.

In turn, my analysis also positioned the production and circulation of fan-created paratexts within feminist fandom as a form of collective multi-generational feminist knowledge sharing. For instance, participants emphasised that their collective production, consumption, and circulation of the fantext allowed them to share information about feminist discourses and practices and initiate educative processes of feminist consciousness-raising amongst their peers. This was particularly important for my participants who identified as feminists before their first encounters with feminist fandom, who reported taking up fannish modes of cultural production to engage with a feminist politics of recognition and produce their own interpretations and reworkings of popular cultural texts. My older participants also emphasised that they were particularly committed to feminist knowledge sharing, framing it as a form of inter-generational mentoring and community support on Tumblr. In Chapter 5, I situated these acts of feminist knowledge production and sharing within the context of fandom's 'gift economy' (Hellekson 2009, Turk 2014), positioning feminist knowledge production as a 'gift' that one anticipates other fans to receive and reciprocate in turn. I subsequently locate feminist fandom as a space where fans co-produce, negotiate, and contest meanings

of feminism through their production, consumption, and circulation of the fantext.

Throughout my analysis, the connections between fandom, feminist becoming, and feminist pedagogy emerged as central to the counterpublic potential of media fandom on Tumblr. My research places feminist fandom on Tumblr within an established history of online feminist counterpublics (Keller et al. 2016, Keller 2016a, Sills et al. 2016, Horeck 2014, Pérez and Greene 2016, Salter 2013, Schuster 2013, Rentschler 2014, Clark-Parsons 2018). I examined this in Chapter 4 with reference to my participants' use of spatial metaphors to describe Tumblr as their "home". Drawing upon the concept of 'platform vernacular' (Warfield 2016, Gibbs et al. 2015), I explored how Tumblr's multimodal, multivocal, and multiplicitous nature positions it as a space where feminist fans may openly discuss experiences, share interests and information, and connect with like-minded people "without shame". For example, a number of my participants emphasised how their engagement with feminist fandom had prompted processes of transformation in their sense of self, for example with relation to their sexuality or race. These accounts subsequently adhered to Fraser's conceptualisation of counterpublics as spaces that permit members of subordinated social groups to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990, 67). Tumblr's affinity with counterpublic modes of address was central to my participants' understanding of feminist fandom on Tumblr as an imagined transnational community of "like-minded" feminist fans.

However, my analysis also revealed that feminist fandom does not necessarily produce an unconditional or fixed sense of belonging in its bringing together of fannish and feminist practices, discourses, and positionalities. Instead, more complex and contingent accounts of belonging emerged. While, as I discussed in Chapter 1, scholars have established connections between the popularisation, or mainstreaming, of fannish and feminist identities within popular media cultures (Stein 2017), my findings complicate this picture. As I highlighted in Chapter 4, my participants were drawn to participating in feminist fandom because its platform vernacular produced a culture of anonymity and

privacy. This is something that not only informed my findings but also my methodological orientation to the research. For many of my participants, the culture of privacy afforded by Tumblr was central to their sense of safety and belonging on the site. They affectively experienced Tumblr as feeling *more private* and thus *more safe* than other social networking sites. Such an understanding of Tumblr as a 'safe space' (The Roestone Collective 2014, Miño-Puigcercós et al. 2019, Clark-Parsons 2018, Lucero 2017) was heightened in particular for my queer participants – especially those who were young, closeted, and rural – who use feminist fandom to undertake various forms of queer identity work and establish a sense of solidarity with an imagined queer community (Gray 2009). For these participants, the privacy norms of Tumblr enabled them to create protective 'firewalls of visibility' (Jenkins, Ito, et al. 2016, 57) that work to reduce their risk of exposure to harm – both on and offline. Additionally, the privacy norms of the site allayed participants' fears about negative peer judgement and alignment with negative fan stereotypes. My research thus counters recent claims within fan studies that position fandom as a normative and widely accepted cultural identity (Gray et al. 2007, Jenkins 2006a, 2007, Booth and Kelly 2013, see Sandvoss 2005). Instead, it reaffirms Scott's (2019, 13) assertion that fan culture's broader shift from the 'margins to the mainstream' has been unevenly distributed, having (re)produced a 'structured secondariness' (5) for fangirls, fans of colour, and queer fans, and their preferred modes of engagement with popular culture.

