INVESTIGATING STRUCTURAL ARTICULATIONS OF POWER IN
INFORMATION CREATION:
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF QUEER-CREATED
FANFICTION

By

DIANA FLOEGEL

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Investigating Structural Articulations of Power in Information Creation:

A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study of Queer-Created Fanfiction

By DIANA FLOEGEL

Dissertation Director:

Marie L. Radford

This dissertation is a constructivist grounded theory study of queer fans and their overlapping interactions with fanfiction texts, online platforms, and each other. Informed by queer theory, assemblage theory, and other perspectives from Library and Information Science (LIS), Media Studies, Fan Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies, I describe how structural power dynamics both shape and are shaped by inequities within information creation and associated online ecosystems. Findings and their implications address current limitations to both LIS and Fan Studies, especially in terms of the disciplines’ individualized and techno-utopian fallacies.

I use constructivist grounded theory to qualitatively analyze and triangulate data from four sources: semi-structured interviews with 25 queer fanfiction authors located around the world, participants’ fanfiction texts, sociomaterial features of online platforms used for fanwork like Archive of Our Own (AO3), and platform policy statements. Analysis exposes complex sociotechnical assemblages that consist of people, technologies, and institutions involved in fandom. In explicating assemblages, I describe how marginalized people express agency via creative practices while they remain constrained by intersecting biopolitical inequities related to gender, sexuality, race, and
nation. Findings suggest that tensions between agency and oppression are expressed in three domains: transforming bodies and feelings; forming community vs. forming cliques; and governing platforms and people.

When participants read and write fanfiction, they *transform* normative canonical media in order to include queer embodiments and affects. These practices are reflected in fanfiction texts as well as platforms’ taxonomic systems. Participants specifically include information about queer bodies and queer sex in their texts, and tags on fanfiction archives often describe affects, or how a work of fanfiction may make a reader feel. However, data from participants of color, trans participants, and asexual participants demonstrate that fandom is regulated by whiteness and homonormativity. Transformative potentials in fandom are limited along biopolitical lines: the bodies and affects instantiated within fanfiction texts and platforms’ taxonomies are often the most normative within these queer spaces, while less normative standpoints are policed.

Similar power dynamics extend to conceptions of *forming community*. Stark racial divides exist among participants: while white participants find community in fandom, participants of color are Othered. Further, complex “attention economies” develop in fandom. Though literature often frames fandoms as free of capitalistic dynamics, fans perform a great deal of labor to gain attention for themselves and their works. Despite the work a fan may perform to receive attention, logics of who and what become popular tend to reify normative racialized and gendered power dynamics so that marginalized fans are left out of arrangements that they refer to as “cliques” rather than communities.

Participants describe debates over what is defined as “inappropriate” or “not safe for work” (NSFW) in fanwork. What is considered NSFW, and how platforms design
ways in which people can avoid potentially upsetting fanfiction, are tied to historical constructions of biopower in fandom. For example, platform policies exist to moderate sexually explicit content, but not racist content; what is sexually explicit is also contested. Fans’ experiences are shaped by these policies. Platforms and their moderators afford white and cisgender fans more protection than trans fans and fans of color, who are often harassed when they share their experiences, and then held individually responsible for preventing people from harassing them. At the same time, moderators on platforms like AO3 are volunteers, and they describe their positions as callings or avocations rather than mere jobs or volunteer positions. Moderators’ perspectives mask both the labor they perform as well as the inequities they reify.

The structural power dynamics described in this dissertation are transferable to other online contexts and populations, and they demonstrate that “information creation” exceeds a practice or suite of practices. Structural power dynamics cannot be eradicated via small-scale platform or behavioral changes because they reflect ingrained social inequities. To conclude this dissertation, I suggest that researchers work with marginalized fans in order to develop potential ways in which to de-construct biopolitics and progress toward equity in online spaces. I recommend three theoretical directions that future work may adopt in order to meet these aims: a) drawing on critical race theory, affect theory, and Black feminist epistemology, I recommend that future researchers center anger as a productive and informative emotion; b) drawing on queer theory, I recommend that future researchers reconsider and explore the myriad ways in which fandoms have failed despite their queer veneers; c) drawing on critical race theory’s intersection with socio-technical futurities, I recommend that scholars use community-
based methods to imagine more just futures that do not follow normative or seemingly inevitable scripts for technology design and use.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is for my dad, who would have been its first and most voracious reader.
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This dissertation is a constructivist grounded theory study of queer fans and their overlapping interactions with fanfiction texts, online platforms, and each other. When I started this project, I intended to look at queer people’s information creation practices and how they reflect and reify structural power dynamics. Queer fandom was a natural context in which to explore these phenomena because I have been an active participant in online and offline fanfiction (or “fic”) collectives since I wrote my first self-insert Pirates of the Caribbean fic at age ten. However, as I progressed through two years of data collection and analysis, I realized that “information creation” does not entirely capture what I examine throughout this dissertation. This type of realization is common within a constructivist grounded theory study: I set out to look at one thing, and I ended up with something much larger and, I hope, more impactful. As I asked people about their experiences with fanfiction, and as I looked at the platforms where their fandoms live, I found rich environments filled with people, technologies, and institutionalized social discourses that far exceed creative practices, or even information practices as we currently think about them. In the end (if a research project ever really has an “end”), I explicate sociotechnical assemblages throughout this dissertation—complex fusions of bodies, affects, technologies, discourses, and institutions, of which information creation is a key component.

As this dissertation is a constructivist enterprise, I believe that it is necessary to clearly articulate my relationship with the topic at hand and the standpoint from which I approach that topic. This articulation requires that I discuss my own position as a queer

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1 Italicized linked terms lead to the Glossary.
2 Non-italicized linked terms lead to relevant sections of the dissertation.
and white individual situated within a western socio-cultural context. It also requires that I explain the epistemics which inform my decision-making around scholarly practices such as those related to disciplinary norms and citations.

Like any researcher, my relationship with the scholarship that I produce is complex and contextual. This dissertation specifically centers queer people’s perspectives, and I myself embody and enact queerness in my everyday life both as a gay and non-binary person, and as someone who spent the past ten years of higher education immersed in scholarship that critiques cis and heteronormative western standards. However, my experiences, perceptions, and understandings in no way represent all of queerness (this would be impossible), nor do they exempt me from my myriad other privileges. I therefore acknowledge that I cannot speak from all queer standpoints with epistemic authority, and I thank my participants for sharing their own expertise with me, and for trusting me to relay that expertise throughout this dissertation and beyond.

Further, I consistently draw on critical race work throughout this dissertation in order to discuss racism that is a) described by my participants, b) enacted in sociotechnical assemblages, and c) embedded into society writ large. As a white person, I cannot fully understand racism. This is true in part because my very existence—how I am perceived, the privileges I am afforded, and the mistakes I am allowed to make—upholds white supremacy. Relatedly, though I raise postcolonial critiques in this dissertation when I discuss national borders and perspectives from my participants outside the west, I acknowledge that I reside on land that my ancestors stole from the Lenni Lenape tribe, and that I have been socialized to accept settler colonialism as normal, correct, and good. I also recognize that perpetuations of colonialism cannot be separated from perpetuations
of cis/heteronormativity and racism, meaning that my inability to fully understand one system affects my ability to fully understand all systems of injustice. As an academic, a fan, and a person, I am committed to anti-racist, queer, and decolonizing projects, but this commitment does not exempt me from my own participation in maintaining interlocking systems of oppression. And while I understand that some BIPOC and queer peoples may believe that I have no business discussing their experiences given my own standpoint, I believe that providing an account of queer fandom that does not engage with intersectional systemic oppressions is not an account of queer fandom at all. I also hope that I can leverage my privileges to give space to elevate the voices of BIPOC and queer people.

In relation to queer fandom specifically, I identify as an “acafan,” or fan studies scholar who writes “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)” (Jenkins, 2013 p. 5). I have participated in online and offline fandoms since age 10, and I have been aware of fan studies, media studies, and related scholarship for over a decade. However, following work from scholars including Wanzo (2015) and Brennan (2014), I attempt to advance a “new genealogy” (Wanzo, 2015, n.p.) of acafandom in order to shift its dominant paradigm in two directions: away from centering fandoms that I am personally involved with, and towards criticism from fans of color who are typically ignored in fan studies scholarship. As a fan, I have found friendship, solace, and needed escapist entertainment in fanfiction. However, I recognize that my position as a white person in fandoms that center white people (in terms of their canon material, fanfiction texts, and
fannish communities) means that I have experienced a particularly privileged and “fun” side of fandom. This privilege masks systemic racism and nationalism within fannish spaces both on and offline (see, Pande, 2018). My whiteness further means that I have helped to sustain racism and colonialism in fandom via my initial ignorance of these topics, and via my sometimes-unchecked affection for fannish spaces and ephemera. Now, however, I believe that taking a critical approach to acafandom in the context of this dissertation and in the context of fan studies more broadly is a necessary endeavor given the dominance of white supremacy, cis/heteropatriarchy, and colonialism in both fandom and the academy.

To that end, wherever possible within the confines of writing a dissertation that must satisfy committee members and meet the requirements for obtaining a Ph.D. (an enterprise that in itself is necessarily bound to the oppressive dynamics that permeate the academy), I attempt to advance just citation practices throughout this thesis. Per Ahmed (2016), theory cannot be separated from politics because it is political, and ways in which we advance theory in conversation with past work may be either violent or in opposition to violence (p. 8-9). I wish for my own work to be in opposition to violence. I therefore attempt to avoid citing white cisgender straight men where possible, particularly when said scholars a) appropriate work from BIPOC and queer people; b) mask systemic oppressions such as racism and trans/homophobia via individualized theories that are (often) meant to be universally applicable; and c) belong to the DWM (Dead White Men) club wherein, despite their contributions, their work has been advanced, expanded upon,
or contradicted by BIPOC, women, and queer people.\(^3\) Moreover, my commitment to just
citation practices contributes to the interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation; it is not an
LIS\(^TM\) thesis in part because it reflects my own interdisciplinary training in LIS, Media
Studies, and Gender Studies, and in part because a great deal of excellent and relevant
scholarship on topics germane to this work such as creative and epistemic labor, feminist
technoscience, racism’s intersection with surveillance, etc., are well-documented in
disciplines outside of information science. Per Halberstam’s (2011) queer perspective on
disciplinarity:

Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well
as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and
learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of
knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy…the
fields that were assembled over one hundred years ago to respond to new market
economies and the demand for narrow expertise…are now losing relevance and
failing to respond either to real-world knowledge projects or student interests (p.
6-7, emphasis in original).

Following this argument, I take steps to integrate real-world knowledge into this
dissertation so that it is relevant outside the narrow confines of information science, and
so that it is responsive to long-standing and current events tied to power and justice. For
example, I do not limit the disciplinary traditions that inform my arguments. I also do not
limit my conceptions of “scholarship” to work published in scholarly journals or by

\(^3\) In fact, said BIPOC, women, and queer people may have published work before DWM, or at the same
time. Their work is less cited due to systemic injustices that valorize and legitimize white, cisgender, and
straight men’s work over anything else (Ahmed, 2016).
scholarly presses. In addition to so-called scholarly resources, I cite critical fans of color who run popular blogs (e.g., “Stitch’s Media Mix”) and who are known for sharing in-depth takes on current and historical fannish events on platforms like Twitter. I believe that it is important to cite such work given normative injustices in the academy that elide thoughtful work from these individuals. Their work is also important to cite because it has a much farther reach within and outside of fan communities than academic journals. Said journals are widely inaccessible due to their cost and their standards for writing.

Finally, a note on terminology. Throughout this dissertation, I use adjectives such as “marginalized” to describe my participants and other individual fans and fandom communities who face and experience the consequences of systemic oppressions. As with any classifier, the term marginalized is problematic both because it constructs a false binary between those who are and are not marginalized, and because its very use may reinforce and deepen actual marginalization (Ahmed, 2006; Collins, 2000). I use the term to draw attention to systemic inequities rather than to advance any type of determinist or deficit-based perspective on people’s socio-political roles, standpoints, and/or abilities. In my implications chapter, I discuss ways that scholarship, including my own, may move past “marginalized” paradigms in a more just future.
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

As a discipline, Library and Information Science (LIS) is highly individualized, and its research tends to focus on the experiences of white and wealthy straight people in the United States (Ma, 2012; Mehra & Gray, 2020). This is especially true in the information practice domain. With this dissertation, I join a growing body of researchers who wish to move past LIS’s limitations by looking at how structural power dynamics, including overlapping institutionalized racism, cis/heteronormativity, and Western colonial dominance, shape and are shaped by information and the ways that people interact with it (e.g., Cooke et al., 2016; Cooke & Sánchez, 2019; Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019; Gibson et al., 2017; Gibson & Hughes-Hassell, 2017; Gibson & Martin, 2019; Kitzie, 2019; Mehra & Gray, 2020; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). Though past information practice scholarship largely elides power and associated inequities in its theories and models, these theories can be expanded upon with attention to the experiences of members of marginalized populations who are often overlooked in LIS scholarship to date. Further, research in LIS is highly connected to adjacent fields like Media Studies, Science and Technology Studies, Communication, and the like. It can also benefit from perspectives including queer theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory. I therefore take a fully interdisciplinary approach to this dissertation. Though my work is officially located in LIS, I connect and draw from a range of literatures in the pages that follow.

To that end, this dissertation does not proceed like more traditional LIS projects. My deviance from disciplinary norms is due in part to my theoretical and methodological stances; queer theory (Halberstam, 2003) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) are openly non-linear and critical of disciplinarity (e.g., Foucault, 1977). For
example, this project is guided by a phenomenon of interest rather than a prescribed set of research questions. I combine my results and discussion, which makes for significantly richer data analysis and advances my interdisciplinary bent. My literature review largely focuses on scholarship that sensitized my data collection and analysis at its inception. Reviewing additional literature is part of the analytical work in a constructivist grounded theory enterprise, meaning that my results chapters discuss a litany of additional research that became relevant to my categories and constructs as I developed them. I do not advance prescriptive implications of my work, especially in terms of making suggestions for how to improve information systems or practices. The inequities I discuss will not (and cannot) be solved through small-scale changes to particular platforms. The implications of this dissertation therefore are not prescriptive, but they are attuned to ways that structural change may deconstruct, reconstruct, and liberate currently oppressive assemblages within (and beyond) fandom.

The dissertation therefore proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the problems addressed by this research, and I articulate the phenomenon of interest. Second, I present a literature review that defines what I mean by “structural power dynamics” and reviews pertinent ideas from scholarship about information practice and creation, fanfiction studies, queer theory and biopower, and assemblage theory. Third, I review constructivist grounded theory and explain how I implemented the methodology. I specifically focus on my theoretical sampling strategies across three methods: interviews with 25 queer fanfiction authors located in seven different countries, content analysis of fanfiction texts, and content analysis of online platforms’ features and policies. Next, I dedicate chapters to the three constructs that developed from my data collection and analysis: transforming
bodies and feelings, forming community vs. forming cliques, and governing platforms and people. In chapter four, transforming bodies and feelings, I explain embodied and affective elements of fanfiction authorship, creative work, and platform design, with particular attention to racialized and gendered biopolitical power dynamics that affect fandom assemblages. In chapter five, forming community versus forming cliques, I draw on data from participants of color and trans participants to trouble ways that information science and fan studies scholars discuss online “communities” and insider/outside dynamics. I especially focus on capitalistic dynamics that lead to the development of inequitable “economies of visibility” within fandoms. Chapter six, governing platforms and people, describes how biopower rooted in intersecting racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism affects the “life” and “death” of platforms used and designed by fans. I also describe how formal and informal moderation structures on these platforms appear just, but in reality, often obscure moderators’ work practices and their contributions to oppressive community dynamics. I conclude with a summary of my findings, and I stress that information interactions and assemblages cannot be understood without accounting for power dynamics. I suggest three theoretical directions for future work—getting angry, embracing failure, and imagining futurities—that may lead to the development of more liberatory and just assemblages in and beyond fannish contexts.

Problems Addressed

Despite LIS’s inter- and transdisciplinary potentials (Bates, 1999), the field continues to undertheorize phenomena related to information interactions due in part to disciplinary constraints constructed by LIS research and praxis. These disciplinary constraints promote certain discourses, or narratives that form bodies of knowledge and
influence normative practices within institutions including academic fields (Foucault, 1977). For example, LIS scholars often frame information as static or entities that act upon people (Dervin, 2003; Ma, 2012) rather than dynamic systems (Chatman, 1999) that consist of people, technologies, and social institutions (Haider & Bawden, 2006). Per Ma (2012), “the term ‘information’ cannot be interpreted as the things, events, or expressions themselves unless it is situated within a context and is understood meaningfully” (p. 721).

However, because common epistemic conceptions of information in LIS focus on information as a concrete entity that individuals need to find (Olsson, 2006), studies of information interactions typically involve “work experts carrying out work tasks and using formal information systems” (Ocepek, 2018a, p. 400). Examples of these systems may include search engines, databases, and school curricula rather than a wider expanse of sociotechnical entities that are informative when contextually relevant. Examples of overlooked sources include entertainment media (Floegel & Costello, 2019), other forms of art (Gorichanaz, 2017), and the body (Lloyd, 2010).

Additionally, LIS has a tendency to flatten the experiences of people who interact with information by ubiquitously referring to them as “users” (Irvine-Smith, 2017), which limits the discipline’s conceptions of a wider spectrum of information experiences and focuses on particular subsets of people (i.e., those who can or those who choose to use certain types of information). Fidel (2012) challenges the “user” label because it centers systems over people (and relationships between systems and people), implies that information interactions are isolated events (i.e., “a use”) rather than part of everyday activities, and binarily divides people into users and nonusers (p. 4).
Overlooking information’s dynamic and constructed nature and flattening people into a singular “user” category causes many LIS studies to elide power dynamics that are involved in any type of information interaction, from access (Chatman, 1996) to availability (Chapman & Birdi, 2016) to stigma and other violences (Kitzie, 2019) that arise from people’s experiences with normative systems (Lingel & boyd, 2013). While LIS scholarship certainly examines issues related to equity and justice in information interactions (e.g., Adler, 2016; Gibson & Hughes-Hassell, 2017; Gibson & Martin, 2019), the bulk of the literature continues to privilege not only WEIRD populations (i.e., western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, Henrich et al., 2010; Nolin et al., 2017), but also people who belong to dominant groups within those populations (i.e., white people, cisgender people, heterosexual people, able-bodied people, educated and affluent people, etc.). This results in scholarship and theoretical frameworks that are largely normative because they center dominant perspectives at the expense of marginalized standpoints, the latter of which can disrupt normative ways of thinking and doing, and therefore expose and reorient what seems to be “common” or “status quo” (Ahmed, 2006). Centering dominant perspectives is a particular problem in LIS because it means that scholarship continues to look primarily at information practices from an individual level rather than a structural level (Collins, 2000; Gibson & Martin, 2019). This means that researchers often miss opportunities to interrogate ways in which normativity and oppression may shape information and people’s interactions with it.

As a consequence of these discourses, LIS tends to adopt a narrow view of both people and their relationships with information, and this results in theories and models that a) neglect power dynamics involved in information interactions and, specifically,
information creation, and b) miss opportunities to consider complex connections between people and information. In LIS, humans and information systems are often binarily split, and less attention is paid to sociotechnical arrangements of bodies and technologies despite sociotechnical perspectives’ potential to advance our understanding of information interactions so that they are more attendant to power and connections between various actors (Costello & Floegel, In press; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). In examining structural power dynamics that shape and are shaped by queer people’s interactions with fanfiction, platforms, and each other, this dissertation addresses the problems raised above by a) expanding our conceptions of information into a more creative and less overtly formal domain; b) emphasizing how intersecting constructs like race, gender, sexuality, and nation relate to inequities within information interactions; and c) articulating sociotechnical assemblages that reveal complex networks, or fusions, of the people, technologies, and social systems that comprise information interactions in context.

Phenomenon of Interest

This project examines how queer individuals create and interact with queer or “slash” fanfiction, as well as how they interact with associated platforms and other fans. Because LIS lacks substantive theories of, in particular, information creation, I use a constructivist grounded theory methodology to explore a phenomenon of interest as opposed to a set of research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A phenomenon of interest is an appropriate way to structure a constructivist grounded theory study that seeks to build substantive and transferable theory in a particular context in order to model the causes, consequences, and conditions that shape said context (Dey, 1999).
Phenomena of interest encourage a more open approach to simultaneous data collection and analysis, and they allow for the flexibility needed to theoretically sample (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As opposed to research questions, a phenomenon of interest also fosters a more interpretive approach to data collection and analysis, which is key to grounded theory work.

Works of slash fanfiction are texts that take original, or “canon,” cis/heteronormative narratives and reorient them with queer characters, relationships, and themes (Hoad, 2017); for example, slash texts may portray romantic encounters between Star Trek’s Kirk and Spock. Current gaps in fanfiction literature are not dissimilar to gaps in LIS scholarship; for example, studies of fanfiction tend to focus on straight, cisgender, and white authors regardless of the type of fanfiction under investigation (Pande, 2018), work that engages with online fanfiction collectives and archives may focus more on practices surrounding creation rather than the politics of creation itself (Hill & Pecoskie, 2017; Price & Robinson, 2017), and most scholarship glorifies fanfiction as a universally subversive practice without attending to structural inequities related to race, gender, sexuality, and nation that affect fannish spaces and practices (Pande, 2018; Thomas, 2019).

Studying queer people who write slash fanfiction as a phenomenon of interest will begin to address these gaps. Queerness serves as both a term to define my population of interest and a theoretical construct through which conceptions of information interactions and creation may be reoriented (Ahmed, 2006). Schutz & Luckman (1973) discuss “orientation” as the point from which the world unfolds; it is a perspective that tends to be constructed normatively, or based on the positionalities of dominant groups. Building
on this idea, Ahmed (2006) uses a queer phenomenological lens to discuss “reorientation,” or a critical state in which people can identify and develop alternatives to points of view that seem to be “given” or “natural.” We can “[turn] the tables…by turning toward other kinds of tables” (p. 63).

Focusing on queer people and queer themes in the context of slash or queer fanfiction reorients disciplinary normativity in LIS on multiple levels: a) creating fanfiction is itself a reorientation practice because authors queer normative canonical texts; b) looking at slash as information reorients LIS’s conception of information as formal and coming from normative experts; c) looking at information creation reorients LIS scholarship because scholars tend to focus on people’s practices with existing resources; d) focusing on queer people reorients LIS away from the behaviors and practices of members of dominant groups; and e) thinking structurally helps to reorient LIS and fan studies more broadly so that they better account for institutionalized power dynamics and how these dynamics necessarily shape myriad interactions between people, technologies, and social systems within fandoms, not merely creation. Overall, queer fandom serves as an especially salient context in which to examine and build theory that pertains to broader ideas related to underarticulated structural instantiations of power in information interactions and creation, and their overlap with sociotechnical arrangements of actors (i.e., assemblages). I demonstrate how this is possible in the chapters that follow.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The place of the literature review in a grounded theory study is contentious, in part because classical and constructivist grounded theory perspectives disagree about whether and how researchers are exposed to pre-existing research and theory before, during, and after undertaking a study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Dunne, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As this project is guided by constructivist grounded theory, I recognize that my approach to data collection and analysis was sensitized by a number of concepts and areas of scholarship both prior to and during its execution. Constructivist grounded theory does not purport to conduct research that is somehow “unbiased” because the researcher did not review any existing scholarship before undertaking their work. On the contrary, I rigorously familiarized myself with previously developed theoretical frameworks and theories both before beginning this study and as part of ongoing data collection and analysis in order to inform my work, highlight where theoretical shortcomings exist, and consider how these shortcomings may be addressed (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30). Further, I continued to explore different areas of literature across disciplines as part of my data collection and analysis.

The majority of this literature review consists of scholarship that I reviewed and was intimately familiar with prior to beginning data collection and analysis. However, constructivist grounded theory is a messy methodology, and it is difficult to truly determine when I absorbed and applied certain knowledges to my work. Therefore, while concepts that became relevant as I progressed through this research are more thoroughly discussed in the proceeding chapters than in the literature review, many do make an
appearance in the following paragraphs. The literature begins with a brief overview of how I conceptualize structure and structural power dynamics that frame this dissertation. I then divide the literature review into four main sections, each of which discusses key frameworks and their utility and potential to be expanded: information practice, fanfiction studies, queer theory, and assemblage theory. These broad areas of scholarship sensitized my approach to this project at every stage from the development of my phenomenon of interest, to theoretical sampling strategies, to my final analysis.

What is Structure?

Information science is a highly individualized discipline, meaning that it historically discusses the actions of individual people or particular information systems rather than the wider social contexts in which both entities reside and overlap (Fidel, 2012). There are, of course, exceptions to this trend, especially when we consider work from scholars of color and queer scholars who discuss how power shapes information interactions. Unfortunately, these works have been largely elided by the discipline due in part to white colonialist logics that dictate academic institutions (Ahmed, 2012, 2016; Cooke & Sánchez, 2019; Gibson, 2019; Mehra, 2019; Mehra & Gray, 2020). Further, a clear definition of what we mean when we discuss “structure” or “structural power dynamics” does not exist in LIS. Rosenbaum (1993) perhaps comes the closest when he discusses “structuration” as a way to frame information use environments. Structuration means to account for social worlds and their impact on individuals’ practices over time, but it falls short of identifying how power and associated inequities affect those worlds and practices. A structural perspective should encompass a more holistic view that accounts
for how power manifests within intersections between people, information systems, and broader social institutions (Foucault, 1977; G. P. Radford & Radford, 2005).

We do not need to construct a definition of structure from scratch in order to craft such a perspective. Information science would do well to look towards other, more critical traditions to learn how to discuss power dynamics in information interactions (and who to cite in the process). Black feminism perhaps provides the most comprehensive and nuanced definition of “structure,” stemming from Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) matrix of domination. The matrix of domination helps elucidate what “the structural” encompasses, and it also demonstrates how structural phenomena are instantiated by institutions that reify normativity and related oppression (Collins, 2000; Collins & Bilge, 2016). These are relevant constructs to parse out in relation to information practices (and information science more broadly) because they demonstrate how the field’s general lack of structural attention causes scholars to develop a certain “tunnel vision” that limits their work’s scope, theoretical depth, and applicability (Gibson & Martin, 2019; Wiegand, 1999, 2015).

The matrix of domination includes four intersecting domains within which marginalized individuals may experience oppression. The first of these domains, the structural, organizes power within a society and affects how the remaining domains, disciplinary (e.g., routines, surveillance); hegemonic (e.g., cultural spheres of influence); and interpersonal (e.g., everyday interactions), function. In order to produce discourses and associated rules and policies, powerful social institutions emerge from the structural domain, including those that pertain to law, polity, religion, and the economy. Such institutions are typically constructed and controlled by individuals who belong to
dominant, powerful groups in society (e.g., in the US, white, cisgender, straight, wealthy, and able-bodied people). In turn, these institutions produce discourses that are institutionalized, meaning that because they are proliferated by powerful bodies, they are accepted as normative and status quo (Ahmed, 2012; Collins, 2000; Rich, 1980). Alternative ways of being are further marginalized so that power differentials and inequities persist (Ahmed, 2006; C. P. Jones, 2002; Stein, 2020).

For example, phenomena such as heterosexuality are institutionalized. Heterosexuality is an assumed state of being that seems “natural” despite its highly constructed nature because structuring agents including religious institutions, federal and state governments, and schools produce and proliferate forms of information that privilege and normalize heteronormative nuclear family units (Rich, 1980; K. H. Robinson, 2012; Weston, 2005). Additionally, heterosexuality is tied to other normative standpoints that are both reflected and reified by social institutions, including white, cisgender, and affluent positionalities (Ahmed, 2006; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Puar, 2017; S. Stryker, 2008). Queer people face increased levels of punishment under heterosexist structuring agents that disadvantage them, and the downstream effects of these consequences can be seen in disciplinary (e.g., queer people face increased surveillance), hegemonic (e.g., lack of queer representation in the media) and interpersonal (e.g., microaggressions) contexts. In essence, structural forces and the institutions that proliferate them set the overall organization of power within a society and consequently produce and reinforce inequities.

What does this have to do with information and information science? The matrix of domination demonstrates that it is impossible to fully account for individualized and
everyday information experiences without considering structural elements of those experiences. However, as I will describe below, scant literature to date substantively accounts for structural power dynamics at play in information practices, including information creation.

**Information Practice**

Information practice denotes a theoretical perspective rather than a singular theory (Fidel, 2012). Practice theorists in LIS are not united by theory, but they share the common goal to examine social attributes of information interactions (Irvine-Smith, 2017). Information practices encompass a range of activities including and exceeding seeking, evaluation, and sharing information (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011). This range provides researchers with a wider understanding of what makes a person “informed” than an understanding that may develop from an information behavior study (Irvine-Smith, 2017). Because practices focus on social attributes of information interactions (Fidel, 2012), they are action-based, temporal, situated, continuous, recurrent, embodied, and mediated (Irvine-Smith, 2017; McKenzie, 2003). As such, they both shape and are shaped by aspects of everyday lives, including environments (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011), facets of identity such as age and shared beliefs (Costello, 2017), physical bodies (Lloyd, 2010), the places and spaces people occupy (Gibson & Kaplan, 2017), and technologies’ material features (Fidel, 2012; Lloyd & Olsson, 2019).

In LIS, an information practice perspective represents a turn—or a new way of thinking—that challenges the more dominant information behavior paradigm (Hartel, 2019; J. Nolin, 2007). Both information behavior and information practice serve as “umbrella concepts” in information science, and as such each draw on different
discourses that shape how the research that falls under each umbrella is conducted (Savolainen, 2007). Information behavior research continues to make important contributions to information science. A behavior perspective can, for example, explain how people seek and find information using particular systems, and it is among the first perspectives in LIS to take a human-centered rather than a systems-centered approach to research (Cibagnu, 2015).

However, a strict information behavior approach would not be appropriate for this study of queer fanfiction writers’ creative practices because a behavior approach tends to examine individualized and cognitively situated situations (Fidel, 2012) as opposed to socially situated phenomena; practice is essentially the critical alternative to behavior (Savolainen, 2007). A practice perspective accounts for ways in which information interactions are constructed by social circumstances, whereas information behavior less frequently attends to context (Talja et al., 1999). Per Bonner and Lloyd (2011), “information practices reflect…specific ways of knowing that are formed over time and in relation to the social, historical and material structures that give a setting its particular characteristics” (n.p.).

Practice frameworks also encompass a wider variety of information interactions than behavior research. While behavior often exclusively focuses on retrieval and seeking (Costello, 2017; Fisher et al., 2004), practice may be more dynamic and varied, meaning it leaves room for phenomena such as creation. Practice perspectives may also account for creation because they focus on interactions beyond information use (Irvine-Smith, 2017); according to Fidel (2012), practices consider what people are actually doing in practice. The practice perspective therefore does not only encompass seeking, finding,
encountering, and interpreting information; it also should account for information’s actual creation.

*Information Creation*

Though LIS work has examined information practices that *surround* the creative endeavors of, for example, fanfiction authors (Hill & Pecoskie, 2017) and teen digital content creators (Harlan, 2014), LIS is in the early stages of discussing information creation itself (Gorichanaz, 2018). However, creation has been examined in other disciplines including communication (e.g., Dervin, 2003) and feminist media studies (e.g., Brouillette, 2009; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; McRobbie, 2016), and it is a central concept in areas that examine artistic outputs such as fan studies (e.g., Lamerichs, 2018; Pande, 2018; Pande & Coker, 2018). At its broadest level, information creation has been referred to as “information use that may lead to information” (Gorichanaz, 2018, p. 3) and a process that results in some type of artifact (Harlan, 2014). When people create, they produce information (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011) that may be disseminated to certain audiences (Burnett et al., 2001) to fill a particular gap in their knowledge or understanding (Dervin, 2003). Trace (2007) argues that how people are socialized affects how they both create and interact with information; stocks of knowledge that underly human interactions and are often imparted by various institutions inform creative work. Gorichanaz (2018) synthesizes a multidisciplinary collection of literature to make the following claims: a) Creation may be part of information use because it draws on information that was previously located; b) it may be constrained or otherwise affected

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4 Note that these literatures are discussed at length in my results chapters. Here, I focus on creation in LIS because that body of literature most heavily sensitized my research. Other areas were significantly more informative during data collection and analysis.
by a person’s role and setting; c) it can be instructive and widely disseminated; d) it can promote social good; e) it has multiple aspects including physical, mental, and social elements; f) individuals or larger entities may engage in creation; and g) creation may occur on many scales so that endeavors may be large or small.

It is necessary to note that while information creation is not often discussed in practice literature, LIS is not devoid of studies that examine creation. Archives and preservation literature, for example, concerns itself with creative endeavors. Many information institutions under-collect materials created by or pertaining to queer people (Blackburn & Farooq, 2019). At the same time, there are ample examples of queer information professionals (Carmichael, 2000), information professionals who partner with queer community members (Huddleston, 2015), and queer communities themselves (Eichhorn, 2013; McKinney, 2020) who construct spaces that preserve and present creative works using queered aesthetic arrangements (Reed, 1996). However, scholarship regarding queer archives and preservation typically focus on either formal information professionals and their work, or on preserving pre-existing materials. Though management systems themselves are created, the creative practices that marginalized people deploy to make their original works remain under-explored in LIS. It follows that ideas discussed in the archival domain highlight areas that should be further investigated in other contexts. Such investigations may draw upon practice frameworks that concern themselves with marginalized people’s practices, such as information poverty and small worlds (Chatman, 1991, 1996).
Information Poverty and Small Worlds

Given the idea that an information practice perspective advances a social constructionist agenda in LIS, one might think that practice literature attends to members of marginalized populations’ interactions with information. This is largely not the case. As I note in the introduction, information practice and, more broadly, information science as a discipline tends to focus on normative and socially powerful bodies, often implying that what white, cisgender, heterosexual, affluent, educated, and able-bodied people experience is universal (Mehra & Gray, 2020). However, there are notable exceptions to these patterns, including literature that develops and extends two frameworks theorized by Elfreda Chatman: information poverty and small worlds (1985, 1991, 1996a, 1996b).

Information Poverty

Limited research with queer people in LIS demonstrates that they may experience a number of gaps in their information practices because information resources including library catalogs and holdings (Drabinski, 2013; Howard & Knowlton, 2018; Wagner & Crowley, 2020), social media platforms (Fox & Moreland, 2015), information retrieved via search engines (Kitzie, 2019), educational materials (Currin et al., 2017), and many forms of mass media (K. H. Robinson, 2012) center cisgender and heterosexual perspectives while erasing or inaccurately representing queerness. Such gaps suggest that queer people experience information poverty, or circumstances where their positions outside dominant social discourses prevent them from accessing desired information (Chatman, 1996). Drawing on her work with populations such as the working poor (Chatman, 1985), Chatman (1996) identifies four constructs that shape an impoverished life-world: deception, or deliberate attempts to distort one’s personal reality; secrecy, or
hiding knowledge about one’s personal experiences for self-protective reasons; risk-taking, or decisions regarding whether to maintain self-protection or to increase one’s knowledge via new information interactions; and situational relevance, or circumstances under which a person experiencing information poverty may risk interacting with information to fill gaps in their knowledge. Chatman relates these four constructs to factors including social norms and trust.

Scholars use Chatman’s information poverty constructs to inform their work with stigmatized populations including drag performers (Lingel & Golub, 2015) and members of extreme body modification communities (Lingel & Boyd, 2013). These works suggest that information poverty may not be a constant or universal state, but instead may pertain to certain types of information needs and interactions related to non-normative aspects of a person’s life-world (e.g., someone may be impoverished regarding their extreme body modifications, but they may have unfettered access to information that pertains to other facets of their life).

However, Chatman’s conception of information poverty is limited because it operates on an individual level (Gibson & Martin, 2019); it discusses someone’s life-world, or individualized everyday experiences (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), with little attention to ways in which life-worlds intersect with and are shaped by structural forces. This results in a body of information poverty scholarship that focuses almost exclusively on individual practices rather than how those practices are structurally shaped (Gibson & Martin, 2019; Haider & Bawden, 2006). Further, information poverty neglects to consider major types of information interactions, including embodied information practices (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017); this contributes to accusations that Chatman’s work
focuses heavily on deficits faced by marginalized people rather than ways they obtain and deploy rich information in certain contexts (Lingel & boyd, 2013). Information poverty was also originally articulated before widespread adoption of the internet and other digital technologies; as a result, its applicability to related sociotechnical systems remains underexplored (Lingel & boyd, 2013).

Information marginalization, a recent extension of information poverty theory developed by Gibson and Martin (2019), demonstrates that social institutions construct information poverty because structural inequities contribute to people’s information practices. Scholars are beginning to reorient Chatman’s initial four constructs to place less emphasis on how people individually behave and to focus on people’s wider social contexts, myriad information practices, and roles as actors within sociotechnical systems (Floegel & Costello, 2019; Gibson & Martin, 2019).

Small Worlds

In addition to more individualized life-worlds, Chatman’s work theorizes small worlds, or communities that coalesce around practices shaped by social norms, worldviews, and actors’ interactions with information (Chatman, 1991a; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998). Examples of small worlds from the literature include feminist bookstores (Burnett et al., 2001), online support groups (Costello, 2017), and women’s prisons (Chatman, 1999). Scholarship acknowledges that small worlds often consist of rich information environments constructed by marginalized people despite their distance from more privileged positions in society (Chatman, 1999). However, theorizing around small worlds has yet to fully account for structural forces that surround their formation and existence (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010a).
In the context of information creation, the small worlds framework helps us consider how creation is not only related to deficits and information poverty (Ilett, 2019); it is also related to richness because it affords opportunities to construct information resources and associated worlds informed by marginalized people’s own experiences (Floegel & Costello, 2021). A small worlds frame also adds further theoretical depth to the idea that information creation is not only an individual experience; it can also be collective or collaborative (Robson & Robinson, 2013), and it can both shape and be shaped by technologies used in creative endeavors (De Kosnik, 2016; Hofmann, 2018).