As a number of fan studies, girls studies, and feminist scholars have contended, gendered modes of anti-fandom often rely on a disavowal of fandom as *too feminine* and *too emotional* (Busse 2013, Scott 2011, 2019, Pinkowitz 2011, Dare-Edwards 2015, Cann 2015, 2018, Hannell 2020a), as an excess of affect. Concurrently, as I argued in Chapter 4, feminist fandom is deeply affective, marked by the 'intensities of feeling' (Thrift 2004) produced by fannish and feminist positionalities. Indeed, one of the most significant modes of belonging that my participants articulated relied upon a deeply affective imagined community of feminist fans on Tumblr. Drawing upon perspectives from both fan studies (Grossberg 1992a, Sandvoss 2011, Busse 2013, Stein 2015) and feminist theory (Hemmings 2012, Stanley and Wise

1993, Gorton 2007) on the affective intensities of both fannish and feminist identities, I argued that the imagined community of feminist fandom is primarily constituted by a sense of *shared feeling,* weaving together the affective and the relational. The affective intensities of my participants' fannish investments in popular culture are structured, organised, and reproduced by their feminism, and vice versa, as shared feminist frameworks operate as a way for feminist fans to organise their affective investments in particular texts. Here my analysis makes visible the connections between feminist fandom and the impassioned modes of feminist popular culture critique associated with fourth wave feminism that I initially discussed in Chapter 1. However, the affective intensities of feminist fandom are also implicated in my participants' desire to have a safe and private space to collectively express their thoughts and *feelings* about both fandom and feminism. Future research on feminist fandom may subsequently wish to consider how the gendered contours of contemporary anti-fandom (Scott 2011, 2019) that drive feminist fans to engage with media fandom in private or semi-private digital spaces align with emergent forms of popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018) and anti-feminism (Ging and Siapera 2019) that manifest in digital contexts.

Feminist Fandom: A Work in Progress

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that feminist fandom is a space in which fans engage in an ongoing process of negotiation and contestation over meanings of feminism. In turn, my analysis positions feminist fandom as a fruitful site for feminist 'identity work' (Wexler 1992, Best 2011) both collectively and individually. We can see this, for instance, in the processes of feminist transference I described in Chapter 3, where feminist fans use the discourses and practices of fandom to work through their positionalities. The identity work of feminist fandom also emerged in Chapter 5 through participants' emphasis on feminist knowledge production and knowledge sharing as an ongoing collective responsibility central to meaningful participation in feminist fandom. Likewise, participants' descriptions of feminist fandom on Tumblr as a safe space in Chapter 4 centred an implicit understanding of the collective 'relational work' (The Roestone Collective

2014, 1348) required of maintaining the safety of the space. However, where feminist fandom is most fruitful in its position as a site for feminist identity work is in its emphasis on process and emergence.

This thesis presents a digital ethnographic examination of the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminism. It is deeply informed by my personal history within feminist fandom, and my data was collected and analysed not as an outsider, but through active and prolonged participation within the feminist fan community on Tumblr. While, as I set out in Chapter 2, I remain deeply committed to a localised production of my ethical stance in line with my participants' wishes and expectations (see Whiteman 2012) and have endeavoured to achieve 'an authentic presentation of the people under inquiry' (Shkedi 2004, 93), in committing my analysis to the page I inadvertently present a fixed and linear narrative that contradicts my participants' understanding of their identities as emergent, fluid, and in process. Feminist fan communities bring together fannish and feminist discourses, practices, and positionalities in ways that are constantly evolving in terms of form, content, and intent. Attempting to capture this in all of its complexity and unfixity has not been an easy undertaking.

In Chapter 3, I drew attention to the commonalities between scholarly understandings of fandom as a 'work in progress' (Hellekson and Busse 2006) and understandings of feminist identities, and feminism, as complex, processual, and 'emergent' (Budgeon 2001, Harris 2010, Keller and Ryan 2018, Piepmeier 2009, Smith-Prei and Stehle 2016). Throughout my data, participants emphasised that feminist fandom has provided them with opportunities to continually discuss and refine their understandings of multiple feminisms, both in theory and practice. They subsequently positioned themselves as open to new concepts, discourses, and practices. Many of these accounts drew upon discursive themes of youth and adolescence, positioning youth as a time of formation, renewal, and exploration of the self (Lesko 1996, Wyn and White 1997).

I returned to these themes in Chapter 5, when I explored participants' participation in a continual process of reflexive *listening* and *(un)learning,* once

again reaffirming the connections between feminist fandom and feminist pedagogy. Building upon Couldry's (2009) understanding of the politics of listening, I examined my participants' accounts of *lurking as listening* in order to interrogate normative fan studies framings of lurking that position it as non-participatory, passive, and ultimately less legitimate (Hills 2002, Bury 2018, Baym 2000, Hellekson 2018). Instead, I positioned *lurking as listening* as an active, receptive, critical, and reflexive mode of participation within feminist fandom aligned with feminist pedagogies of listening across difference (Butterwick and Selman 2003, Hinshaw 2011, Cervenak et al. 2002, Ratcliffe 2005). I later explored the connections between the process of listening and the process of (un)learning. The unlearning of hegemonic and normative understandings of the social world, I highlighted, has an established history within feminist pedagogy (Aptheker 1981, Stitzel 1979, Omolade 1987, hooks 1989), and, in my participants' accounts, unlearning is intrinsically connected to the ongoing processes of self-reflection, learning, and discovery prompted by listening. A commitment to a lifelong, continual, and ongoing process of feminist listening, learning, and unlearning forms a core part of the group identity work required of being a feminist fan and belonging to feminist fandom. As I conclude this thesis, this identity work continues beyond the confines of my analysis.