At the same time, considering creation on a structural level has the potential to trouble the definition of a small world so that it accounts for a) how power may operate within a world itself (e.g., racism within fandoms (Pande, 2018)) and b) how informationally rich small worlds may be structurally disadvantaged in the face of larger, more powerful social institutions (e.g., writing fanfiction does not fix hegemonic media industries, (Bratich, 2012)). These ideas draw attention to underarticulated relationships between small worlds and information poverty: a person may be structurally impoverished (e.g., to draw on Chatman’s 1999 work, they may be incarcerated), but also part of a rich small world (they may experience “life in the round” in a rich prison information system). Additionally, small worlds and information poverty contain similar limitations. Both frameworks fail to account for broader institutional milieus in which individuals are situated, as well as intersections between information practices and technical systems.
Areas for further development

The limits to information poverty and small worlds lead us to consider greater limitations to information practice as a perspective. Practice frameworks may be constrained by limited conceptions of what constitutes information: formal documents created by normative experts are overwhelmingly represented in information practice work to date (Ocepek, 2018a, 2018b). This does a great disservice to marginalized populations in particular given that they a) may not find relevant information in formal documents, and b) possess rich traditions of creating and using their own (less officially “formal”) information resources (e.g., McKinney, 2020). Information practice scholars would do well to broaden definitions of “information” so that they are cognizant of more diverse epistemic, aesthetic, and creative practices.

Additionally, despite Bonner and Lloyd’s (2011) claim that practices attend to “structures,” a great deal of practice work continues to operate at an individual level. A limited body of information behavior and practice scholarship engages with structure, often in direct response to individualistic models and theories. For example, Jaeger and Burnett (2010a) further develop small worlds (Chatman, 1991b) with their work on information worlds, which describes how smaller contexts are embedded within larger social worlds. Gibson and Martin (2019) similarly examine structural dimensions of information poverty, and Gibson and Kaplan (2017) draw on information horizons to develop a place-based theory of information seeking zones. Developments in the theory

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5 While I make a distinction between practice and behavior for the sake of this dissertation, both perspectives have similar limitations, especially in terms of focusing on individuals, eliding power dynamics, and binarizing people and technical systems. Though the practice/behavior debate can lend important insights into the field, it also keeps us from focusing on major limitations to information science as a discipline, which I believe mirror the limitations to practice and creation discussed here.
of information grounds also aim to account for social needs and context (Fisher et al., 2004), as does recent scholarship that describes various dimensions of information work (Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019). Lloyd (2017) continues to develop the concept of fractured information landscapes in the context of forced migration with attendance to “marginality, transition, and resettlement” (p. 40). These works explicitly attend to social structure and power as they shape information interactions.

However, despite these advancements, as noted above, the bulk of practice scholarship remains individually focused with no clear acknowledgement of structural power dynamics. For example, practice scholarship often claims to attend to routine and everyday phenomena (Irvine-Smith, 2017; McKenzie, 2003; Ocepek, 2018a), which Kari and Hartel (2007) characterize as “neutral.” However, the “everyday” should, according to Schutz and Luckman (1973), encompass a person’s “fundamental and paramount reality” (p. 3)—a reality that is inherently shaped by the institutional constraints in which they reside (Rothbauer, 2005). This suggests that neutrality is impossible to achieve in everyday information practices (and, it should be said, in any context, e.g., Gibson et al., 2017) if researchers consider how structural forces shape extremely different “everyday” experiences for different groups of people.

Information practice scholarship also engages in a type of dualism wherein it binarizes people and information systems. Literature in LIS is generally split between “systems-focused” and “user-centered” work, which are positioned in opposition to each other. This binary classification limits our potential for theorizing, especially on a structural level: neither people nor systems exist in a vacuum, and they are, in fact, intricately fused together alongside institutionalized discourses within sociotechnical
assemblages (D. J. Haraway, 1991; Puar, 2017), which I will further explicate below.

When we think about information practices, we are often so focused on individual people or “users” that we miss ways in which their interactions with information are both shaped by and shapers of technologies and institutions (e.g., Lloyd & Olsson, 2019).

Developing Information Creation

A narrow definition of what constitutes information, an individualized focus, and a binary construction between people and systems are three large critiques of the practice perspective that I address in this dissertation. Conceptualizing information creation as a theoretical phenomenon may help to address these three major limitations to practice scholarship. Expanding our understanding of information creation could challenge some of the epistemic assumptions behind information. For example, creation draws attention to the literal ways in which information is constructed: humans build resources in a diverse array of formats that demonstrate their particular values, perspectives, or expertise (Melo & Nichols, 2020). Information, in all of its forms, is created. Creative endeavors have the potential to draw attention to, challenge, or subvert normativity, particularly when they are crafted by individuals and collectives whose perspectives are not typically centered in the formalized resources that Ocepek (2018a) and Costello (2017) note are prioritized in LIS research. While subversion via creation is by no means a universal narrative (given the idea that every piece of information was at some point created, it immediately becomes apparent that creation is not always a subversive practice), subversion’s theoretical potential is rich. For example, actors who create zines as part of the LIS Microaggressions Project—an online zine publication where LIS workers from marginalized communities share experiences with microaggressions in the
workplace—provide an example of how people may translate their own experiences into a digitized DIY format to create resources beyond “institutional and professional organization mission statements and writing…that are inaccessible behind pay walls” (Arroyo-Ramirez et al., 2018, p. 126). Zine collective members create in order to display “resistance to white dominance” in LIS (Arroyo-Ramirez et al., 2018, p. 109). Finally, creative endeavors necessarily involve digital and/or other forms of technologies (e.g., writing implements, canvases, glue) that people interact with under structural constraints. Studying creation therefore provides rich contexts in which to examine groupings of fusions of people and technologies.

However, at present, the potentials of studying creation are not met in LIS. This is due to three areas of information creation literature that require further examination: a) accounting for sociotechnical elements of information creation; b) considering how creation is work; c) problematizing narratives that frame creation as utopic or universally reparative.

*Sociotechnical systems* describe assemblages that challenge binary divisions between humans, technology, and social institutions (D. J. Haraway, 1991; Hoffmann, 2019; Puar, 2017). In LIS, recent sociotechnical work tends to focus on digital systems including social networking sites (Kitzie, 2019) and search engines (Noble, 2018), but sociotechnical “technologies” need not be limited to digital realms. Sociotechnical assemblages can be found between humans and physical infrastructures such as highways (Winner, 1980) and levees (Fouché, 2006) or clothing such as bras (McGaw, 2003). Sociotechnical examinations of bodies and technologies have the potential to account for structural power dynamics that shape these assemblages. Research in these domains
emphasizes connections between inequities and technology. For example, structural whiteness on the internet perpetuates racist search engine results (Benjamin, 2019c; Noble, 2018), digital tech and associated algorithms inordinately surveille poor people so that they are targeted by law enforcement (Eubanks, 2018), facial recognition technologies enforce the gender binary (Keyes, 2018), and levees’ failure during Hurricane Katrina stems from racist resource distributions in New Orleans (Fouché, 2006).

Creative practices are necessary sociotechnical. Individuals who make art (Gorichanaz, 2017), zines (Arroyo-Ramirez et al., 2018), and YouTube videos (Postigo, 2016) all utilize technology to create information. Though literature acknowledges technological dimensions of information creation, sociotechnical assemblages are rarely addressed. This limits the scope of information creation research: sociotechnical power dynamics are not caused by technology but are instead windows that showcase modern iterations of long-standing injustices such as racism, transphobia, and colonialism. Moreover, major components of information creation including the power dynamics inherent in accessing and using certain technologies are missing from the literature. For example, Harlan (2014) discusses the important function social media plays in teens’ content creation practices; however, the narrative they present cannot be universalized given that certain platforms are antagonistic toward marginalized groups such as queer people due to “real name” policies that may deadname (i.e., list the name they were given at birth) a transgender person or otherwise prevent someone from using a particular site (Haimson & Hoffmann, 2016).
Overall, thinking sociotechnically may help to expand information creation perspectives in two ways. First, it would contextualize creation, and particularly creative practices undertaken by members of marginalized groups, within wider inequitable systems. Second, it affords deeper consideration of how various technologies factor into creative practices, and what the implications of using these technologies may be for marginalized creators.

Literature also misses opportunities to engage with how information creation functions as a type of work. Information practices in general require a great deal of work that has been conceptualized within a health domain: per Costello (2019) patients’ health information work comprises a “part-time job” with cognitive, emotional, and physical components. Moreover, articulating streams of work in information practices allows us to recognize often-unacknowledged aspects of everyday phenomena (Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019). Structurally speaking, information creation in the United States occurs under capitalism and is thus bound to temporal, fiscal, and other constraints (Huws, 2014). Both what is recognized as work and whose actions count as work are thus bound to power and normativity. Women, for example, historically perform a great deal of invisible immaterial labor, and the work practices of marginalized groups are underacknowledged and undervalued in society writ large (Nakamura, 2014). To date, LIS literature conceives of creation as extant to work contexts, likely because it falls outside of organizational work scenarios and may therefore be framed as “leisure” (e.g., Hartel, 2010). However, particularly if creation is thought of as a way to fill gaps in a person’s information landscape (Dervin, 2003), it seems imperative to consider how work factors into this form of knowledge-building, and how creation may be situated within a myriad
of types of work occurring under capitalism. Per Dalmer and Huvila (2019), “information work…can offer a helpful way to differently consider how people interact and engage with information and can complement a parallel focus on practices, behaviors, and activities” (p. 96). Considering how work functions in information creation will help us understand how power operates within creative practices. Work helps scholars reflect on the populations they study and how members’ positionalities affect their ability to be creative: who, for example, would have the time and skills to write fanfiction or engage in art-making such as self-portraiture, and why do they have that time and those skills?

Because the structural is neglected in information creation research, scholars may develop theoretical perspectives that seem particularly utopic. Translating to “no place,” utopia is a problematic concept not only because it is impossible to achieve, but also because typical conceptions of utopia tend to be steeped in normative framings of whiteness, gender, and other axes of identity (Spiel et al., 2019). Existing definitions of information creation perpetuate a utopic view of creative endeavors: the goal of creation may literally be to create utopia (e.g., Dervin, 2003), or creation’s potential to promote social good may be emphasized above other imaginaries (Shneiderman, 2003). We trouble utopic perspectives on creation when we consider how power dynamics factor into information practices. Dynamics inherent in sociotechnical assemblages and the work-related implications of creation demonstrate that, particularly under current structural constraints, utopia will not be achieved via information creation. Additionally, focusing on utopic conceptions of “social good” falsely assumes a universal definition of what is “good,” erases contexts that may be the converse to social goodness, and creates what Pande (2018) refers to as neat narratives of subversion that do not account for ways
in which marginality works within creative practices. For example, discourses surrounding fanfiction and its subversive potential neglect ways that racism within fandoms oppresses fan writers of color (Pande, 2018).

Fanfiction studies

Fanfiction (or “fic”) refers to written texts that, with varying degrees of loyalty to their source material, expand upon canon media universes (Jenkins, 2013). Fanfiction can be divided into a number of common genres, though some works defy strict categorization (Woledge, 2006). Slash fanfiction is one such genre. As previously discussed, slash refers to narratives in which writers infuse cis/heteronormative source material with queer characters, relationships, and themes (Duggan, 2017; Hoad, 2017). Assumptions about slash and its creators have been disproven by recent scholarship that directly involves slash communities (Duggan, 2017; Hanmer, 2014), Literature claimed that heterosexual cisgender women wrote slash with a focus on “M/M pairings,” or relationships between two male characters, and scholars compared women’s slash practices to phenomena such as “reading the romance” (Grossman, 2011; Jenkins, 2013). Subsequent work finds a rich tradition of queer-authored slash fanfiction wherein reading and writing practices play salient affective and epistemic roles in queer people’s lives (Aalto, 2020; Dym et al., 2019; Fowler, 2019). For this reason, “slash” and “queer” now are both used as modifiers to describe fanfiction that transforms cis/heteronormative canon content.

Literature notes that queer authors may write slash fanfiction in response to their interactions with entertainment media; rather than merely receive media content that erases or somehow invalidates their identities, they take that content and transform it into texts that center queerness (Hoad, 2017; Rosenberg, 2007). Slash creation, often serves as
a direct response to symbolic violence found in queer entertainment media content (Floegel, 2020a). Queer fanfiction can easily be framed as literary (Finn & McCall, 2016), and as a collective it represents a wide expanse of queerness that includes both *homonormative* (Ng, 2008) and more explicitly queer identities, relationships, and themes (J. Duggan, 2017). Queer fanfiction particularly responds to harmful media practices like queer-coding or baiting (Brennan, 2019b; Nordin, 2019), and literature credits it with avoiding tropes like gratuitous violence against queer characters (J. Duggan, 2017; Dym et al., 2019; Hanmer, 2014). Writing and engaging with slash have been called especially queer practices wherein individuals reorient normative content (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Floegel, 2020a).

Literature claims that practices around queer fanfiction exemplify how media can fuel individual identity development and broader community formation, especially online. Authors commonly utilize digital tools and platforms to collaboratively create, encourage and critique each other’s work, and participate in conversations that veer into more personal topics related to queerness in everyday life (Coppa, 2006; Flegel & Roth, 2016; Price & Robinson, 2017). These conversations, sometimes called fan “meta” or “paratext,” also demonstrate fans’ keen critical engagement with media content. With other fandoms, queer people discuss normative discourses in entertainment media and how such narratives limit contents’ impact (Forcier, 2017; Hofmann, 2018; Leavenworth, 2015; Wild, 2018).

Although fanfiction existed long before the internet and social media, current practices surrounding fanfiction are extremely sociotechnical (Coppa, 2006, 2013). Digital platforms such as Archive of Our Own (AO3) afford opportunities to post, read,
and comment on fics that relate to people’s particular fandom(s) and interests. These forms of “meta” demonstrate how platforms afford and constrain critical engagement with media content (Forcier, 2017; Hofmann, 2018). Scholars claim that online fanfiction creation and the platforms on which it occurs have enormous democratizing potential because of their virtual and economic structures (Coppa, 2013; Fiesler et al., 2016; Flegel & Roth, 2016; Yékú, 2017). These claims invoke the origin of many online fic platforms: they were constructed in response to major publishing houses’ bids to monetize fanfiction (Coppa, 2013; Fiesler et al., 2016). Fiesler et al. (2016) claim that AO3 is a case of “feminist human-computer interaction” because it was created and is still maintained by the communities it serves (i.e., women and queer fans who are largely excluded from both media and computer science work).

Areas for further development

Like information practice and creation, the bulk of fanfiction scholarship does not engage with structural power dynamics, nor does it question how inequities affect queer creators’ efforts to reorient symbolically violent entertainment media through slash creation. Perspectives on queer fanfiction and associated platforms tend to take a utopic view of fanfiction’s potential (Pande, 2018). Utopic or universally reparative framings especially neglect to account for racism and capitalist dynamics that permeate queer fanfiction texts and communities (J. Z. Bratich, 2012; De Kosnik, 2009; De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018; Pande & Coker, 2018; Thomas, 2019).

Regarding capitalist logics, fanfiction is often praised because it is not explicitly monetized. Authors construct gift economies to trade fic (Black, 2009; De Kosnik, 2016) and platforms such as AO3 are designed, maintained, and moderated by volunteers
(Fiesler et al., 2016). However, these forms of exchange are problematic because they ensure that people who write fic and maintain platforms (or, often, who do both) perform a great deal of labor without capital compensation (Beer & Burrows, 2013; Huws, 2014). While it is appealing to focus on alternative compensation (e.g., satisfaction, emotional gains) as a universal good and a beacon against current power structures, it is also an issue to present this argument without nuance because the ability to participate in these volunteer structures requires a great deal of privilege including temporal and fiscal resources (J. Z. Bratich, 2012). Alternative economic structures like gift economies are accessible only to those who already have a certain amount of power in a more conventional, profitable sense.

Similarly, narratives that cast online fanfiction platforms as unquestionably subversive and progressive neglect to attend to race and transnationalism in their accounts of queer fanfiction’s potentials (Morimoto, 2019; Pande, 2018; Stitch, 2020b; Thomas, 2019). Racism connects to capitalist logics given that capitalism and white supremacy both stem from colonial legacies (McMillan Cottom, 2020). The feminist principals that underscore AO3 align with white feminism (Stitch, 2020a); they do little to challenge ways in which white supremacy continues to structure the internet (Benjamin, 2019c; Noble, 2018). Moderators on fanfiction sites like AO3 are predominantly white, and fanfiction texts, including slash texts, that are written by people of color and that subvert white narrative expectations are more heavily policed and critiqued than those that conform to normative whiteness (Pande & Coker, 2018; Thomas, 2019). Fans of color tend to be marginalized in fan spaces that bill themselves as accepting, and this is compounded when fans of color are also queer (Pande, 2018).
Globally popular fanfiction platforms like AO3 were created for an English-speaking and writing audience, which limits digital fandoms’ transnational potential and further marginalizes fans who do not speak or write in English (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; Pande, 2018). Though queer fanfiction has liberatory potentials (see, Benjamin, 2019a), texts and platforms are shaped by and shapers of structural whiteness.

We therefore cannot examine queer fandoms as if they are isolated contexts. Fannish phenomena, including creation of fanfiction texts, need to be located and critiqued within wider socio-cultural circumstances. Structural critiques will illuminate how interlocking oppressions affect ways that people interact with fanfiction texts and associated fannish communities. Such critiques may be guided by perspectives including queer theory and assemblage theory.

*Queer Theory*

Queer theory necessarily sensitizes this dissertation because it examines how normativity may be destabilized and ultimately reoriented in order to center marginalized perspectives and dismantle systemic inequities (Ahmed, 2006). Queer theory is not a singular theory; it is a theoretical perspective rooted in social constructionism that focuses on queer subjectivities’ potential to destabilize and reorient normative discourses (Ahmed, 2006; Jagose, 1997; Puar, 2017). Though these discourses tend to focus on sexuality (e.g., Sedgwick, 1990) and gender (e.g., S. Stryker, 2008), they relate to other structural axes of identity, power, and oppression (for example, race and class) given their instantiation in post-industrial normative values (Rubin, 1993). Normative values refer to discourses that are dominant and stem from structural power dynamics, but that appear quotidian and status quo (Foucault, 1977; Puar, 2017). In the United States,
heterosexuality, binary gender classification, affluence, and whiteness are all normative, as are related practices such as getting married and having children during adulthood. Individuals who identify with dominant standpoints tend to benefit from social institutions (e.g., polity, law, the economy, schools) because they are structured according to normative values (Collins, 2000).

Queer theory aims to expose and address normativity and associated inequities beyond merely calling attention to them by a) examining the existence of queer identities throughout history (Rubin, 1993; Somerville, 2000; S. Stryker, 2008), b) examining how discourses shift over time given socio-cultural developments (Halberstam, 2003; Jagose, 1997; Sedgwick, 1990), c) rejecting seemingly normative or essentialist narratives around social structures and intersecting axes of identity (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1993; Rich, 1980), and d) imagining and enacting reorientation practices that dismantle normative assumptions and ways of being and thus challenge inequitable arrangements of power (Ahmed, 2006, 2016; Halberstam, 2011). Queerness, as both a way of life and a theoretical orientation, aims for systemic change.