My ethnographic analysis of feminist fandom on Tumblr has subsequently enabled me to examine the lived experience of a transitory and ephemeral moment in the site's history. The experiences captured throughout my data in many cases refer to what Watercutter (2019) describes as Tumblr's 'halcyon days', the 'three or four years around 2013.' This is something my participants also acknowledged throughout their responses to my survey in particular, which notably situates their most intense and sustained engagement with feminist fandom in the period leading up to the emergence of popular feminism around 2014 (see Banet-Weiser 2018, Keller and Ryan 2018, Rivers 2017). Future work may give due consideration to the possibility that young people's participation in media fandom may have facilitated the heightened visibility of feminism within both popular and digital culture at a

time when fannish and feminist modes of cultural consumption, production, and critique are increasingly ubiquitous.

Complexities and Contradictions

Notably, since I began this research, Tumblr's user base and activity have steadily declined. Many of my participants, for example, reported that, as they moved into higher education or full-time employment, they now have less time to dedicate to feminist fandom on the site, and are subsequently engaging with feminist fandom on a more intermittent basis. Numerous participants emphasised that they have more recently moved their fannish and feminist online activity elsewhere as new platforms with alternative affordances and vernaculars have emerged.

Additionally, the site's wavering popularity was exacerbated by two key events that occurred towards the end of my data collection. Firstly, in 2018 investigative news reports revealed that a significant number of Tumblr accounts posing as Black Lives Matter activists were connected to a Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaign operating throughout the 2016 U.S. presidential election (see Sommerlad 2018). The news came as a surprise to many Tumblr users who had become accustomed to the sense of spatial belonging afforded by the site. Tumblr's implication in the proliferation of disinformation campaigns circulating through online networks (see Bennett and Livingston 2018) thus risks destabilising understandings of Tumblr as a safe space for those wishing to engage in counterpublic modes of address. Secondly, in December 2018, Tumblr made a much-critiqued decision to ban adult content from its site. Many were quick to express their concern about the impact of this decision on the site's LGBT users who, like many of my participants, found in the website a space to undertake queer identity work with regards to gender, sexuality, and sex and relationships (Cho 2015, Dame 2016, Fink and Miller 2013). For example, writing for *The Guardian,* Ho (2018) expressed her concern about the impact that these changes would have on 'the marginalised communities who have found, within Tumblr's more tolerant stance toward legal adult material, a safe haven to explore and establish their

sexual and gender identities.' Tumblr, in turn, reportedly lost up to 20 per cent of its users following this decision (Liao 2019, Romano 2018). Beyond this, Tumblr has become increasingly embroiled in the US culture wars over the past few years, exemplified most clearly in alt-right anti-feminist memes about "social justice warriors" (Massanari and Chess 2018, Nagle 2017, Lawrence and Ringrose 2018) – a term that, as I discussed in Chapter 1, references the association between Tumblr, its users, and the feminist term "social justice". The links between Tumblr, digital feminism, and media fandom are by no means uncomplicated or straightforward.

In Chapter 2, I discussed my methodological orientation to this research and emphasised the necessity of feminist researchers to proceed with due compassion *and* due criticality towards research about young people's feminisms (Lewis and Marine 2015, Gill 2007a). As García-Rapp (2018, 620) notes, it is the work of researchers to both 'clarify and complicate' our understandings of the social world. Thus, while my analysis has explored the potential of media fandom to operate as a feminist pedagogical space that facilitates feminist identity development, consciousness-raising, community building, knowledge production, and knowledge sharing, it is also important, especially as I conclude this thesis, to question and, where necessary, interrogate the gaps and silences in many of my participants' accounts. One of the most significant outcomes of this methodological orientation to my data analysis was its insight into the ways in which my participants' narratives, while rich and varied, at times contradicted one another. In doing so, they revealed the powerful processes of inclusion and exclusion at work within feminist fandom, as well as digital feminist spaces more broadly.

Most significantly, in Chapter 4, I distinguished between two divergent understandings of feminist fandom articulated by my participants. The first, I argued, represented a normative celebratory understanding of fandom as inherently progressive or resistant – one that circulates within both fan studies and fandom itself. Alternatively, the second understanding instead of feminist fandom foregrounded the structuring force of whiteness within both fannish (Pande 2018) and feminist spaces (Daniels 2016, Loza 2014), revealing how access to belonging within feminist fandom is differentially distributed in ways