While queer theory may be associated with queer identities (e.g., non-normative genders and/or sexual orientations), queer theory itself may be applied to destabilize and reorient a myriad of normative social circumstances, especially those that stem from structurally induced power dynamics (Ahmed, 2006; Puar, 2017). Queer theory helps us understand how overlapping normativities like whiteness, heteronormativity, and colonialist logics shape institutions (Puar, 2017; Rich, 1980). It also helps us visualize alternatives to these institutions (Ahmed, 2006; Halberstam, 2011). For example, Weston’s (2005) ethnography of queer “chosen families” demonstrates how queer people
reorient assumptions about nuclear families by forming their own queer kinship units. Networks of kin reject the assumption that “family” relates only to biological ties (Clarke, 2018; TallBear, 2018; Weston, 2005).

Some accuse queer theory of flattening a litany of diverse identities into one category, while others argue that queer theoretical projects contribute to a monolithic conception of reorientation (S. H. Jones & Harris, 2018). This can be true in practice, particularly when, as Puar (2017) points out, scholars focus too heavily on “the Foucauldian ‘act to identity’ continuum…that privileges the pole of identity as the evolved form of western modernity” (p. 222). However, a close reading of queer theoretical texts finds that in theory, the perspective questions a singular definition of queer politics and aims to mobilize scholars and activists to simulate new practices and institutions (Butler, 2011; Halberstam, 2011; Puar, 2017; Sedgwick, 1990). Further, many queer theoretical texts define and critique “homonormativity,” or circumstances under which certain queer people (especially those who are white, cisgender, and wealthy) experience more privilege than other queer people, in part because their lifestyles conform to traditionally heteronormative institutions (Puar, 2017; S. Stryker, 2008). However, per Butler (1993), queer “is never fully known, claimed, or owned, but instead that which is deployed, twisted and queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (p. 220). Butler’s words emphasize that queer theory is not only useful in the here-and-now; it is also a way to imagine futurities that “lie outside of the conventional” (Halberstam, 2003, p. 4). In particular, queerness offers avenues through which we may reconstruct sociotechnical assemblages so that they
conceptualize and enact power in different and more equitable ways than current hegemonic structures (Halberstam, 2011; Puar, 2017).

Moreover, queer theory has methodological implications. Though scientific endeavors have a long history of abusing, exploiting, and pathologizing queer people, scholars can continue to address queer perspectives in research by working with members of queer populations rather than on them; this means researchers may, for example, involve members of queer populations as experts on their own experiences rather than mere “subjects” (LeVay, 1996). Additionally, queerness serves as a useful methodological construct; it can be used to explain, for example, the advantages of approaching a study using a constructivist methodological orientation that does not follow a linear set of steps. This is so because queer theory illuminates the value of reorienting methodological assumptions in order to approach data collection and analysis in ways that make sense for the particular phenomenon at hand, rather than approach data with a pre-determined methodological course (Ward, 2018).

**Queerness and Biopower**

In the spirt of non-linear queer projects, as I progressed through data collection and analysis for this dissertation, biopower and associated biopolitics became salient theoretical concepts. As will be noted in my results chapters, my participants discussed phenomena and experiences that relate to ways in which bodies and feelings are regulated throughout fandoms and, more specifically, on fannish social media platforms.

Foucault first articulated biopower in a series of lectures (Foucault, 2007, 2010). In his view, biopower is a form of population control imposed by the state to meet the needs of governmentality; he most explicitly relates biopower to sexuality and
reproductive capacity (Foucault, 2010; Schuller, 2018). Recent scholarship expands Foucauldian notions of biopower in three key overlapping directions. First, biopower is no longer exclusively associated with “the state” and national governance. While biopolitics continue to regulate bodies on a national level by, for example, delineating brown bodies as “terrorists” and white bodies as “innocent” (Hall, 1997; Puar, 2017), biopolitics apply to any number of non-state actors who wield power, including other institutions, technologies, and less formalized community governance structures (Schuller, 2018). Second, biopower does not only apply to physical bodies; it also regulates emotions or affects (Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Schuller, 2018). Biopolitically charged “life” and “death” therefore do not only apply to literal bodies; they may also be symbolic. Third, and perhaps most directly in response to Foucault’s limitations, biopower is an intersectional force that upholds structural whiteness, *cisnormativity*, colonialist logics, and ableism in addition to heteronormativity (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019; Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2017). Per Chow (Chow, 2002), biopower may be used to examine the “ascendency of whiteness in the modern world” (p. 3). Like queer theory, modern critiques of biopower ideally examine structural power dynamics in direct opposition to neoliberal logics.

Biopower and queer theory go hand-in-hand partially because biopolitics may be used to address the monolithic conceptions of queerness that queer theory can produce (Puar, 2017; Schuller, 2018). Biopolitics go beyond strict identity to think about structure, and ways that categories of bodies and sentiments are produced by institutions who, regardless of intent, impose stratified power dynamics on a population based on those categories. Queer theory allows us to identify these categories and their relationship
to power dynamics, while biopower reveals complex arrangements of bodies, affects, and institutions that result in gradations of often-unevenly applied formal and informal regulations that instantiate power dynamics. Regulations can be literal laws, rules, and policies, or they can be less formalized (but still institutionalized) infrastructures and discourses like inaccessible buildings and racist school policies (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Puar, 2017; Williamson, 2016). Puar (2017) explains how biopolitics function in light of “queerness” when she discusses a type of homonormativity that she calls “homonationalism.” Puar demonstrates that white, western, affluent, and cisgender queer people who conform to normative institutions (e.g., marriage, home ownership) are less regulated than, and may in fact be regulators of, more marginalized queer people of color.

As Nyong’o (2017) argues, queer theory and biopolitics work best when paired together. 

Assemblage Theory

I note above that sociotechnical perspectives may expand upon pre-existing theory in information practice and fanfiction studies. Uses of the term “sociotechnical” are uneven, especially across information science, given the numerous paradigms that inform the discipline. Assemblage theory shapes my approach to sociotechnical phenomena within fandoms, and it further cements connections between queerness and structural articulations of (bio)power.

Assemblages stem from Deleuze’s (1992) conception of control societies, though assemblage theory has been significantly expanded by queer, feminist, and queer of color theorists (Nyong’o, 2017). At their most basic (and literal, from the French term “agencement”), assemblages describe groupings or collections of actors like humans and technologies (Nyong’o, 2017). In LIS, we may recognize this definition as paramount to
actor-network theory and associated perspectives like sociomateriality. However, assemblages have a rich and, arguably, more nuanced place among feminist and queer technoscientific perspectives (D. J. Haraway, 1991; Puar, 2017). Within actor-network theory, components of an assemblage seem concrete and, potentially, extractible: a person and a technology, or a person and a technical system. In feminist and queer contexts, assemblages are not merely comprised of a collection of “things” that somehow work together. Arguing against an assemblage as “a mere juxtaposition of things,” Nyong’o (2017) says:

Queer assemblage points us toward not just things but to velocities, not just to objects but to affects, not just to perceptible detritus but to the imperceptible play of forces that bring them into contact, fusion, and fission (p. xiii).

Assemblages therefore cannot be de-constructed in order to reveal and separate their component parts; they are conceptualized in part to demonstrate the limitations of categorizing people separately from machines, bodies separately from affects, and everyday occurrences separately from structuring forces (D. J. Haraway, 1991; Puar, 2017). They are not, as we sometimes like to say in general “sociotechnical” work, simply arrangements of people and technologies.

Assemblages reveal how power is mobilized and enacted beyond visual identity politics (Puar, 2017). In both Puar’s (2017) and Schuller’s (2018) formulations, assemblages demonstrate biopower and its function in modern societies in more complex and technoscientific ways than performative and simplistic examinations of inclusion and exclusion (see, Ahmed, 2012). For example, we can see how technologies intersect with capitalistic exploitation and entrenched anti-blackness to form racist, violent surveillance
states (Browne, 2015). Further, assemblages do not only reflect power dynamics. As Schuller (2018) explains, assemblages “combine cultural and biological elements and conceptions that…shape the form that power assumes, and not only the reverse” (p. 32). In their formulations and permutations, assemblages construct power in addition to revealing it.

Finally, we can consider assemblages theory’s relationship with intersectionality. Particularly within feminist circles, there is some debate about whether assemblages eclipse intersectional perspectives because they are less focused on categories of identity and more focused on “other contingencies of belonging…that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics” (Puar, 2017, p. 211). Puar suggests that feminist and queer scholars may do well to move away from intersectionality and toward assemblages given that a) assemblages are more attuned to bodies and space outside of normative constructions like time, and b) intersectionality has been co-opted by institutions as part of neoliberal “diversity” and “inclusion” efforts. However, a world exists in which both intersectional and assemblage theory co-exist and strengthen each other (Massumi, 2002, p. 7-8). While intersectionality elucidates how power dynamics relate to identities and positionalities in the here-and-now, assemblage theory articulates links between bodies, identities, and other actors that are perpetually in motion (Clough, 2000; Cohen, 1997). We need both perspectives in order to understand power beyond normative institutionalized discourses and develop ways to equitably redistribute that power.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I define “structure” and review four main areas of scholarship that inform my approach to this dissertation: information practice, fanfiction studies, queer theory, and assemblage theory. In the chapters that follow, I address limitations to information practice literature with a specific focus on information creation. Concurrently, I contribute to a growing body of scholarship that resists monolithically positive conceptions of fanfiction and associated fannish communities. I draw on queer theory, queer biopower, and assemblage theory to accomplish these aims. Further, in alignment with constructivist grounded theory, I introduce and cite additional related research into my combined results and discussion chapters when relevant. The proceeding chapter discusses constructivist grounded theory as a methodology and details the specific methods I used to collect and analyze data about my phenomenon of interest: queer fans’ creation of and interactions with fanfiction, platforms, and each other.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology and Methods

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory is an appropriate methodology for this project, given its aim to build theory where theory lacks or needs development. Queer individuals’ creation of slash fanfiction serves as a salient context through which to construct fresh and needed theory in LIS that accounts for structural power dynamics involved in information creation and associated information interactions. Such theory is needed in order to more substantively turn LIS scholarship towards acknowledging the role institutions and other normative agents play in information interactions.

Grounded theory was first articulated as such by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Their original text is epistemically divided between positivist and constructivist approaches to grounded theory. Since its publication, two camps of grounded theory have developed: classical grounded theory, which aligns with Glaser’s positivist orientation, and constructivist grounded theory, which aligns with Strauss’s constructivist orientation (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). I use a constructivist approach to grounded theory in this dissertation, following in the footsteps of other scholars who deploy the method to develop information science theory (Costello, 2017; Gibson & Martin, 2019). In this context, constructivism describes the epistemic and metatheoretical perspectives from which I approach scholarship. Here, constructivism does not indicate that I believe that all information interactions take place within individual people’s cognitive knowledge structures (Talja et al., 2005). Instead, it signals that I recognize my place in this research: constructivist grounded theory is a highly reflexive methodology wherein the researcher is in constant dialog with their data, consistently interrogating their place within every
step of the project and acknowledging that their perspectives and experiences will shape its results (Dey, 1999).

Constructivist grounded theory is a flexible and interpretive approach to describing phenomena of interest via simultaneous data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The methodology culminates in the development of middle-range theoretical contributions that describe the causes and consequences of phenomena, as well as the conditions under which they occur (Charmaz, 2014; Dey, 1999). It is perhaps unfortunate that Glaser and Strauss’s original text is epistemically inconsistent and widely cited for its approach to inductive analysis, as this confluence of circumstances has arguably led many a scholar to label their research “grounded theory” when they in fact use inductive analysis that may or may not include constant comparison (Suddaby, 2006; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). For the sake of the methodology and our discipline, it is important that we only define our research as constructivist grounded theory when we truly deploy the methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

There are six components of constructivist grounded theory (see Costello, 2015):

1. **Develop middle-range theory**: Grounded theory should be employed in order to develop theory where current theory is lacking (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). If we develop and conduct our research with the goal of advancing our theoretical understanding of a phenomenon of interest, grounded theory is an appropriate methodology to use (Charmaz, 2014).

2. **Inductive analysis**: During a grounded theory study, we should analyze our data inductively; grounded theorists do not deductively apply frameworks or coding schemes from prior literature to their data. However, as noted in chapter one, we
do identify *sensitizing concepts* as we develop our phenomena of interest and throughout our study as part of theoretical sampling. Sensitizing concepts demonstrate where theoretical gaps exist, where further theory development is needed, and how our work is situated among prior literature (Dunne, 2011). Inductive analysis in a grounded theory study involves three overlapping coding stages (Charmaz, 2014): 1) open coding, where we develop gerunded *invivo* codes from our data; 2) axial coding, where we group our codes into analytical categories; and 3) focused or theoretical coding, where we further abstract our categories into theoretical constructs. Coding is not a linear process due to constant comparison and accompanying theoretical sampling: as we continue to collect and analyze data, we move flexibly between all three stages of coding, deconstructing and reconstructing categories and constructs in order to address negative cases (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Negative cases describe data that conflict or contradict developing findings; they should not be assimilated into findings but should instead be used as critical tools to guide theoretical sampling. Though grounded theory is often used to collect and analyze qualitative data due to the epistemic underpinnings of components like inductive analysis, we can use constructivist grounded theory for any method of data collection, including quantitative work (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3. *The constant comparative method:* We often say that data collection and analysis occur “simultaneously” in constructivist grounded theory. This is a bit of a misnomer; we collect and analyze data *iteratively* so that there are not separate “data collection” and “data analysis” phases of the methodological process. This
is called constant comparison, or the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). When we collect our data, we should analyze it as quickly as possible, then iteratively revisit previous data and analysis in order to advance our understanding of our phenomenon of interest and further develop our theoretical model or contribution.

4. **Theoretical sampling**: Theoretical sampling is arguably the most important and most overlooked component of constructivist grounded theory (Draucker et al., 2007). In constructivist grounded theory work, we do not begin with a pre-determined sampling strategy based on populations or other data sources of interest. Instead, we begin to collect and analyze data related to our phenomenon of interest (often, but not always, via semi-structured interviews), then we determine where to next collect data based on the theoretical directions our work takes us (Draucker et al., 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We may need to ask new questions, collect data from new sources, or design new studies in order to pursue developing categories and constructs, address negative cases, and reach theoretical saturation (J. Low, 2019). Theoretical sampling should happen iteratively, alongside inductive analysis and constant comparison, so that we pursue data based on our developing analysis.

5. **Memoing**: Memoing is essential to constructivist grounded theory, as it allows us to trace our analytic processes throughout our work (Charmaz, 2014). Memos do not need to be formal, and may in fact be most useful when they are spontaneous (Charmaz, 2014). As we progress throughout our study, memos should become more complex, integrating our data, sensitizing concepts, and developing codes,
categories, and constructs (Charmaz, 2014). We write a variety of types of memos throughout a constructivist grounded theory study; memos may include actor memos that describe our participants and/or the systems and institutions we examine, as well as how they interact; process memos that describe our methodological processes and decision-making, such as the decisions we make about theoretical sampling strategies or coding; and analytic memos that track our developing analyses, such as our progression from codes to categories to theoretical constructs.

6. Assessing trustworthiness: It is difficult to determine when a grounded theory study is over: the constructivist epistemic that underscores the methodology means that we will never claim to conclusively develop a generalizable theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, grounded theorists use multiple methods to ensure that our works’ theoretical contribution is trustworthy, or robust and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some of these methods include member-checking, or continuing to communicate with participants throughout our data collection and analysis in order to ask them further questions and solicit their input on developing findings (Miles et al., 2015); peer debriefing, or a combination of formal and informal critical discussions about our developing findings with knowledgeable people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and negative case analysis, or identification of deviant cases in our data that suggest we need to continue theoretical sampling (Draucker et al., 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In sum, trustworthiness checks should help us determine when we reach a reasonable degree of theoretical saturation. Though Low (2019) points out that saturation is
a logical fallacy because there will never be a point at which we find no new patterns in our data, we can reasonably assess the strength and potential contribution of our conceptual model or theory as we conduct grounded theory research.

It is key to note that these components overlap. True constructivist grounded theory is iterative—it does not happen in discrete parts or steps.

In the section that follows, I will explain how I enacted each component of constructivist grounded theory in this dissertation. I will illustrate my explanations of these processes with examples from my research. As an active and reflexive methodology, constructivist grounded theory comes “alive” with descriptions of how the work is carried out (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2014).

Employing Constructivist Grounded Theory in This Dissertation

The following explicates how constructivist grounded theory methodologically informs my dissertation. I first discuss my initial data collection methods, followed by their limitations and the ways that I addressed these limitations via theoretical sampling and trustworthiness checks. I explain that I coded my data manually in order to increase my sensitivity to developed codes, categories, and constructs, and I articulate how my sensitizing concepts influenced my analytical processes. I conclude with ethical concerns that are germane to this and other research endeavors that explore people’s online information practices and the data they leave behind.

Initial Data Collection Methods

I developed my phenomenon of interest in December 2018 and conducted data collection and analysis from February-December 2019 after obtaining IRB approval from Rutgers,
The State University of New Jersey. I conducted an initial round of data collection and analysis from February-November 2019. I started with semi-structured interviews; I recruited a total of ten participants who self-identify as queer and who read and write slash fanfiction online. To recruit participants, I used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling: I reached out to two people I know, who each recommended two or three other people who may be interested in participating, and so forth. Interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype. To assist in protecting their identity, participants selected their own pseudonyms. They were compensated $20 for their time. I transcribed my data as quickly as possible after each interview, and began open coding during transcription. As I continued to interview and transcribe, my inductive coding advanced up the analytic chain into axial and focused coding as I employed the constant comparative method.

As I talked with participants, their responses made it clear that fanfiction texts and platforms were salient to their reading and writing practices. Therefore, while I continued to interview, I also looked at examples of slash fanfiction as well as material features of the online platforms participants most frequently mentioned: Archive of our Own (AO3) and Fanfiction.net (FFN). I sampled fanfiction texts from the Captain America fandom on both platforms because participants mentioned it frequently by conducting searches on both AO3 and FFN to find the most current work of Captain America slash fanfiction published on each platform as of mid-April 2019. Two works (one from each platform) and their respective comments/reviews were downloaded and qualitatively examined alongside interview data. I coded fics’ tags, text, and comments manually using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) in order to develop codes and categories.
In addition to fic content and interviews, I also examined material features including the retrieval systems, classification schemes, and interactional tools (e.g., commenting affordances, providing “likes” or “kudos”) on both AO3 and FFN in order to better understand participants’ descriptions of their interactions with the platforms. I captured a series of screenshots and coded the screenshots using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, I wrote descriptive memos of what I saw in each photograph, as well as the context from which I took each photograph (e.g., other features on the platform, the date and time and whether each was significant, etc.). I coded the memos alongside the screenshots to develop codes and categories. I then triangulated codes and categories that developed from fic analysis and platform analysis with those that developed from interview transcript analysis in order to begin to create higher-level theoretical constructs that accounted for all data sources. Here, I was able to look at fanfiction texts to better understand the reading and writing practices that participants described, and I was able to look at platforms to deepen my understanding of actions and interactions participants described, as well as ways in which platforms’ infrastructures contributed to those interactions.

As I began to triangulate this data and code them theoretically, I identified a number of concerning limitations to my work that I then used to theoretically sample and advance my developing data collection and analysis. For example, I realized that my sampling strategy yielded a homogeneous participant pool that limited my ability to examine intersectional power dynamics within fandoms; my fic sampling strategy crossed ethical boundaries; and my approach to platform content analysis needed to include policy statements in addition to sociomaterial features. Interestingly, these limitations were not
exclusively negative cases. My data were quite consistent, meaning that participants’ responses echoed each other and developed into clear patterns. This repetition is a reason to continue theoretically sampling in grounded theory research (Draucker et al., 2007). Hearing the same patterns and identifying similar themes within participants’ responses was a sign that I was missing perspectives, not a sign that I reached theoretical saturation. This process of identifying shortcomings in my data collection and analysis was essential in strengthening my project and its theoretical significance. Shortcomings with my initial data collection include:

1. *An all-white sample:* My initial ten participants are all white people. This partially resulted from my recruitment strategy; people I reached out to are white, and people they subsequently asked to participate are also white. This draws attention to a significant potential limitation of convenience and snowball sampling, which are often used in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014); because we widely live in segregated societies, our social contacts often share similar backgrounds and demographics, and this can lead to homogenous samples. The initial whiteness of my sample majorly limited the perspectives gleaned from interview data; to understand the power dynamics at play during fannish interactions, I could not only study white queer people. Constructions of gender and sexuality, as well as queer experiences, are co-constituted with constructions of race (Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018). Studying fandom can highlight intersecting inequities between queerness and race (Cohen, 1997), as fans of color experience racism and hate that demonstrate ways in which structural racism is expressed in fandom (and other online and offline) spaces. Though whiteness is a racialized construction, its
dominance often renders racism invisible. Consequently, studying only white people obscures inequities in fandom, and provides a narrow view that casts fannish activities as democratic or utopic while overlooking structural inequities (De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018). Therefore, I needed to interview queer fans of color to understand these inequities, and to develop constructs that account for structural articulations of power in information interactions. This was not merely a demographic or representational problem in my data: it was a problem of theoretical significance and, perhaps more importantly, a problem related to justice in information science studies that often promote and privilege whiteness (Mehra & Gray, 2020).

2. *Ethical dimensions of data scraping:* My initial sampling strategy for fic texts was unethical. I learned this mostly in hindsight, after speaking with other internet researchers and expanding my familiarity with literature about data ethics. For example, I did not obtain explicit permission from authors to analyze their work, which raises ethical alarms around consent and transparency (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This is especially concerning because I am specifically working with queer populations, who are marginalized and therefore more vulnerable to being exploited or harmed by data collection (Hoffmann & Jones, 2016). It was also incorrect in a fannish context, given norms around privacy in fandom communities as well as known instances in which researchers have exploited fans in the past (Dym & Fiesler, 2018b). Further, my decision to focus on *Captain America* was limiting both because it is one among an infinite number of fandoms, and because examining two texts without speaking to their
authors necessarily limited by understanding of them. This became clear as I continued to talk to participants and more deeply engage with fan studies’ intersection with critical race theory. Further, because grounded theory is a methodology focused on iteratively analyzing a suite of methods, the whiteness in my participant sample affected my fic sample, as well as my ability to glean information about power from that sample: slash Captain America fandom and associated fic have been called out for perpetuating racism in fannish spaces (Pande & Coker, 2018). Therefore, alongside adjustments in my participant recruitment strategy and resultant pool, I also needed to reconsider my fic sampling strategy to make it more ethically sound and more attuned to power.

3. **Focusing on the sociomaterial rather than the sociotechnical**: During my initial round of data collection and analysis, I focused on sociomaterial features of AO3 and FFN. While these sources of data are useful, sociomateriality on its own is generally an individualistic and, arguably, deterministic lens through which to consider how people interact in and with online environments. Sociomateriality focuses on a technology’s affordances, or what it permits, and constraints, or what it deters or does not offer, with limited attendance to the sociocultural factors that situate such features (Kitzie, 2019) and the power dynamics that shape wider sociotechnical ecosystems (Floegel, 2020a; Haraway, 1990). My initial focus on sociomateriality had the same outcome as my participant and fic samples: it did not allow me to thoroughly attend to power in my data collection and analysis. Because it did not allow this, I was unable to theoretically consider how sociotechnical assemblages, or complex networks of humans, technology, and
institutions (Haraway, 1990; Lupton, 2016; Puar, 2017) form and function in fandom spaces because I was considering features rather than more complex systems.

I developed theoretical sampling strategies to address these shortcomings, and I resumed data collection and analysis in February 2020 after successfully defending my dissertation proposal. Theoretical sampling, especially as it occurs over the course of two years, may make constructivist grounded theory work appear as if it has a pilot phase. Especially as students, we may be encouraged to frame initial data collection or developing theoretical sampling as “pilot” data that is to be expanded upon with subsequent collection and analysis; this can be particularly true when events like dissertation proposal defenses cause a gap in our data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, separating phases of data collection and analysis in grounded theory is inaccurate, and disservices both the methodology and the research because it erases the iterative processes that define grounded theoretical development. For example, though I had conducted axial coding during my initial data collection and analysis, I did not move on to theoretical coding because of the gaps I identified in my research; when I resumed data collection and analysis, I revisited and revised open codes and axial categories from my initial data collection and analysis in light of new data that I received and analyzed from new sources.

**Theoretical Sampling and Analysis**

In direct response to the concerns that a) my participant pool did not allow me to interrogate inequities, particularly along racialized lines, b) my fic sampling strategy was unethical and could be adjusted to better respect participants’ privacy and creative works,
and c) my focus on sociomaterial features did not allow me to fully attend to broader sociotechnical power dynamics, I investigated additional strategies I could deploy to ensure that my subsequent data collection and analysis would better, and more ethically, attended to power dynamics within fandom. Therefore, my theoretical sampling strategies included:

1. **Recruiting and interviewing additional participants:** With IRB approval, I revised my recruitment strategy so that I could recruit participants from my personal Twitter account. I tweeted an announcement about my dissertation research on March 4, 2020 that included a link to a pre-screening survey to specifically target queer fans of color. The [pre-screening survey](#) asked basic demographic questions (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, nation), whether participants read and wrote fanfiction within the past year, and whether they moderated and/or designed a fanfiction site. Moderators on fanfiction sites are responsible for implementing platform and/or community guidelines. The moderation and design questions were included to inform theoretical sampling, as my initial data collection, analysis, and further reading led me to believe that I needed more information about moderating to understand power in fandom. I was retweeted 600 times and 132 people completed the pre-screening survey, which I closed for data collection on March 10, 2020. I selected participants to interview slowly, so that I could iteratively collect and analyze my data and so that I could theoretically sample from the large potential participant pool I acquired. Initially, when sampling, I paid attention to a) a person’s race (e.g., I did not have a large number of Black people respond, and so I interviewed the few Black participants I
had, partly to consider why this was so); b) a person’s gender (for example, I had more women than men and non-binary people in my initial sample, and so I interviewed a greater number of men and non-binary people); c) whether a person moderated a fan site of interest (e.g., I wanted to interview both people who currently moderate and those who moderated in the past, but no longer do so).

After I interviewed a few people, transcribed their audio-recorded interviews, and open-coded transcripts, I proceeded to further theoretically sample participants. In addition to the three criteria I already listed, as analysis progressed, I prioritized fans who live outside of the United States because my interpretation of the data suggested that nationality, in addition to race, is an important construct in fandom interactions. I interviewed a total of 12 participants who responded to the prescreening survey. Towards the end of my data collection, I also emailed the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW)—the non-profit that runs AO3—to ask if any queer people who moderate for one of the volunteer committees that oversee the platform’s daily functions would speak with me. Though I had already spoken to some lower-level moderators, the information I received from participants about AO3 raised some questions about the OTW’s committee structure. Two moderators responded to my inquiry. Both volunteer for the Policy and Abuse Committee and Open Doors Committee, and one also volunteers for

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6 The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) is a non-profit organization committed to protecting and preserving fanworks. It is comprised of a number of committees that oversee its various projects, including the maintenance and development of Archive of Our Own (AO3) (https://www.transformativeworks.org/). The Policy and Abuse Committee specifically investigates reported violations of AO3’s Terms of Service (e.g., harassment, incorrect tagging, spam posts) while the Open Doors Committee is in charge of transferring fic from defunct or soon-to-be defunct online fandom archives to AO3; they do not do this without permission from the moderators of said archives. Other participants in this dissertation who volunteer for the OTW tag wrangle, or sort and organize tags in their claimed fandom, on AO3.
additional committees that she asks I not specifically disclose. Including my initial participants, I interviewed 25 people over the phone or via Skype, Discord, and WhatsApp. Participants recruited during theoretical sampling selected their own pseudonyms for confidentiality and were compensated $35 for their time. Table 1 lists participants and their demographic information, while Table 2 lists participants and which platforms they moderate. I provide a copy of my interview guide in Appendix B.

2. Asking for explicit permission to read participants’ fic: I redesigned my fic sampling strategy so that I asked for participants’ permission to read their fic. I collected fic samples in two ways: a) I emailed my initial ten participants to ask if they would feel comfortable sharing two fic examples with me, and b) I added a question to my pre-screening survey to ask participants who were recruited during theoretical sampling whether they were willing to share two fic examples with me. Four of my initial ten participants shared fic; the other six did not respond (though some did respond to other forms of member-checking, as explained below). These four participants asked me whether I had criteria for the fic I would like them to send, so I broadly requested fic that was especially meaningful to them. I also asked whether they would be willing to answer follow-up questions about their fic. All four agreed. Three answered questions via email and one preferred to talk over the phone. I asked these participants a) why they selected the two fics; b) where they published them and why; c) how their fics related to canon; d) how their fics related to other fannish content, if at all; e) how they approached tagging their fics (all participants sent links to AO3 fics, meaning
they were all assigned tags); and f) whether they would change anything about the fics if they could. These four participants were compensated an additional $15 (for a total of $35 compensation throughout their participation in this research). All but one participant recruited during theoretical sampling shared two fic examples as well; I provided the same broad selection criteria to them.

Information about fic samples was integrated into interview questions, particularly when I asked about canon materials and tagging. Participants were generally excited when they spoke about their fic. The one participant who did not share fic was recruited during a late-stage theoretical sampling effort to talk to moderators on AO3. I felt I had already reached sufficient saturation with the fic data; I did not ask her for examples so that we could focus on moderating during the interview.

3. **Expanding my platform sample and examining platform policies**: In order to conceptualize power on a sociotechnical level with data from fanfic platforms, I expanded my analyses to look not only at the features of those platforms, but also to look at their policy statements and information about their infrastructure (See Table 3). Such information included their moderation systems (e.g., human, algorithmic, or a combination thereof), terms of service, information about any content that is banned from the site, procedures for reporting content, and procedures for reporting users and harassment (e.g., community guidelines). I also expanded my platform sample to include three sites in addition to AO3 and FFN: Twitter, Discord, and Tumblr. I selected these platforms because participants frequently spoke about them during interviews. I selected which features and
which policies to examine based on information provided by participants, as well as theoretical sampling directions suggested by an initial examination of topics participants discussed. For example, I looked at the tagging system on AO3 because participants frequently discussed it, and then I expanded my analysis to look at metadata more broadly to see how tags function within AO3’s larger ecosystem. To preserve these data, I took screenshots of and/or created PDFs from information provided by each platform, as well as from news briefs distributed by platforms. Examples of the latter include blog posts about AO3 published by the OTW in the midst of Black Lives Matter protests, and announcements made by Discord during the same time period. I also used fic examples that participants sent me to examine features; for example, most participants sent their fic as AO3 links, which allowed me to look at tags and other metadata in situ, as they relate to a fic work and its author. This strengthened iteration between my three main data sources—interviews, fic, and platforms. Further, I triangulated data from current platforms with information participants shared about now defunct-platforms during interviews; for example, I considered the archival features on AO3 in comparison to the chat forum features on the now-defunct fan platform, LiveJournal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (Pronouns)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Race or Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Shared fic?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ash (He/they)</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Black and Brazilian</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin (They/them)</td>
<td>Genderfluid</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara (She/her)</td>
<td>Cis woman</td>
<td>Queer (bi)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Year Valid?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowgirl</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian/bi</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mostly gay</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>Cisgender female</td>
<td>Bisexual (also use queer/lesbian)</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyrical</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer/bi</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Russian/Jewish</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>Male (trans)</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Latin American, European</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persephone</td>
<td>Genderless</td>
<td>Bi-romantic asexual</td>
<td>Chinese-Canadian</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer/lesbian</td>
<td>Afro-Latina</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Nonbinary/genderflux</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qwuik</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronan</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Bi/pan</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robosan</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Latinx, Ecuadorian</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Female, cis</td>
<td>Bi/demi</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scatter</td>
<td>Trans masc</td>
<td>Bi-romantic asexual</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>US</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Girl/boy/complicated</td>
<td>Queer/bi</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine (She/they)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asexual (Demi-sexual)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince (Any)</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Lesbian (Demi-sexual)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latina (Mestiza)</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow (She/her)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>white</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Participants and their self-reported demographic information.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Self-designed platform</td>
<td>Designer; general moderator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrical</td>
<td>Obscured for confidentiality</td>
<td>List owner; general moderator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persephone</td>
<td>LiveJournal</td>
<td>General moderator</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qwuik</td>
<td>AO3</td>
<td>Tag wrangler</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robosan</td>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>Board, server, channel moderator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronan</td>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>Board, server, channel moderator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scatter</td>
<td>AO3, Discord</td>
<td>Tag wrangler, Board, server, channel moderator</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>AO3</td>
<td>Policy and Abuse and Open Doors committee member</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>AO3</td>
<td>Multiple, including Policy and Abuse and Open Doors committee member</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Participants who moderate.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Policies</th>
<th>Dates examined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive of Our Own (AO3)</td>
<td>Tagging system; search system; commenting features; other response features (e.g., “kudos); metadata for published works; content rating system</td>
<td>Terms of service and community guidelines; moderation policies; content policies; committee descriptions; blog posts/news bulletins</td>
<td>February 2019, November 2019, March 2020, May-June 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanfiction.net (FFN)</td>
<td>Tagging system; search system; commenting features; other response features; metadata for published works; content rating system</td>
<td>Terms of service and community guidelines; moderation policies; content policies</td>
<td>February 2019, November 2019, March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Text-based and image-based affordances and constraints; threaded tweets; commenting features; likes and retweets</td>
<td>Terms of service and community guidelines; moderation policies; content policies</td>
<td>March 2020, May-June 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>Server formation; classification mechanisms; search system</td>
<td>Terms of service and community guidelines; moderation policies; content policies; news bulletins</td>
<td>March 2020, May-June 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>Tagging system; search system; other response features; reblogging</td>
<td>Terms of service and community guidelines, moderation policies, content policies</td>
<td>March 2020, May-June 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Platforms, features, and policies analyzed for this study.
These are not the only theoretical sampling strategies I used throughout data collection and analysis. Modifying the interview guide is a frequent theoretical sampling strategy in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014): because data collection and analysis are iterative processes, ongoing data collection should reflect developing analysis. I modified my interview guide frequently to further explore ideas that I identified during stages of open, axial, and focused or theoretical coding. Examples include updating the language I used (i.e., a few participants used the term “anti” or “anti-fan” to discuss toxicity in fandom, and so I started to ask specifically about antis during interviews) as well as the questions I asked (i.e., participants described feelings of loss when platform purges occurred, so I started to ask about loss) and the topics I covered (i.e., I added questions about moderation as it became clear that moderating was a significant practice in fandom).

Another key source of my theoretical sampling is not traditional data collection, but sampling literature that became relevant as my data collection and analysis progressed. While sensitizing concepts in grounded theory are most often discussed in relation to how they inform the development of a phenomenon of interest, a researcher should identify and explore them throughout a constructivist grounded theory study so that the researcher may connect developing findings to existing literature; this aids original theory development and ensures that findings can be used to expand current theory (Dunne, 2011). For example, as I collected and analyzed data, various streams of work developed as salient components of reading and creating fanfiction, as well as interacting with other fans. Therefore, as I progressed, I read existing literature about creative, emotional, and information labor to both enrich my understanding of my data
and to understand how my work relates to existing scholarship. Note that in my final contribution, “work” itself was not a construct: sensitizing concepts, whether they are identified towards the beginning, middle, or end of a grounded theory study, are often integrated throughout data analysis rather than deductively deemed a high-level construct. Work is relevant to all of the constructs I developed from this study and was therefore integrated into analysis; for example, in *transforming bodies and feelings*, participants of color perform more emotional labor than white participants because they have to contend with racist content and interactions, while in *forming community vs. forming cliques*, participants explain how affective economies develop from fandom work.

Finally, two global processes were exacerbated during my data collection and analysis that I had to attend to theoretically: COVID-19 and multiple instances of police officers murdering Black people in the United States. I call these processes rather than events as to not diminish their development or significance; COVID-19 is a pandemic that’s development and spread stems from intersecting instantiations of climate change, capitalism, global economic divides, and racial inequities (Gibson et al., 2020; C. P. Jones, 2001; Klein, 2020), while penal and carceral systems in the United States have been systemically racist and violent from their conception (Benjamin, 2019b; Gibson et al., 2020). Both COVID-19 and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade continue to impact fandom; while they do not necessarily indicate anything new in studies of fandom, they do illustrate how processes like crises, trauma, and violence shape and are shaped by fannish interactions and spaces. Participants interviewed after February 2020 all mentioned COVID-19 without my asking; I also added a question...
about COVID-19 to my interview guide and via email asked this question of participants who I had interviewed previously. Again, this was not to focus specifically on this pandemic, the impact of which we do not understand because it is ongoing; it was to theorize how global crises ripple in fandom pools.

Further, though I had a great deal of data about racism in fandom from participants, police brutality and increased public attention (read: increased attention from powerful people) on racism led AO3 and Discord to update their policies, purportedly in order to make them safer for people of color. I took screenshots of or downloaded the policies, as well as announcements about them, and I also carefully followed news and discourse on other social media sites like Twitter to collect blog posts and op-eds about these policies which, especially in AO3’s case, were not often favorably received. Both COVID-19-related data and policy-related data helped me to advance my theoretical constructs, as they further exposed the emotional ties participants develop with fanworks (i.e., participants turned to fic for catharsis during lockdown); the work moderators must do to keep platforms running (i.e., higher traffic on fansites led to heightened moderating duties); exposure of how racism is instantiated on platforms (i.e., AO3’s and Discord’s policies did not directly address racism, and put increased responsibility on individual users rather than platforms and those who officially run them).