that necessitate more precarious and contingent modes of 'differential belonging' (Carrillo 2005). Many of my participants of colour expressed their frustration with feminist fandom's elevation of white characters, as well as the failure, if not refusal, of many feminist fans to address whiteness 'as a racialised identity' (Pande 2018, 82). The experiences of 'white fragility' (DiAngelo 2011, 2018, Applebaum 2017) reported by feminist fans of colour should be considered in contrast to, or perhaps more fittingly in conjunction with, participants' narratives detailed in Chapter 2 marked by a performative disavowal of "white feminism" – a term that has been revitalised within feminist discourse in recent years (see Kendall 2020, Olufemi 2020, Kanai 2020) – in favour of a supposedly "intersectional" feminist identity. This performative process of disavowal, I argued, is central to the identity work undertaken by many feminist fans and is configured through anxiety-laden discourses about regulating, disciplining, and improving the feminist (and fannish) self. However, as Kanai (2020) notes, a disavowal of complicity with white feminism in pursuit of a supposedly intersectional feminist identity often obscures the reinvigoration of a whiteness centred on individual self-monitoring and self-discipline (Ahmed 2004b). More broadly, my arguments in relation to whiteness and non-belonging can be situated alongside an emergent body of literature within fan studies examining race and fandom (Pande 2018, Woo 2018, Warner 2018, Morimoto 2018).

Notably, other forms of exclusion also emerged throughout my analysis, for example with regards to language, nationality, and cultural barriers. For instance, I discussed the responses of participants from the Global South who expressed their discomfort towards the myopic focus of much feminist fandom on the North American and European context (Altınay 2014, Kim 2017, Losh 2014), thus extending the forces of neocolonialisation and neoimperialism within a digital context (Maxfield 2016, Taylor and Zine 2014). In Chapter 5, I also suggested that feminist knowledge within feminist fandom can be understood as a form of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995). The successful performance of an ability to participate in feminist knowledge sharing within feminist fandom thus risks reinforcing hierarchical processes of exclusion as, like many digital feminist spaces, a certain fluency in feminist vocabulary and

principles is required to participate (Clark-Parsons 2018, Kanai 2020). The complexities of these experiences cannot be neatly interpreted within normative celebratory theories of fannish resistance within fan studies (Coppa 2014, Jenkins, Shresthova, et al. 2016, Busse 2017).

The accounts I have examined throughout this thesis therefore make visible the multiplicitous, complex, and often contradictory, meanings of feminism and feminist practice that are circulated, negotiated, and contested within fannish spaces, reminding us that there is no singular or fixed "feminism" implicated in feminist fandom, or fourth wave feminism more broadly. However, they also undoubtedly affirm Banet-Weiser's (2018) assertion that some feminisms are afforded more popularity than others within the 'economy of visibility' (18) that characterises our contemporary cultural moment. In turn, the accounts of non-belonging within feminist fandom articulated by participants of colour can be contextualised with regards to the ways in which whiteness pervades the feminisms that are afforded the most visibility within popular and digital cultures, subsequently effacing more dynamic and intersectional feminist iterations and practices. Nevertheless, a number of my participants did position feminist fandom as a space in which they had engaged with less visible intersectional, queer, and indigenous feminisms. Like popular feminisms, fannish feminisms are multiplicitous and multivalent. They exist along a continuum.

Simultaneously, the dominant understandings of feminist fandom, articulated both within my ethnographic data as well as within scholarly theorisations of fandom, call for the necessity of a sharper understanding of the complex and contradictory ways in which difference is simultaneously levelled out and heightened within fannish spaces. While my analysis reveals the role of social media platforms like Tumblr in facilitating the relationship between media fandom and young people's engagements with digital feminism, we must also remain mindful of its complex role in the re-entrenchment of structural inequalities both in its architecture and its use. Digital spaces are not disembodied, but instead extend and reproduce offline inequalities and power imbalances. Just as they can become key spaces for feminist education and activism, they can also become 'aggregators of online misogyny' (Rentschler

2014, 65) and bring other forms of structural inequality into stark relief. As Rivers (2017, 115) notes, ‘the relationship between feminism and social media is as fraught as it is productive.’ Likewise, Gill (2016a, 617) stresses that we need to ‘think together’ the rise of popular feminism and new forms of feminist practice and activism, as typified by feminist fandom, alongside, and in tandem with, intensified misogyny and the resurgence of the far-right.

In concluding this thesis, I do not want to present a reductive or overly deterministic account of feminist fandom, yet I also do not wish to foreclose due critique. In turn, our understandings of feminist fandom, and the relationship of media fandom to digital feminisms more broadly, should be open to change in line with its emergent nature. This also adheres to understandings of youth as a time of process and continual recalibration. The processual nature of fannish feminisms, as well as feminist fans’ commitment to continuous growth and change, hopefully implies that there is ultimately room for movement and progress. This calls for a flexible approach to the observations and findings detailed throughout this thesis. This thesis is not an uncritical celebration of the relationship between media fandom and digital feminisms. It should instead be understood as an attempt to bring together some of the complex, ambivalent, and contradictory ways in which feminist fandom remains entangled with digital and popular cultures which at once challenge, and yet continue to be shaped by, relations of power and domination.