As data were collected iteratively, analysis also proceeded iteratively, moving from inductive open coding to axial and focused coding in a nonlinear fashion—often, new data and negative cases caused categories that were in an axial or focused stage to return to an open coding process. Iterative analysis is common in constant comparison,
which stresses flexibility and non-linear coding during simultaneous data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). As referenced earlier in this chapter, I coded my data manually in order to increase my sensitivity to it, and to avoid closing categories too soon, which can happen with qualitative data analysis software (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During analysis, I paid particular attention to appearances of my sensitizing concepts for two reasons: to ensure that I integrated them into my analysis, and to ensure that I did not cease analysis when I recognized a previously known construct in my data (Dunne, 2011). For example, I note in the literature review that our understanding of work in information practice scholarship is limited. I found various streams of work, including epistemic, emotional, affective, and attention work, in my data, and I integrated these ideas into my theoretical analysis. As analysis progressed, I also identified new areas of inquiry that I needed to integrate into my findings; for example, affective and embodied information practices became salient, as did their biopolitical implications.

In tandem, iteratively collecting and analyzing data from the multiple sources named above allow me to conceptualize sociotechnical assemblages (Benjamin, 2019d; D. Haraway, 1990; Lupton, 2016; Puar, 2017) in fandom: the constructs I developed explain how various actors I included in this research—participants, digital technologies, institutions like platforms, and institutionalized discourses—shape and are shaped by each other in ways that allow me to consider how power operates within fandom spaces where people create and interact with information.

Establishing Trustworthiness

As I employed the constant comparative method to collect and inductively analyze my data, I conducted a number of trustworthiness checks. These trustworthiness checks did
not occur as I concluded my research. Instead, I assessed the trustworthiness of my developing findings at every stage possible so that processes like member-checking and peer-debriefing factored into my analysis. Trustworthiness checks proceeded in the following manner, occurring simultaneously alongside data collection, analysis, and theoretical sampling):

1. **Memoing:** Like any trustworthiness check, memoing is both an analytical tool and a tool through which to assess rigor (Charmaz, 2014). I composed three types of memos during data collection and analysis. I composed *actor memos* after every interview wherein I a) described the interview, b) noted any unique or defining features of the interview; and c) listed any lingering questions or potential negative cases. In these memos, I tried to conceptualize each participant as part of a wider fandom network: as I described what they told me, I considered how their practices shape and are shaped by other actors such as fanworks, platforms, and other fans. I also composed *process memos* wherein I documented, described, and questioned my methodological process. In this dissertation, process memos typically coalesced around my theoretical sampling decisions, my interrogations of my own place in my data analysis, and, towards the end, how I could account for global events that unfolded during data collection and analysis (i.e., COVID-19 and a heightened fight for civil rights). In order to both track and develop my data analysis, I wrote *analytic memos*. These memos ranged from sentences jotted into a note on my phone to a list scribbled on an index card to article-length Word documents explaining my constructs. Collectively, memos
helped me track my evolving theoretical sampling strategies and analysis, and as they became more complex, they provided a basis for writing this dissertation.

2. **Negative Case Analysis**: As noted above, negative cases describe data that contradicts or otherwise conflicts with developing findings. When I came across negative cases during data collection and analysis, I proceeded in two ways: I moved back down the analytic chain to open coding if I was conducting axial or focused coding, and I considered whether and how to theoretically sample so that I could collect more data about the negative case(s) in order to better understand how they informed my phenomenon of interest. For example, at point when most participants told me that they only have positive experiences on AO3, NIV told me about people he knows who were harassed on the platform. This led me to modify my interview guide to ask about harassment, and to pursue recruiting participants who moderate harassment cases on AO3.

3. **Member-checking**: Member-checking is key to constructivist grounded theory; unlike more traditional qualitative studies where researchers may send a transcript or brief summary of findings to participants with little additional follow-up, constructivist grounded theory studies are typically characterized by more involved forms of member-checking (Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al., 2015). This is so because member-checking is itself a form of theoretical sampling. When I had additional questions about both the data participants directly provided and my developing findings as a whole, I would gather additional information from participants. All participants consented to member-checking at the beginning of the study, though I told them that they did not need to respond to my member-
checks if they did not wish to do so. During this study, I performed the following official member-checks: a) I asked select participants follow-up questions when I wanted to know more about information they provided during interviews, or when I had questions that pertained to a topic they raised during their interviews that was not generally discussed throughout data collection; and b) I sent a short summary of my findings-to-date to participants in May 2020, and asked for their feedback. Interestingly, less formal member-checking occurred when participants contacted me after interviews to share additional information that they wanted me to know. Speculatively, this may have occurred because fans are a generally excitable population, and because isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns placed people online more often than usual; multiple participants interviewed or otherwise contacted after March 2020 noted that they had a lot of free time on their hands and were happy to provide information. All forms of member-checking happened via email, via Twitter direct messages, or via Discord’s private messaging feature. I integrated data from member-checks into my analysis, and some of the quotes I present in my findings are from member-checks.

4. **Peer debriefing:** I also frequently engaged in peer-debriefing throughout my data collection and analysis. Peer-debriefing occurs on a spectrum that encompasses formal and informal or spontaneous discussions. I engaged in debriefing with a number of people, including dissertation committee members, other doctoral students, and other fan scholars, especially those who study online fandom and who study race and nation in fandom. Throughout my study, I arranged formal
meetings with these individuals to discuss findings; during these meetings, I a) provided debriefers with a written summary report of my findings to date so that they could provide feedback; b) described my findings and asked for their impressions; or c) asked specific questions about data that I did not quite know how to interpret. Less formally, I spoke of my dissertation often with colleagues and friends in fandom spaces, and they generously provided feedback or suggestions, even when I did not ask.

After iterative rounds of trustworthiness checks and further data collection and analysis, I settled on the three constructs and determined that I reached a reasonable level of saturation such that I could conclude the study and consider avenues for future research (J. Low, 2019). I determined I reached sufficient saturation when:

1. My constructs addressed my phenomenon of interest in an explanatory manner rather than merely a descriptive manner (Glaser, 2001);
2. I could articulate processes (e.g., causes, conditions, and consequences) of my phenomenon of interest (Dey, 1999);
3. I addressed negative cases through theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008);
4. I theoretically sampled both data and existing literature so that I could be sure that my work expands on prior research (Bowen, 2008);
5. I determined that my constructs could be transferable to other scenarios via peer debriefing and further reading (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)

Remaining Ethical Considerations

Briefly, it is worth nothing that this dissertation raises some ethical methodological concerns beyond my initial decision to examine fic without permission. Writing and
otherwise interacting with fanfiction is an intimate process wherein fans, who are largely members of marginalized groups, may articulate or grapple with traumatic events and processes (Dym et al., 2019). When I collected data, participants shared such experiences with me, both as they relate to their fanworks and as general information about themselves. This means that the data I collected is particularly sensitive and personal; I did not include these details in this dissertation either because participants asked me not to disclose them, or because they are quite intimate and not necessary for understanding my analysis.

Further, participants granted me permission to read their fic, and to use their fic in my data analysis. They also discussed and referenced the specific fandoms they participate in during interviews. However, despite having their permission to quote their fic, I do not do so in this dissertation, nor do I reference specific plot points in their fic. I also do not identify participants with their fandom(s); to illustrate points, I either remove fandom names from participants’ quotes, or I use more generic examples from a major (at the time of my writing) fandom like *Sherlock* or *Captain America*. I made these decisions to protect participants’ identities—people are easily identifiable from their writing or their participation in specific fandoms.

This has ramifications for IRB procedures, which scholars already note tend to misunderstand research that involves marginalized populations (Halse & Honey, 2005). To those who are not inside fandom spaces, a “fanfiction” likely does not seem like a site for collection of sensitive or identifiable data, even if it is penned by marginalized queer people. This draws further attention to our obligation as researchers to consider a) how we can be ethically responsible to our participants within institutional structures; and b)
how we may change those structures so that they are more ethical towards participants (Ahmed, 2012; Halse & Honey, 2005).

Conclusion

Constructivist grounded theory is a flexible and interpretive approach to simultaneous data collection and analysis that results in the development of middle-range theoretical contributions. In this chapter, I introduce the six core components of constructivist grounded theory—develop middle range theory, inductive analysis, the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, memoing, and assessing trustworthiness—and explain how they methodologically inform my dissertation. I demonstrate that theoretical sampling strategies allowed me to more thoroughly examine power dynamics within online fandom environments, and I raise ethical concerns related to my study that I had to navigate throughout data collection and analysis. In the chapters that follow, I present the rich theoretical contributions that developed from my use of constructivist grounded theory.
CHAPTER 4: Transforming Bodies and Feelings

Introduction

I developed three constructs during data collection and analysis: transforming bodies and feelings; forming community vs. forming cliques; and governing platforms and people. These constructs demonstrate ways that structural articulations of power operate in fandom spaces wherein queer people create and interact with fanfiction texts, each other, and platforms. They exemplify how power dynamics, especially intersectional and biopolitical power dynamics, are reflected and reified within and among sociotechnical assemblages in fandom. Chapters four, five, and six will present these constructs, and sections within each chapter will focus on categories that illustrate them. Throughout these chapters, I will integrate results and discussion in order to make my findings come “alive” by putting them in dialog with existing scholarship (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2014). This chapter will discuss the transforming bodies and feelings construct, while the following chapters will discuss the other two findings.

Transforming bodies and feelings refers to practices, features, and policies that relate to ways in which queer people and platforms construct and understand embodiments and affects, or emotions, via online fanwork. Reading and writing fanfiction texts are embodied and affective experiences for participants. The transformative elements of reading and writing queer fanfiction are intricately tied to participants’ embodied experiences with gender, sexuality, and race. However, though queer fanfiction ostensibly transforms heteronormative canonical media texts so that they reflect queer identities and experiences, reading and, especially, writing practices are infused with normativities that expose the biopolitical dimensions of fanfiction texts. For
example, texts are often homonormative and dominated by white characters (Pande, 2018). Moreover, participants explain that transformative elements of fanfiction are not only embodied in a corporeal sense: they are also affective. But though participants claim that both reading and writing fanfiction can be cathartic, their descriptions of catharsis operate on an individual level, and therefore obscure further inequities involved in transformative practices. I argue that we can see these inequities if we think of fanfiction as creative epistemic labor wherein more marginalized queer fans have to work harder, and experience more negative emotions, to create and achieve some sense of catharsis. Finally, I discuss how AO3 demonstrates ways that platform features and evolving policies affect how bodies and feelings are constructed in fanfiction texts. Here, biopolitics also become relevant, as platform governance and polices that seem progressive often serve to regulate bodies and feelings in order to uphold normativity and further obscure oppression in fandom.

*Transformation and queer fanfiction*

Participants value queer fanfiction because it transforms canonical texts, which they describe as widely cis- and heteronormative. Essentially, participants identify gaps in what they see represented in canonical media texts, and they seek to fill those gaps through interactions with fanfiction. Persephone describes an exemplary scenario rooted in *Harry Potter* fandom:

[Y]ou look at known *TERF* JK Rowling and her disaster of a universe and then you go, ‘Okay, well, what if we made this but actually made it so it’s friendly towards queer people? Towards trans people? Towards neurodivergent people?
So it’s not a racist mess?’ You know? And so, part of [fanfiction] is transforming that. Because you don’t…see that in commercial media.

The scenario Persephone poses aligns with literature that describes transformative fandom, or a type of fandom in which people alter elements of canon media by creating new texts such as fanfiction (Dym et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2013). There is a rich history of particularly queer transformative texts; while some people refer to such texts underneath a broad “slash” fanfiction umbrella, others use the term slash to refer only to fanfiction that depicts gay men (or “M/M” pairings) while they use terms like “queer,” “gay,” or “gender-bent” to refer to other practices within subsets of transformative fanfiction that focus on queer people (Neville, 2018). No matter the terminology, dominant narratives about transformative fandom follow a common trajectory: members of marginalized communities—particularly women and queer people—read and write queer fanfiction to actualize and explore their personal desires and experiences, which are not widely depicted in canon or mainstream media texts (Dym et al., 2019; Hoad, 2017; Neville, 2018).

Participants describe practices that align with this viewpoint, but also complicate its “neat narrative of subversion” (Pande, 2018). Specifically, participants describe the embodied and affective elements of their fanfiction interactions, and how such elements are politicized within transformative fandom cultures.

Reading and writing queer bodies

Participants relate their reading and writing to how they experience queerness: namely, how they perceive their bodies, and how their bodies are perceived by those around them. Pilar says that because she is queer, she “[tends] to look at things from that queer
lens…it’s like having this unique interaction with society.” Vince emphasizes that being queer means “going against the standard. Like, what has been named the norm.” These perspectives align with general principles of queer theory, wherein queerness, as both an identity and a theoretical concept, aims to destabilize and reorient what we consider to be normative (Ahmed, 2006; Jagose, 1997). Here, normative refers to discourses that are dominant and stem from structural power dynamics (e.g., cisgenderness and heterosexuality), and therefore appear to be status quo despite their constructed nature (Collins, 2000; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Puar, 2017; Stryker, 2008). Queerness does not exist in a vacuum: it is one among many non-normative standpoints, and its construction necessarily intersects with other sources of power and oppression including race, class, disability, and nationality (Crenshaw, 1989).

This intersectionality means that participants experience queerness differently, often depending on their situated positionalities. While Ash says queerness is “actually liberating” and Austin ties queerness “very closely into community” where “we’re cool with everyone being different,” other participants describe more fraught experiences. Lyrical largely remains closeted outside of fandom because “one of the worst things you could be being Black is gay or liking gay or being in the periphery of gay,” while Maria explains that their experiences are shaped by their national context: “this place is Russia, which is extremely homophobic…because I don’t live somewhere in the first world, it’s not a thing that I can, like, display freely.” Because Persephone is on the asexual spectrum (or is “ace”), he experiences a lot of “acephobia” and “othering,” while NIV explains his difficulty coming out as a trans man in Latin America: “it was hard to figure
out because I didn’t have any references about trans people…I came out four times. It was a disaster each time.”

Participants’ varied experiences draw attention to critiques of queerness and queer theory on both individual and structural levels. Individually, queerness cannot be uncritically applied as an umbrella descriptor for people who are not straight or cisgender because a) the meaning of these terms can differ between national contexts, partly because their creation stems from Western colonial values (Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018), and b) perceptions of gender and sexuality interlock with race, nationality, and even spectrums of queer acceptance so that people who are not white, Western, and labeled within binary conceptions of gender and sexuality are typically more oppressed than those in more privileged positions (Cohen, 1997; Crenshaw, 1989; Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018). On a similar note, some scholars accuse queer theory of contributing to monolithic conceptions of reorientation (Jones & Harris, 2018).

However, despite intersecting inequities and participants’ critiques, all participants use queer to label their genders and/or sexualities, and they interact with transformative fandom and fanfiction to fill gaps they identify in canonical media that either erases queerness or depicts queer people monolithically. Such practices align with literature on information interactions, particularly scholarship that discusses seeking and creating information as practices meant to fill gaps in existing knowledge or materials (Dervin, 2003; Floegel, 2020a; Floegel & Costello, 2019; Kitzie et al., 2020). Here, however, participants specifically discuss embodied aspects of their interactions with fanfiction. Most information science literature to date discusses embodiment in particular types of scenarios; namely, those in which people’s physical bodies are present and
actively engaged in some sort of activity. Scholars explain how embodiment is germane to people’s experiences to argue that information interactions are neither strictly cognitive, nor binarily split between physical bodies and minds (Huttunen et al., 2019; Olsson, 2006). Examples of studies that focus on embodiment include Lloyd and Olsson’s (Lloyd & Olsson, 2019) study of enthusiast car restorers, where they describe complex information environments that include corporeal elements, and Cox, Giffin, and Hartel’s (2017) review of embodied aspects of activities like swimming and playing music. Developing methodologies for studying embodied aspects of information interactions, such as guided tours (e.g., Thomson, 2018), similarly focus on situated physicality. Ocepek (2018b) and Lloyd (2010) argue that studies of embodiment can provide useful insights into information behavior research because they demonstrate how the body impacts information interactions. However, literature on embodiment in information science can advance in two key areas: examinations of embodiment in immaterial contexts like online environments (Marlin-Bennett, 2013) and examinations of power dynamics that necessarily stem from any examination of bodies situated in social contexts (Ahmed, 2006; Foucault, 2007, 2010; Puar, 2017).

Participants’ descriptions of their interactions with fanfiction advance our understanding of such elements of embodiment, particularly as they pertain to information creation. Participants argue that canon texts—particularly television, film, and videogames—do not sufficiently depict queer bodies or embodied practices of queer people. Robosan shares an example from the Marvel universe, saying, “they could go to 100 on the queerness but they don’t. They reel it in. They give you a token kiss.” Crowgirl describes more widespread transphobia in canon texts: “the transphobia is at the
sticky end. They get the worst representation, the least care is taken, the least attempt to engage with the community is taken.” Clara bemoans the overrepresentation of gay men in media when she says, “As a woman, I’m not in that story. Mostly it’s all dudes,” while Harriet says that Black queer characters are a rarity because most stories center a “white cis character.” Participants generally bemoan longstanding media trends where queer people’s bodies are abused and murdered (Bury Your Gays, 2017) and queer sex is physically violent or invisible. Further, queerbaiting in canon texts is a particularly sore spot for participants. Queerbaiting describes media industry practices wherein “those officially associated with a media text court LGBT narratives…without the text ever definitely confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters” (Ng, 2017). It “often takes the form of pledging an allegiance to issues of queer visibility without ever actually delivering on such an allegiance in any tangible way” (Brennan, 2019a).

Persephone calls queerbaiting “unfinished business” and “wasted potential,” while Lyrical bemoans “fan service…a wink here, a nod there.” Especially on an aesthetic level, queerbaiting is an embodied practice wherein characters’ bodies are placed in positions that suggest, but do not explicitly depict, romantic or sexual interest (Foucault, 2012). Overall, participants state that though queer representation has come a long way in recent years, media still provides limited depictions of queer people who are not white, cisgender, and gay (Himberg, 2018; Rodriguez, 2019). Participants note that though they recognize these shortcomings in canon media, they continue to interact with media that depicts queerness because it can, as K says, be “helpful” even though “those gaps, when I see them or when I perceive them, make me angry.” Thus, when interacting with canon
texts, participants *satisfice*, or settle for the best they can find among limited options (Floegel & Costello, 2019).

Limited depictions of queer bodies and practices in canon texts are tied to power on multiple levels. Participants note that queer people are not seen or developed in media because queerness is not as marketable as heteronormativity; those identities we do see tend to be perceived as the most palatable to “mass” (i.e., default straight and cisgender) audiences (Himberg, 2018). Participants note that fiscal constraints limit what media can do. Scatter says, “TV shows have budgets, or actors can only be in a certain number of episodes.” Robosan explains that canonical material often “plays it safe” because “a lot of canon material [is] still created by corporations seeking profit, for the most part.” In early fan studies scholarship, media fans were often cast as powerless against corporate wishes in rather binary or simplistic depictions of the relationship between fans and media producers (Jenkins, 2013). Scholarship demonstrates that fans themselves have the power to express agency through transformative works (Dym et al., 2019; Fiesler et al., 2016), though such agency is still curbed by media institutions whose members invalidate fans (Nordin, 2019) as well as wider sociocultural power dynamics (Pande, 2018). Per Brennan (2019a):

> [W]hile cultural scholars may now value the active reading strategies of fans, power imbalances and a general fear of alienating a wider audience ensures that queer readings remain talked about, even encouraged, but scarcely confirmed, endorsed or, most crucially, transcribed in a manifest way (p. 13).