Notes

[1] For instance, some argued that generational differences discourage young women from identifying with feminism (Pilcher 1998), while others point to negative media representations and negative feminist stereotypes rendering feminism unpopular (Bulbeck 1997, Hinds and Stacey 2001, Zaslow 2009, Crossley 2010, Tomlinson 2010, Mendes 2011). Others suggest that young women distance themselves from feminism because they believe it to be anachronistic (Budgeon 2001, Jowett 2004, Read 2000, Hall and Rodriguez 2003), or because neoliberal and postfeminist discourses reduce the appeal of joining collective political struggles (Baker 2008, Hughes 2005, McRobbie 2009, Zaslow 2009, Scharff 2012). Additionally, race and class intersect with these forms of feminist dis-identification, as many consider feminism the exclusionary and alienating domain of white middle-class women (Skeggs 1997, Kelly 2001, McIntyre 2001, Denner 2001, hooks 1994a).

[2] For example, mainstream journalistic coverage of Tumblr describes its users as having 'a strong interest in social justice issues' (Safronova 2014), as 'help[ing] to queer an entire generation' (Madden 2019), and as committed to 'open, self-governing exchange of ideas' (Watercutter 2019).

[3] This is to ensure compliance with Tumblr's Terms of Service, which at the time of writing stipulates that users must be aged 13 and above to use the platform.

[4] Notably, here I refer to girls and young women, rather than the assumedly gender neutral "youth", in recognition of the dominance of gender (and often, those who are cis-gendered) as an analytic category when exploring young people's engagements and identifications with feminism. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, I opened up my own research to self-identified feminists regardless of gender identity, which produced a much more diverse and multivalent sample of participants in terms of gender identity.

[5] Having been used to establish generational divides between feminists (Gillis et al. 2007, Schuster 2013), exclude feminists of colour (hooks 1994a, Springer 2002), privilege white and Western feminisms (Hemmings 2005, 2011), present paradoxes of confusion when cross-wave themes are combined (Graff 2003), and create individual and collective crises of feminist subjectivities amongst those who do not identify with a specific wave (Kinser 2004).

[6] See Kinser (2004), Mann and Huffman (2005), Gillis et al. (2007), Harnois (2008), Coleman (2009), Genz and Brabon (2009b).

[7] Following the work of Henry Jenkins (2006a), I understand the term 'production' to refer to not only the creation of digital products, but also to the interactive and dynamic processes of cultural consumption that is embedded in production. My understanding of cultural production recognises that young people often 'take up or consume popular images, and combine, critique, adapt, or incorporate them in their own media productions' (Weber and Mitchell 2007, 27).

[8] For a detailed breakdown of the affordances of Tumblr compared to social networking sites such as Facebook, see Renninger (2015).

[9] Indeed, as Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2009) have argued, no singular feminism exists, and, as Marjorie DeVault (1996) notes, feminist methodologists do not use or prescribe to a unified set of practices and principles or any single research method. However, feminist methodologists are broadly united through their shared commitment to questions of power, knowledge, and subjectivity.

[10] See Charlotte Brunsdon's (2000) interviews with Geraghty, Hobson, Ang and Seiter in *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* for more information on the approaches taken by feminist audience researchers during this period.

[11] Although, as a relative newcomer to fandom not particularly well-versed in the fannish norms and expectations of LiveJournal, I often struggled to access the closed LiveJournal communities where much fannish activity occurred at the time (see Chin 2018, Morimoto and Chin 2017).

[12] Which, as Coppa et al. (2018) note, in many ways constitutes a fandom in and of itself.

[13] Hine (2015) similarly highlights the role of ethnography in crafting 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) of the social world, writing that 'only be ethnographic immersion can a confident thick description be produced' (Hine 2015, 161).

[14] These are as follows: Argentina (1), Australia (8), Austria (6), Belgium (5), Brazil (5), Bulgaria (1), Canada (18), Chile (3), Czech Republic (1), Denmark (5), Estonia (1), Finland (2), France (11), Germany (21), Greece (2), Hungary (1), Indonesia (2), Iran (1), Ireland (1), Israel (1), Italy (9), Latvia (1), Mexico (3), New Zealand (2), Norway (2), The Philippines (3), Poland (1), Portugal (3), Romania (1), Russia (2), Slovakia (2), South Africa (1), Spain (3), Sweden (9), The Netherlands (6), Trinidad and Tobago (1), United Kingdom (48), Ukraine (1), and the United States (157).

[15] Notably, the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software can increase the rigour of a qualitative study, especially when working with larger data sets (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007).

[16] Notably, a feminist ethics of care is often utilised within fan studies (see Busse 2018, Busse and Hellekson 2012, Deller 2018).

[17] This approach largely adhered to the editorial philosophy of the *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* (2020), whose guidelines on the protection of fan sources stipulate that researchers should obtain permission from the creator of any fanworks cited in a piece of research.

[18] Similarly, in *By Any Media Necessary,* Jenkins and Shresthova (2016) conceptualise popular culture as a 'civic pathway'. They claim that fandom represents one of many possible spaces where people come together around their shared passions and interests, which can in turn act as 'springboards for civic and political participation' (271).

[19] Hills' notion of fandom-as-transformative should not be conflated with Busse's (2013) typology of *transformative* versus *affirmational* fandom. Their respective uses of 'transformative' are very distinct. Hills uses the term to describe a genre of self-narratives about identity development, while Busse uses the term to refer to modes of fandom, fan practices, and fan communities.

[20] Taft (2017), in her research on girls' activist narratives, similarly identifies themes of both transformation and transference.

[21] Similarly, Fiske (1987) and Jenkins (1992) have referred to this as a communal fan-produced 'meta text' that is larger, richer, and more complex than the original (also see Hellekson 2009). This is something I have discussed in more depth with regards to feminist fandom elsewhere (see Hannell 2017b).

[22] See Skeggs (1997), Kelly (2001), McIntyre (2001), Denner (2001), hooks (1994a).

[23] Although numerous scholars have notably lamented how the intersectional turn at times severs intersectionality from its origins in black feminist epistemologies (Crenshaw 1991, Collins and Bilge 2016).

[24] In Canada, Métis are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry.

[25] Fridlund (2014), for example, describes belonging as 'partial, fragmented, or segmented' (267), to the extent that '*multiple* belonging is constitutive of identity' (273; original emphasis).

[26] Affect theory has been widely adopted within Euro-American cultural studies and beyond, yet the concept remains somewhat open-ended, and has been taken up by scholars in a number of ways (Ahmed 2004a, Gregg 2006, Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Wetherell 2012). While some distinguish between affect and emotion (Probyn 2005, Grossberg 1992b, Pedwell and Whitehead 2012), many others use the terms interchangeably (Ngai 2005). Affect is ultimately concerned with the way *feeling* resonates and is negotiated and experienced. For affect theorists such as Grossberg (1992a, 1992b) and Hillis et al. (2015), affect concerns both the *quantity* and *quality,* or rather *intensity,* of feeling.

[27] The *Supernatural* fandom has received a notable, perhaps disproportionate, amount of scholarly attention within fan studies. See, for example, Zubernis and Larsen (2012). At the time of writing, a literature search for the term "Supernatural" on the *Transformative Works and Cultures* database*,* as a 'flagship publication' (Morimoto and Chin 2017, 187) within fan studies, returns almost 100 individual results.

[28] For example, a 2007 *Time Magazine* article declared that the fanboy is 'one of the most powerful taste-makers in Hollywood' (Keegan 2007).

[29] For example: the 'Manosphere' (Gotell and Dutton 2016); gamer gate (Gray et al. 2017); Men's Rights Activism (Gotell and Dutton 2016); digital lad culture (Jackson et al. 2014, García-Favaro and Gill 2016, Phipps et al. 2017); 'e-bile' (Jane 2012); and 'toxic technocultures' (Massanari 2017).

[30] Beverley Skeggs (1997) has similarly noted the conceptual duality of the relationship between identity and non-identity, highlighting the importance of non-identification in the process of locating identities and feelings of belongingness.

[31] Also see Onís (2019).

[32] As I noted in Chapter 3, many of my participants reported actively seeking to centre women, as well as other intersecting marginalised identity positions,

in the fanworks they produced, positioning cultural production as an important means by which my participants carried their feminism forward into their fandom. Also see Hannell (2017b).

[33] This is something that Pande's (2018, 54-5) participants similarly discussed.

[34] As scholars including Wanzo (2015), Pande (2018), Warner (2015), Scott (2019) and Woo (2018) have noted, fan studies has had limited engagement with the relationship between race and media fandom. This is perhaps, as Wanzo (2015) argues, because this process may trouble some of the implicit claims 'at the heart of fan studies scholars and their scholarship' which position media fandom as inherently progressive, inclusive, and liberatory.

[35] However, feminist fans are nevertheless still coalescing in spaces which privilege English-language speakers and predominantly Anglo-American media texts.

[36] Notably, feminist scholars have similarly conceived of feminism as an intergenerational 'gift' (Elam 1997).

[37] One of the few exceptions to this was a response written by sixty-four-year-old Wendy (#118), one of my oldest respondents, who expressed her concern that "younger people tend to feel that we don't have anything relevant to contribute."

[38] See https://archiveofourown.org/.

[39] Notably, many fans cross-post their fanworks across AO3 and Tumblr. For example, a fanfiction author may upload their fanfiction to the repository of fanworks on AO3, and subsequently post to Tumblr to alert their followers that they have done so.

[40] These responses notably include the Tumblr blog *diversehighfantasy*, which I discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to Grace's (#264) experience of coming to understand feminism within the context of race and ethnicity.

[41] Flourish Klink and Elizabeth Minkel, of the fan-created and fan-run podcast *Fansplaining,* for example, routinely produce thought-provoking and engaging discussions about fandom that bridge the divide between fannish and scholarly criticism. The podcast, which Klink and Minkel describe as digging "into the conversations currently shaping fan culture, from intersections with the entertainment industry to depictions in the media to conflict within fandom itself," routinely invites contributions from writers, academics, fan creators, industry insiders, and more (Fansplaining 2020).