Participants discuss both the power they have as fans to recast narratives as well as the constraints they face when trying to do so. Specifically, participants discuss their efforts
to write fanfiction that depicts more diverse queer bodies and practices than what they find in canon materials. Here, participants engage in a unique creative information practice wherein they take what they like about a canon universe—namely, its characters and their personalities—and reorient it to be queer (Floegel, 2020a). As part of this practice, participants both read and write fanfiction to explore their own bodies and identities. Ash says:

[I]t’s an easier way, I think, to understand a bit of things about ourselves. For example, I was reading a fic—a fanfic—and the author put in the notes, ‘Oh, my fics understood I was a transman before I did. Because all of the characters were transmen.’ So, I think it’s something that makes us understand ourselves.

Q corroborates that fic helps its readers understand themselves, stating that “reading fanfic has made me realize that [I am trans] because it’s trans people writing fanfiction.” Both perspectives align with previous studies of queer fic writers, who use fanfiction to help with their coming out processes or to otherwise understand what it means to them to be a queer person (Dym et al., 2019). Scholars also demonstrate the value of information created by and, often, for members of populations it depicts (Janack, 1997): participants identify with fic that is written by people who share similar epistemic positionalities or, if they do not see their positionality represented in what they read, they write something themselves to express their epistemic authority (Floegel & Costello, 2021). Crowgirl says fic can be “a case of not only write the story you want to read but write the story you need to read.” According to NIV, “[trans] people don’t really get a lot of good representation, so, it’s kind of like, either you make your own representation, or you kind of have to force canon into giving you representation by writing better canon.” Reading
and writing practices in fic are intricately connected in this context. Participants do not only identify gaps in canon media that they fill with fanfiction; they also identify gaps in fic they read that they fill with their own creations.

Embodying queerness in fanfiction does not only apply to identities writ large; it also applies to embodied practices around sex and sexuality. Sue says, “a lot of the fic I read is much more explicit than what you get in canon.” Lydia uses fic to think about “sexual intimacy” while Harriet tries to keep homonormative dynamics out of her writing when she depicts relationships. Referring to queerbaiting, Scatter says that fanfiction is “able to capitalize on very strong relationships between characters…who aren’t give that romantic tone in the actual canon material.” Participants agree that fic affords opportunities to extend or, as Persephone, Harriet, Lydia, and Sue say, “fix” problems such as burying gays and queerbaiting in canon. Fic examples from participants exemplify this: many include detailed descriptions of kissing, physical intimacy, and sex.

Further, embodiment extends beyond strict queerness and into other elements of participants’ identities. Lyrical includes descriptions of music and food in her fic because she loves them. Discussing one of her fic samples, Pilar says:

I ended up projecting a whole lot of myself…while using these characters to explore things like navigating the world while queer and insecure and the process of managing friendships, but it’s primarily about depression.

However, Pilar, a queer Afro-Latina woman, also describes queer fic that reflects embodied inequities. She says, “there is a little bit of colorism that you watch happen…you would think it would get talked about more. I guess I would think it would get talked about more. And it doesn’t.” Despite transformative fandom’s subversive
reputation, fanfiction, other fanworks, and fandom communities in general are subject to the same structural power dynamics that pervade any social space, namely, racism, transphobia, colonialism, and even homophobia (Chin & Morimoto, 2013; De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019). Examining how such inequities pervade embodied aspects of transformation in fanfiction helps us understand how power is at play in embodied information interactions on a larger scale.

In addition to Pilar’s observation about colorism, participants describe other inequities they identify in depictions of queer bodies and embodied experiences in fanfiction. Ronan says that characters of color are not treated as well as queer or reoriented queer characters in fic. They explain:

There are several cases of (usually Black) characters being whitewashed…

Characters of color tend to be regulated to unhealthy tropes (i.e., they’re tough and violent, oversexualized, etc.), and voices that speak up against this tend to not be heard or listened to.

Further, fannish efforts to “fix” problems such as queerbaiting are also affected by racist practices. Pande and Coker (2018) for example, point out that Capitan America, one of the most popular fandoms featuring slash fanfiction, is rife with fic that depicts romantic and sexual relationships between protagonists who are white men, while the sole Black man in the franchise is widely erased from fanfiction despite his similar homoerotic potential.

In addition to racism in fandom, participants point out instantiations of homo, bi, ace, and transphobia in fanfiction. Eliza points out that femslash is rare in comparison to relationships between gay men; she says that her “male slash characters get way more
traffic than my female slash characters.” Sunshine notes that relationships between queer men can draw on heteronormative dynamics: “that’s not what a gay relationship is. They’re supposed to be both gay. One of the is not a stand-in girl.” Lydia notes that she sees fewer bi characters in fic because “there was a tendency among writers to revise a character’s sexuality from straight in canon to gay in fic as if bisexual were not a thing that exists.” Multiple participants, especially those who identify on the asexual spectrum, note that characters are rarely depicted as ace, partly because it is hard to conceive of ace characters in societies that are dominated by both hetero- and homonormativity. Ash draws on his own experiences, as well as experiences of trans people he informally surveyed via social media,7 to explain narrow depictions of transness in fic: trans characters are often shown in explicit works; trans men in explicit works have had top surgery while trans men in more general fic have not had top surgery; depictions of trans women are lacking in general; trans people often hate their bodies; and non-binary people are cast as stereotypically androgynous, when they are present at all. Ash does not see themselves in fic texts “because I’m non-binary and I’m completely feminine.” They also note that their readers post grateful comments when they publish fic with trans men that are not focused on those characters’ bodies.

These examples draw particular attention to the biopolitical power dynamics inherent in embodied aspects of interacting with fanfiction. According to Foucault (2007, 2010), biopolitics and biopower describe ways in which bodies and entire populations are controlled by both self-discipline and institutionalized regulations. Though biopolitics are arguably most associated with contemporary political and economic theory (Coole, 7 I am intentionally vague here to protect Ash’s identity.
2014), they are increasingly used throughout social theoretical perspectives to understand power, struggle, and the legitimization of authority over subjective knowledge (Lemke et al., 2011). Biopolitics may be associated with biology, but biopower is not rooted in the biological sciences; instead, it focuses more on techniques of corporeal control (Williamson, 2016). Further, while strictly Foucauldian perspectives on biopower have been critiqued for overlooking race and colonization (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019), subsequent applications of biopolitics—especially those that intersect with queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory—engage with legacies of racism and colonialism as key influences in the construction and maintenance of biopolitical power dynamics (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; Puar, 2017; Schuller, 2018).

When participants transform canon texts to include queer bodies and embodied practices, they are in a sense pushing against biopower, especially as biopolitics are expressed in media industries and the social structures that shape and are shaped by them: transformative fanfiction can be an effort to take control of narratives that promote normative bodies and experiences. However, such transformative practices are not divorced from biopower in participants’ respective societies: queer embodiments expressed in fanfiction are still subject to racist, homophobic, transphobic, and colonial discourses (De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018) that are legitimated, perpetuated, and further constructed by disciplining bodies so that they conform to white, normative, and western ideals (Ahmed, 2013). Take Ash’s description of trans characters in fanfiction: here we see that even fic which may be framed as subversive (i.e., because it reorients cisgender characters) is disciplined by discursive mechanisms of control that normalize trans bodies (Puar, 2017; Stryker, 2008). Further, fic reflects multiple
violences committed against queer bodies of color—and especially Black queer bodies—by fully erasing them, assimilating their storylines to conform with whiteness, or drawing on other racist tropes to depict them (Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018). And though trans participants and participants of color address these problems by writing their own fanworks (e.g., Florini, 2019), transformative fandoms writ large continue to be both dominated by white people and wider normative social discourses (Pande, 2018), meaning that biopolitics continue to shape interactions with fanfiction, particularly on an embodied level.

*Feelings and fanfiction*

Participants’ interactions with queer bodies and embodied practices are not the only ways they transform canonical texts via fanfiction. Affect and emotion also play significant roles in shaping participants’ experiences with reading and writing fanfiction. Of note, affect and embodiment are intricately tied together, and my decision to separate them stems from how participants explain their interactions with fanfiction. However, affect and embodiment intersect; emotions are essentially embodied thoughts (Rosaldo, 1984) that reflect bodies in relation to each other (Ahmed, 2013).

In information science, our examinations of affective information interactions should be a key component of information practices’ social focus. The theories on which information practice draws—namely, Bourdieu’s practice theory, Giddens’ structuration theory, and Schatzki’s mechanisms of practice—grapple with feelings that develop from socialization; feelings are part of what people do (Irvine-Smith, 2017). Therefore, we see affect in components of prominent practice models. Kuhlthau (2004), for example, notes affective elements of information seeking that include anxiety, confusion, frustration, and
doubt. Emotions like anxiety and guilt also characterize personal information management strategies when students feel that their habits do not conform with normative or ideal behaviors (Robinson & Johnson, 2012). Hartel (2010) notes that information practices can be joyful within hobby contexts, while Costello (2017) discusses various feelings that underscore social relevance assessments among members of online support groups.

However, our conceptions of affect are limited because they are shaped by the individual focus of many information practice models (Gibson & Martin, 2019); Schroeder and Cahoy (2010), for example, define the affective domain as “a person’s attitudes, emotions, interests, motivation, self-efficacy, and values” (p. 129; emphasis added). This definition neglects sociocultural elements of affect and implies a binary split between affect and cognition. Ahmed (2013) tells us why such a framing is problematic; she states that a hierarchy is constructed between thought and affect that both separates the two and privileges thought. Ahmed further argues that emotions are associated with femininity and otherness, and therefore marginalized. This perspective partly explains why information science’s attendance to affect is limited: with exceptions, our discipline tends to either focus on dominant positionalities or describe marginalized people’s practices with deficit models (Mehra & Gray, 2020). An attendance to sociocultural constructions of affect that account for its intersections with cognition and embodiment may help break information science of this trend and help us further understand the political dimensions of information interactions. As Ahmed (2004, 2013) points out, emotions are politicized forms of thought that inherently relate to normativity: they have the potential to both reify normative standpoints and destabilize and reorient them.
We can see these affective dynamics at play when participants read and write transformative fandom texts. In line with their desires to interact with and create fanfiction that reflects queerly embodied experiences, participants appreciate fanfiction because it provides an outlet through which they can empathize with, express, or otherwise share their feelings. Participants describe what it means to them to be a fan in primarily affective terms. Vince identifies a difference between “just consuming a piece of media and being a fan”: fans are “invested in something.” Lyrical discusses fandom as “love” and NIV says that fandom “has to be about feeling a connection” with some type of material. Maria says that fandom “means to have something to be happy about…It’s basically a scene for extremely enjoying any kind of enjoyment in this life.” The act of being a fan is widely positive for participants. However, these positive emotions are troubled by participants’ frustration with tropes in both canon texts and fic. Ash says that queer people “feel it, the lack of content in canon, in almost every content that is given to us.” while Lyrical says that it can be “kind of annoying” when a fandom focuses on one ship when there are other relationships to explore.

Further, participants claim that in addition to finding more varied queer representations in fanfiction than in canon, fanfiction is significantly more interior, or emotional, than canon. Q explains:

Usually [fic is] more focused on character development. Whereas source material is usually more about the plot and stuff. So, usually, in the fanfiction that I read…it’s basically more about the character’s journey emotionally through whatever is happening rather than, like, ‘this happened’ type thing.
Similarly, Clara says that fic “centers that core relationship stuff” while canon “[relegates it] to the B plot.” Emotions often drive participants’ taste in fic; for example, when Sandra selects fic to read, she looks for “a particular sort of emotional relationship between characters…that was very intense.” The fic examples participants shared reflect these statements: fics do not have complex plots or, in some cases, any plot outside of point-of-view characters’ interior thoughts. Said interior thoughts often focused on intense and often overlapping emotions including anxiety, guilt, depression, joy, relief, anger, love, and lust. Fics mostly do not explain plots; rather, they explain emotional processes.

Therefore, a major reason that participants both read and write fic is to process emotions in order to experience catharsis or comfort. Some of these emotions pertain to frustrations with canon. K says that writing fic allows her to process feelings about canon; she gets “pissed off at the ways that characters are treated, or stories aren’t told. Like, those gaps…they make me angry. And fanfiction sometimes gives me a way to deal with that.” Fic also serves as a vehicle through which participants process more personal traumas and emotions. Q writes fic to process sexual assault. He explains, “trying to write it in the point of view character…it’s helped me to step back from my feelings about it and remember exactly what happened and get over some of the guilt that I have.”

Robosan read fanfiction for her favorite ship after her father suddenly died; she recalls, “the way I coped with grief was by reading fanfiction…I would escape into fanfiction.” Robosan further explains that following her father’s death, she “spent about a year in a deep depression…And that’s when I started writing more.”
Interestingly, NIV explains that his tastes in fanfiction shift with his experiences; for example, when he was fighting with his family, he wanted “to read about two people getting together and saying that they love each other and that they’re family, because my relationship with my family is shit.” His preferences “[depend], really, on the mood.”

NIV’s perspective in particular echoes Lamerichs’ (2018) study of affective fan cultures, wherein she argues that fannish practices serve as ongoing identity maintenance wherein fanfiction is a conduit for fans’ emotional experiences. Finally, fic helps participants process more global traumas; for example, they explain that reading and writing fic is useful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, when participants describe cathartic elements of writing texts, they do so in a very individualized way—they process their personal traumas through the medium of fanfiction (Lamerichs, 2018). Pilar says that in her fanfiction, “there is so much of me,” while Persephone echoes a statement expressed by many participants: “mostly I write it for me.” This individualized focus makes biopolitics difficult to identify within affective dimensions of fandom; as Clarke (2018) states, “individualized discourses make biopolitics politically invisible” (p. 25, emphasis in original). However, emotions are biopolitical—they are shaped and shaped by inequities. Schuller (2018) argues that sentimentalism gave rise to biopower in the United States: institutional apparatuses regulated and continue to regulate how various groups within the national population are able to feel and express feelings. Schuller further explicates how such regulatory apparatuses are intersectional: binary sex, for example, is a mechanism of racializing power, and together, sex and gender provide sites of emotional regulation and marginalization (Schuller, 2018; Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018). Take, for example, tropes of
angry Black women or deceptive trans people. Such tropes further illustrate how embodiment and affect intersect, given that marginalized bodies are emotionally policed more often and with greater force than normative bodies (Ahmed, 2013).

A deeper exploration of fandom exposes how biopolitics operate on affective levels. First, the embodied limitations participants discuss in fanfiction texts can be understood to demonstrate that participants of color and trans participants do not experience the same types of catharsis that white and cisgender participants experience, especially in their reading practices. Participants describe negative emotions in this context: Lydia is “irritated”; Sunshine feels “weird”; and Ash finds limited representations in fic “really, really frustrating.” Partly as a means to cope with these emotions, participants write fic; they do not only address problems in canon media, they also address shortcomings that they identify in queer fanfiction itself (Floegel, 2020a).

Writing practices may be framed in a primarily positive light—they are reparative and expressions of fannish agency (e.g., Fowler, 2019; Hoad, 2017; Yékú, 2017). In a sense, such practices constitute a resistance to biopower: in response to feelings generated from the regulation of bodies in canon and in queer fanfiction (e.g., Yang, 2020), participants construct different narratives to push back against homonormativities and whiteness in fandom. However, this analysis does not consider that this drive to write fanfiction is itself a component of inequities in fandom: writing, and especially who feels compelled to write, reflects power structures so that participants who feel most motivated to write are often those who feel equipped to identify and represent standpoints that are largely elided in fanfiction (Floegel & Costello, 2021). Thus, participants who are the
most marginalized also may undertake the most work in fandom contexts, although this is a contested space.

The labor of writing bodies and feelings

Academics and fans themselves continue to question whether participating in fandoms is work, partly because binary divisions between work and leisure are deeply embedded in our society. In information science, leisure is often studied in the domain of serious leisure, a perspective that “describes the nature of leisure and provides a grounded classification system of leisure activity” (Hartel, 2010, p. 850). Stebbins (2001) defines serious leisure as free-time activities centered on acquiring specialized knowledge or skills, and notes that hobbies are the most prevalent sub-type of serious leisure. Hill and Pecoskie (2017) argue that fanfiction communities’ activities can be described as serious leisure (SL) pursuits; their study of fannish practices leads them to conclude that “it is clear that the fanfiction community participates in SL-based information- and library-related activities” (p. 852). However, serious leisure on the whole continues to be critiqued for promoting whiteness and wealth (Costello & Floegel, In press), partially because binary splits between leisurely hobbies and compensated professional work are tied to capitalist dynamics that reify whiteness and affluence (Brouillette, 2009; Hinman, 1978). We can therefore question and trouble assumptions that “work” and “leisure” are discrete concepts.

Creating fanfiction arguably constitutes a variety of types of labor, and here creative labor is most salient. Often contextualized within the broader category of immaterial labor—or value produced from cognitive or affective activities that are commodified under capitalism (Lazzarato, 1996)—creative labor defines interactions that
are not usually associated with value (e.g., producing life stories; Terranova, 2004), but that involve productions of objects that are infused with specialized knowledges that include intricate affective components (J. Bratich, 2010; Brouillette, 2009). Participants’ creative practices with fanfiction occur in “immaterial” digital contexts but result in material texts that reflect their experiences and epistemic authority, and that reflect and elicit emotions. Per Andrejevic (2008), fans “may be working for free, but that does not mean they are not producing value” (p. 33). And while scholars point out that fan labor is often exploited, exploitation in this context widely applies to media executives who use fans as outsourced creative laborers (e.g., Andrejevic, 2008; Anselmo, 2018). Other implications of fan labor remain underexplored.

One such implication involves epistemics as their overlap with affect and bodies (e.g., Davidson & Gruver, 2020): fans who are most marginalized often shoulder the burden of creating content that reflects their situated knowledges of their bodies, emotions, and experiences. Ronan explains this with regard to their response to white washing in fanfiction: they “try to [include characters of color] via representation in my works! If a character’s race isn’t explicitly stated, for instance, I tend to diversify for the sake of added nuance to a story.” In their study of fat womxn, Davidson and Gruver (2020) argue that epistemic labor often renders invisible forms of oppression visible by showcasing marginalized people’s perspectives on their own positionalities. However, epistemic labor also demonstrates the additional work that marginalized people must do when they write fanfiction. As Ahmed (2004) explains, recognizing a variety of forms of “work as work” allows us to better understand social and power dynamics (p. 201, emphasis in original). Participants who are trans, asexual, and/or people of color
especially identify and aim to fill more gaps than queer people who are white and/or cisgender. Epistemic and creative labor converge so that queer fans who are most structurally marginalized also perform the most work.