[42] See Murru and Stehling (2016) for an overview of the literature on the civic value of listening from an audience studies perspective.

[43] See Fiesler et al. (2017) for an exploration of this theoretical concept within the context of fandom.

Glossary

Many of these definitions have been informed by the Fanlore wiki's extensive reference volume of fan terminology. See: https://fanlore.org/wiki/Category:Glossary.

1D: One Direction, a British-Irish pop boyband formed in 2010.

AFAB: Assigned Female at Birth. Often used within discussions about gender identity, particularly by trans or non-binary people.

AMAB: Assigned Male at Birth. Often used within discussions about gender identity, particularly by trans or non-binary people.

Anti: An abbreviation of the terms "anti-fandom" or "anti-fan". Used to refer to fans who focus on a source text to mock or deride it (and, on occasion, its fans). Some anti-fans were originally fans of the source text to begin with. See Gray (2003).

AO3: Archive of Our Own, an open source fanfiction repository and archive operated by the Organisation for Transformative Works and Cultures. See: https://archiveofourown.org/.

ASOIAF: A Song of Ice and Fire, a series of epic fantasy novels by George R. R. Martin. Adapted into a television series, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), by HBO.

Canon: A source, or sources, considered authoritative by the fannish community surrounding a particular text. Alternatively, see "fanon".

Cisgender: A term used to describe when a person's gender identity matches social expectations given their gender assigned at birth (also see AFAB and AMAB). For example, ciswoman or cisman. Alternatively, see "transgender".

Discourse: A term used in particular fannish contexts to refer to fannish discussion, debate, and/or arguments and disagreements. Also see "wank".

Fanfiction: Fanfiction, also known as "fic" or "fanfic", is a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, adopting a source text or famous person(s) as a point of creative departure. Fanfiction is usually produced and circulated within the context of a fan community. Also see "AO3" and "slash".

Fanon: Any element that is widely accepted within a fan community, but has little or no basis in canon.

Fanwork: A fanwork is a creative work produced by one or more fans intended for other fans. There are many types of fanworks ranging across written, visual, audio, video, print, and multimedia formats. See: https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fanwork.

Femslash: A term used to refer to fanwork featuring female characters involved in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Sometimes referred to shorthand as “f/f”.

Genderfluid: A term used to describe a flexible and fluid gender identity that may fluctuate between genders or express multiple gendered identities at the same time.

Genderqueer: A term used to describe a category of gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine, and thus lie outside of cis-normativity. In some cases it is used as a synonym for “non-binary”.

IRL: In Real Life. Also see “meatspace”.

LiveJournal: A social networking website founded in 1999 where users can keep a blog, journal, or diary. Users can create group journals (“communities”) which can operate as either public or members-only.

Meatspace: The physical world, as opposite to cyberspace or virtual reality.

Meta: A form of self-reflexive critical writing and analysis that is stylistically unique to fandom.

Mutuals: A term used to describe the relationship between users who follow one another on social media. They mutually follow one another. Can be used as singular of plural.

Non-binary: A term used to describe a category of gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine, and thus lie outside of cis-normativity. In some cases it is used as a synonym for “genderqueer”.

Notes: On Tumblr, “notes” refers to the total number of likes, replies, and reblogs on a single post. They are used to measure the popularity of a post.

Queer: A sexual or gender identity that is non-conforming to heterosexuality or gender binaries. Further, this term also refers to academic theory and method that resists normative ways of exploring and conceptualising social phenomena (e.g. queer theory).

Reblog: This term refers to the process of user B reposting (and thus recirculating) user A’s blog post to user B’s blog.

Slash: A term used to refer to fanwork in which two (or more) characters of the same gender are involved in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Slash most commonly refers to male/male (m/m) pairings, while the term “femslash” is used to refer to female/female pairings. The term “slash” is most often used within the context of fanfiction.

Social Justice Warrior: A term used within digital cultures, often pejoratively, to describe those who align themselves with progressive politics and social justice. The term Social Justice Warrior is used as a pejorative within alt-right anti-feminist communities on websites including 4chan and Reddit (Nagle 2017). Most often referred to in its abbreviated form as “SJW”.

Social Justice: A term that has long been used by feminists, anti-racists, and other progressives to refer to ensuring social, economic, and political justice and recognition for marginalised identities.

Spoony: A term used to refer to a person with disabilities.

Stan: A portmanteau of the words “stalker” and “fan”. A term, often described as inspired by American rapper Eminem’s 2000 song “Stan”, used self-referentially by fans to refer to a particularly overzealous type of fannish behaviour. As of the late-2010s, many young fans increasingly refer to fan culture as “stan culture”.

Transgender: Those who have a gender identity which does not correspond to the identity they were assigned at birth. Alternatively, see “cisgender”.

Tumblr: A microblogging and social networking website founded in 2007.

Wank: A fannish term used in particular fannish contexts to refer to fannish discussion, particularly during arguments and/or disagreements. Also see “discourse”.

wlw: Women who Love Women. Used as an umbrella term to refer to lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form

This survey is part of my larger PhD research on feminist fan communities on Tumblr. My research seeks to explore the relationship between media fandom and feminism, and to examine the experiences and practices of fans who identify as feminists and use Tumblr to engage in fandom. I am conducting this research as a feminist and a fan, and I have been active within media fandom more broadly for 10+ years, and on Tumblr for 8+ years.

This survey is a series of open-ended questions about your personal experiences of fandom, Tumblr, and feminism. I encourage you to write as much or as little as you wish in response to my questions, and your responses can be as informal or as formal as you'd like – it really is up to you! Once you've completed the survey, I wholeheartedly encourage you to pass it on to your feminist and fannish friends. I am relying on the goodwill of fans to help spread the word!

My research has full ethical approval from the University of East Anglia's (in the UK) General Research Ethics Committee. Your participation in my research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time you wish to do so. All personal information will be kept strictly confidential, and you will be provided with the opportunity to provide a pseudonym or public identifier. Please note that I may contact you again based on your responses to the survey to follow up or invite you to participate in additional research.

I will post regular updates about my research on my blog under my "#phd update" tag. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me on Tumblr or at B.Hannell@uea.ac.uk.

Thank you!

CONSENT FORM

Research Title

Fandom and the Fourth Wave

Name of Researcher

Briony Hannell

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided to me for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I can confirm that I am 13 years of age or older.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.
4. I understand that if I do withdraw any data already collected about me will continue to be used in the research and may subsequently be published, unless I explicitly ask otherwise.
5. I understand that the data collected about me during this research will be credited to the given name or pseudonym that I provide to the researcher when it is submitted for presentation or publication.
6. I understand that any data collected about me during this research will be saved on a password protected computer.
7. I understand that I may be contacted about possible participation in future research projects conducted by the researcher.
8. I agree to take part in this research.

_____ _____

Name of Participant* ** Date

* You will be given the option on the following page to provide a name or pseudonym that the researcher will use when discussing and writing about any data collected about you.

** If you wish to, you can sign this consent form under your Tumblr username.

Appendix B: Survey Schedule of Questions

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

* = Required

1.1. Name*

This will be kept confidential and is purely for my records. This doesn't have to be your legal name. It can be your username.

1.2. Public Identifier*

Can I use the name given above in my write up (i.e. publications, papers, etc.) or would you prefer a pseudonym or anonymised marker? Again, this could be your username.

1.3. Tumblr username(s)*

1.4. Email Address

So I can get in touch with you again if required.

1.5. Age*

Please note that all participants must be above 13, in accordance with Tumblr's Terms of Use.

1.6. Gender/Pronouns*

Please state your gender identity and preferred pronouns.

1.7. Sexual Orientation*

Any terms on the spectrum that you'd like to use.

1.8. Ethic/Cultural/Racial Identities*

Any labels that you self-identify as.

1.9. Geographic Location*

Which country do you currently live in?

1.10. Languages

1.11. Education

What is your last/current education qualification?

1.12. Occupation

What is your current occupation?

TUMBLR, FEMINIST FANDOM, AND YOU

The next section of the survey is a series of open-ended questions about your experiences of fandom, Tumblr, and feminism. These questions are designed as prompts to help you frame your responses. You don't have to respond to every aspect of the question, and I encourage you to write as much or as little as you wish, and be as informal or formal as you'd like. There are no right or wrong answers! I'm interested in hearing about your experiences of fandom, feminism, and Tumblr.

2. **Fannish History***

Tell me about your journey in fandom. What is your personal journey in fandom? When did you become a fan? What was your first fandom? How did you find it? Where did you find it? What was your response? What other fandoms have you been involved in and which ones are you currently involved in? What sort of activities do you do as a fan?

3. **Feminist History***

Tell me about your journey as a feminist. What's your feminist story? When did you become aware of feminism? When did you start to identify as a feminist? Was there a specific moment of "feminist awakening"? What does feminism mean to you? Have you ever studied feminism?

4. **Fannish Platforms***

Which platforms have you previously used for your fandom activity? Which platforms do you currently use? Do you have a favourite platform? If so, which

one and why? How important is it to you to use Tumblr for your fandom activity? Are there any platforms you will never use for your fandom activity? If so, which one(s) and why not?

5. **Tumblr History***

When did you start using Tumblr? How old were you? How did you find it? What was your response? How often do you use Tumblr? Why do you continue to use Tumblr?

6. **How do you engage with feminist issues in fandom? ***

*When did you begin to engage with feminist issues with regards to fandom? How? **

7. **Are there any factors that affect your ability to engage with these issues?**
8. **Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

If you have anything else you'd like to add, please use this space.

If you have any specific comments, feedback, or concerns, you can also email me directly at b.hannell@uea.ac.uk or let me know here.

Finished!

Thank you very much for your time. Now you've completed the survey, I wholeheartedly encourage you to pass it on to your feminist-fandom friends.