Across the board, participants describe aspects of writing fanfiction that demonstrate the amount of work it takes to create texts. Participants especially focus on the amount of research they have to do when they write a story, especially if that story is an “AU,” or a fic that takes characters from one canonical universe and sets them in an “alternative universe.” They also describe the amount of time it takes them to write fic; as Persephone says, “I have no fucking time nowadays,” while Robosan says, “I have all these ideas and not nearly enough energy or time to create them.” However, the actual transformational aspects of writing fanfiction, and especially of reorienting bodies away from normative canons, are more work for more marginalized participants. Austin explains that this type of writing “requires people to be more creative and to put more effort and energy into making the story more engaging.” The extra work involved in acts such a gender and race-bending characters also influences participants’ affective experiences with canon. Pilar, for example, says that her “confidence dwindled a lot” and she “burned myself out a little bit there for a stretch.” Therefore, bodies and feelings are not only transformed in-text: the amount of work it takes to transform canon universes also takes its toll on participants.

Further, creative epistemic labor does not only apply to participants’ fics in transformative fandom. Some explain that they do not feel comfortable publishing stories that feature characters whose experiences lie outside their own, especially if those stories have not been “betaed” by members of the communities they wrote about. Here, betaing,
or beta-reading, describes practices wherein a writer has another person read their work of fiction with a critical eye (Beta Readers, n.d.), often before that work is published. Crowgirl says, “I’ve never written a trans character because I don’t feel qualified to do that. I have only glancingly written characters of color because the number of questions I came up with as I started writing that I could answer just as quickly became overwhelming.” However, she feels more “comfortable” when someone betas her work. Ash explains how this can work:

[My friend] betas my fics, my works—and I think after that, I talk to him and I’m like, ‘Oh, do you think this could offend someone?’, or stuff like that. Or I post it on Twitter and…ask, ‘You, as a trans person, what would you feel about this? What would you think about this?’

Such betaing practices are not unlike the use of sensitivity readers in mainstream publishing, wherein people (often people of color) are paid to “improve the literary quality of a book by steering the author away from one-dimensional portraits and clichés” (Shapiro, 2018, n.d.). While this may seem like a useful way to diminish the harms caused by normative or stereotypical depictions of marginalized characters in novels and other creative works, it is perhaps questionable to rely on marginalized people to essentially correct the work of (often white) authors, especially because such corrections expose them to potentially violent content. In fandom in particular, betaing is volunteer work and therefore not compensated. And while it is not holistically a negative—participants frame betaing as useful and, at times, reciprocal—it can broach on what Berenstain (2016) calls epistemic exploitation, or emotionally taxing epistemic labor that occurs when privileged persons have marginalized persons educate them about
oppression. Here, too, we locate another source of labor and exhaustion expressed by marginalized people in a variety of contexts that manifests in fandom.

On the whole, then, we see biopolitics expressed in the work that comprises transforming bodies and feelings in fandom—more marginalized queer fans, including queer fans of color and trans fans, do more work because they assume responsibility for ensuring that their standpoints are represented in largely cis and white fandoms. Further, when more privileged fans try to do some of this work, they often call on marginalized fans to assist them. Therefore, more marginalized queer fans experience embodied and emotional aspects of transformative fandom more intensely than others—the epistemic creative work they do to transform canon, transform fandom, and assist others with their transformative practices takes its toll. Fandom is not “serious leisure”; it is serious work.

Embodiment, emotion, and biopower in tagging

As institutionalized power dynamics, biopolitics do not only operate at the individual level of participants and other fic creators; they are instantiated in platforms used for fannish practices. In the context of inequitable queer embodiments in fanfiction, we see biopolitics at play most clearly in tagging and other classificatory systems on platforms that host fanworks, like AO3 and FFN. Biopower is inherently tied to knowledge organization and classification in its concern with how populations are constructed, and in its examination of how epistemics inform power relations (Legg, 2005). The taxonomic structures and policies on platforms contribute to inequities in transforming cis/heteronormative canon materials into queer fanfiction because they prioritize iterations of queerness above all else, with little official attendance to race and
intersections between race, gender, and sexuality. Here, AO3 serves as a particular case through which to examine these dynamics.

Elements of taxonomic structures on AO3 focus on embodiment and the arrangement of bodies in fanfiction; I focus on AO3 here because it is extremely popular, it is lauded for its tagging system’s sophistication and inclusivity (Fiesler et al., 2016; McCulloch, 2019), and it is specifically for fanfiction. AO3 has four categories of tags that authors must fill—category, fandom, relationship, and characters (see Figure 1). Within these categories, authors have a series of official tags they can choose from, and they can also enter their own, free-form tags to describe their work. This makes AO3’s tagging system extremely complex—to the point that an entire subset of volunteer moderators on the platform “tag wrangle,” or essentially manage the tags for each fandom represented on the site.

![Categories of tags on AO3](image)

**Figure 1.** Categories of tags on AO3.
This arrangement of tags seemingly prioritizes bodies. “Category” describes the type of fanfiction a work fits within, and these types are based around relationships, or arrangements of bodies in a fic. Tags within this category indicate, for example, whether a work includes M/M or F/F pairings, whether it is general fanfiction (e.g., romantic relationships are not its focus), or if it whether includes polyamorous or heterosexual pairings. Category, then, explicitly focuses on sexuality. Tags under “relationship” further describe arrangements of characters within a particular work—they may list the specific characters who are entangled (for example, “Sherlock/John Watson”) or a common name for a relationship in a fandom (for example, “Johnlock”). “Characters” lists all of the characters in a work, while fandom lists the fandom(s) a work is based in, e.g., “Sherlock (BBC)”.

Though these categories may seem benign or even detailed, they are rife with politics (De Kosnik, 2016). For example, they were clearly designed to prioritize sexuality above other axes of identity. Authors are required to indicate how bodies are arranged in relationships in at least two categories: “category” and “relationship.” This requirement is rooted in the history of internet fandom, especially as queerness relates to fandom censorship: fans constructed AO3 after content bans instituted by other platforms removed queer content and essentially banned queer people (Coppa, 2006; De Kosnik, 2016; Fiesler et al., 2016). AO3 highlights and crafts policies around sexuality in particular, because sexually explicit, and especially queer, content was often targeted during content and account bans on other platforms (I discuss this in more detail in chapter six). While this narrative seems triumphant, it obscures the fact that racism in fandom and on the internet writ large has as long and as troubled a history as homophobia.
(Pande, 2018; Thomas, 2019). AO3 designers and current moderators do not highlight, protect, or focus on race as they do on sexuality. Further, the focus on sexuality is itself limited, as is any attempt to classify what is actually a spectrum and not a discrete series of categories (Jagose, 1997). Qwuik points out that such efforts make it “difficult to show that someone is asexual.” Gender is similarly elided in this system, especially because cisgenderism remains the default positionality, meaning that characters who may be *gender-bent* in a fic are not necessarily represented as such in that fic’s tags.

Thus, AO3’s tagging system renders biopolitics visible because it *visualizes* certain relationships and bodies over others. Tags tells us how bodies are arranged—to return to the *Sherlock* example, the tags “M/M,” “Sherlock/John Watson,” and “Johnlock” explicitly tell us that an author queered canon and wrote a story in which Sherlock and Watson are romantically and/or sexually involved. These tags destabilize a heteronormative default. However, the mandatory tags do not tell us whether Sherlock and Watson are white, cisgender, or able-bodied: other normative embodied defaults related to race, gender, and disability remain intact. This further implies that readers are informed about elements of a fic’s sexual premises before they decide to read it, while they are not often informed about how it treats gender, race, and other sites of oppression. Tags, then, also render certain axes of biopower *invisible*. Overall, we see that while AO3’s policies around sexuality imply a careful and innovative approach to classification, such implications are surface-level, and not attendant to intersecting power dynamics.

If authors do want to include tags about race, gender, disability, or any other topic not covered by the four required categories, they have the option to input “additional
tags,” and enter their desired words for phrases. Figure 2 provides an example of the daily word cloud AO3 generates for people looking to browse additional tags that creators add to the platform.

Figure 2. A word cloud of popular tags generated by AO3.

Interestingly, participants and their fic samples indicate that additional tags often describe *emotions* rather than corporeal bodies; though Qwuik says, “you can type anything you want into the tags,” in practice, writers on AO3 often tag feelings that are meant to evoke, in Scatter’s words, “what people would either want to avoid, or want to read.” Scatter continues, “I’ll tag, ‘angst with a happy ending’ because, you know, some people just really want angst with a happy ending. And that kind of thing.” Ash likes to use tags that are “kind of funny,” while Ronan will “throw some of my own thoughts in” at the end of a fic: “sometimes it’s just me rambling or making a joke.” Common additional tags in fic data include “Angst” and “Hurt/Comfort.” Participants who do not employ such affective tagging practices, like Persephone, describe their tagging style as “utilitarian,” thereby
acknowledging fans’ general tendency to try to capture and describe the emotions they think their fic will evoke in the additional tags field.

Such practices are relevant to for two reasons. First, the exercise of classifying emotions is in itself a practice that is subject to normative critiques of classification (e.g., M. A. Adler, 2012; Drabinski, 2013; Olson, 2001); though these tags may look different from library subject headings, they still aim to reduce complex topics into singular categories (Ahmed, 2013). Further, they crystalize the constructed, subjective, and particularly creative nature of any classification scheme; via tags like “ooooohhhhhhhhhhh my god get ready for some feelings” or “happy happy happy ending,” we see that creating tags to characterize a work is part of the creative process: tags prime a reader by telling them what they should expect to feel, and they therefore contribute to a work’s atmosphere or aesthetic. Second, these emotional tags still widely focus on either individual people, or bodies in relation to one another. The tag “Angst,” for example, generally describes the narrator or point-of-view character’s internal emotional state, while the tag “Hurt/Comfort” generally describes a scenario wherein two people (often a romantic and/or sexual couple) console each other. This means that though additional tags have the potential to address what is elided in the other tagging fields—e.g., racism—in practice, they do not do so, and they instead perpetuate the shortcomings and erasures found in the required tagging fields.

Policies around “additional tags” are extremely open, save one rule: tag wranglers cannot interpret tags. Qwuik explains, “you do not assign meanings to tags. Like, if the tag has a meaning that you’re not sure about…you don’t make one up.” However,

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8 These examples paraphrase similar tags I encountered in participants’ fic data.
interpretation extends beyond strict “meaning,” or not understanding what a tag means or how it relates to a fanwork. Scatter says, “Even if as a human being, I vehemently disagree with what you put in a tag, I’m not changing the tag…I’m not going to delete it.” The interpretation rule, then, essentially means that anything goes when it comes to additional tags. This is part of larger “anything goes,” “read what you like to read,” or “no judgement” epistemics in fandom (Pande, 2018) that I also discuss in chapter six. Such epistemics are steeped in whiteness and other sites of privilege. Often, they uphold white supremacy and excuse racist and other harmful normative discourses and practices (Rodriguez, 2020). Therefore, policies around “additional tags” serve a similar function to “freedom of speech” in the United States, meaning they are subject to the same critiques as that doctrine. Namely, harmful rhetoric spewed by powerful people at the expense of marginalized groups is not curbed in AO3 tags; racism, transphobia, and other violences are not technically against the terms of service as they apply to tagging and classification (Pande, 2018; Stitch, 2020c).

Therefore, through its tag-related policies and infrastructure, AO3 deflects any responsibility it might (or should) have towards fans who are affected and harmed by inequities reflected in tags. AO3’s tagging system and policies widely uphold biopower, and they draw explicit attention to the ways that *governmentality* functions to regulate bodies and feelings in fandom. From a Foucauldian lens, governmentality refers to techniques and technologies that manage people and “things” via a patriarchal stance that upholds normative power dynamics (Foucault, 1991, p. 93). Though Foucault speaks about national governments in a European context, scholars who build on his work demonstrate that biopower can be expressed and enforced by a number of forms and
sources of both state and non-state institutions (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). Here, AO3 is one such institution, and its non-intervention strategy, as well as its responses to critiques of this strategy, exemplify how its structure, or “governance,” enforces normativity by permitting racism and other transgressions on the platform. For example, AO3’s non-intervention strategy places responsibility on individuals: creators must use their judgment when crafting tags, and readers must use their discretion when selecting what to read. And though fans of color in particular have pointed out these problems and the wider inequities they reflect since AO3’s founding and, historically, since the birth of fan networks (De Kosnik & Carrington, 2019; Pande, 2018), moderators and other people in charge of AO3 remain resistant to changing their policies. Recently, fans on Twitter and other social media platforms called out AO3 for permitting racism on the platform during protests for Black lives in the summer of 2020. AO3 initially responded with a blog post that highlighted fan advocacy and largely ignored complaints about the platform. After fans responded negatively to this blog post—and perhaps because in this instance, negative responses included a mass of white fans—AO3 moderators then released a series of steps they plan to take to improve these conditions on the platform. However, as they relate to tagging, these plans are anemic at best. For example, the press release includes “potentially drafting revisions” to the terms of service and “[exploring] other possibilities like saved searches to filter out certain works, [and] tag muting” (H, 2020, n. p.). Words like “potentially” and “exploring” are weak in this context, and they do not inspire confidence that any action will be taken. Further the steps themselves do not

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9 This blog post has since been deleted—a political act in itself that demonstrates AO3’s general unwillingness to engage in these types of conversations.

10 At the time of writing, no action has been taken.
outline specific plans, nor do they mention anything about race specifically. They are, arguably, performative responses the OTW crafted to assuage angry, frustrated, and wronged fans.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I present the construct *transforming bodies and feelings*, which refers to embodied and affective dimensions of reading and writing fanfiction. Via an analysis that is deeply grounded in my data, I explain that participants interact with fannish texts in order to address and redress shortcomings they identify in canonical media texts and fanfiction texts themselves. I further describe the affective dimensions of these embodied practices, especially as they relate to catharsis. However, I trouble the subversive implications of the practices by exposing the biopolitical inequities they both express and obscure: racism, transphobia, and acephobia are common in queer fanfiction that often appears more homonormative than radical. These dynamics are made more apparent when we consider labored aspects of writing fanfiction as a creative and epistemic practice. Finally, I use AO3’s tagging system as a case through which to explain how embodied and emotional biopolitics are embedded in platform design and policies.

This chapter on transforming bodies and feelings largely focuses on practices surrounding fanfiction *texts*, which are only part of the ecosystem that comprises queer fandom. In the chapter that follows, I focus on *communities*—another area in which structural power dynamics expressed by and between people and platforms affects queer fandom.
CHAPTER 5: Forming Communities vs. Forming Cliques

Introduction

The second construct I developed during data analysis, *forming community vs. forming cliques*, explores complex insider/outsider dynamics within online fandom environments, ways in which these environments are structured by intersecting power dynamics, and the development of a fannish attention economy that further complicates our conception of “community” on fandom-related platforms. Though reading and writing are central to queer fans’ experiences, participants explain that the people they interact with on various fannish platforms can be more central to their practices than fic texts themselves. These interpersonal interactions are of course not divorced from fic texts; interactions relate to reading and writing fanfiction, as well as other practices such as role playing, drawing fan art, and discussing topics on various forums. Further, interactions are influenced by the platforms on which they occur; features both shape and are shaped by fans’ interactions with each other.

In studies of media fandom to date, fandoms are often described as “communities” with shared interests, ideals, and goals (Dym et al., 2019; Matthews, 2016; Price & Robinson, 2017). However, my findings about community trouble these conceptions, as participants describe complex insider/outsider dynamics within fandom spaces that lead to formations of “cliques” rather than “communities.” Such dynamics are biopolitical, and structured around instantiations of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism. These findings demonstrate that universally positive conceptions of fandom are a product of white and western perspectives that widely focus on white, western, and cisgender gay people in fan studies and adjacent disciplines (e.g., Pande, 2018).
Across platforms, inequitable cliques form partly based on fans’ ability to participate in affective and attention economies that structure interactions within fandoms. Though fans largely resist monetizing fanfiction, capitalist dynamics seep into fannish practices via constructions and popularity and desires for attention and validation. Whether fans receive attention and validation often depends on their social positions: racist, trans/homophobic, and colonialist power dynamics structure exchanges such as commenting cultures within attention economies that further solidify systemic exclusion in fanfiction communities.

_Fandom Communities: Chosen Family_

“Community” is commonly used to describe fandoms in fan studies and related literature. Fandoms provide opportunities for people to make “connections” (Black, 2009) and find people from around the world with whom they have something in common (J. Duggan, 2017), especially if they themselves are marginalized in some way (Dym et al., 2019). Participants echo this; Clara describes fandom as “a really great source of community,” while Crowgirl enjoys participating in fandom because “it has a great deal to do with the feeling of being in a room full of friendly people like you.” Both Sue and Lydia enjoy fandom because it is “collaborative” in the sense that they can write and discuss fic with friends they’ve made through online fannish practices.

Further, participants explain that people they meet through fandom activities can be more important, or at least as important, as fic texts themselves. Qwuik says, “I don’t think [fic] shaped me specifically so much as just being around everyone and understanding the queer space.” When participants discuss community in fandom, they do so in ways that echo conceptions of a queer _chosen family_. In a queer context, chosen
families describe arrangements of kinship networks formed by queer people who occupy common physical and/or digital spaces (Weston, 2005). Queer chosen families are defined by ways in which members reorient assumptions about nuclear family units so that they form their own kinship networks that reject the assumption that “family” relates only to biological ties (Ahmed, 2006; Clarke, 2018; Fielding, 2020; Weston, 2005).

Austin describes their *Harry Potter*-centered community:

> I started that when I was fourteen, and it’s been very interesting because I was out at fourteen, and everyone in that group—and we have a solid core group of about 12 of us that have been together for the past 7-12 years, and as time went on, people from our group sort of slowly came out and were like, ‘Hey, I’m queer.’ And just the entire time, I was like, ‘Yes. This is unsurprising to me.’ So, it was very interesting—growing with the community and growing with other people, I think, was very formative for me in that way.

Other participants echo that fandom affords them special connections with other queer people that they may not have been able to forge in other contexts. Harriet explains, “connecting over media has also been a way that I’ve made a lot of fellow queer friends,” while Sandra describes the delight of connecting with other people who are fellow “queer, mentally ill, disabled messes of people.” Willow simply says, “I feel like I’m with my people.” For many participants, queer fandom networks contrast with biological families or other friends who are less accepting of, or experienced with, queerness.

Crowgirl says, “For someone who grew up relatively emotionally and geographically isolated, that’s still a hell of a kick.” However, while these testimonials conform with the
perspective that fandom breeds positive community dynamics, the participants who describe their affirming communities share one trait: they are all white.

Fandom Cliques

When “community” is discussed in information practice literature, scholars to date rarely interrogate power dynamics within communal spaces and interactions. Common areas in which communities are discussed include work on small worlds, information grounds, and communities of practice. Small worlds and information grounds are closely related, as both discuss social arrangements of actors and the norms and conventions that co-construct information practices within such arrangements (Costello, 2017). Small worlds (Chatman, 1991a, 1999) refer to social contexts that are developed via norms and conventions that shape people’s practices, and that dictate who resides “inside” and “outside” of a particular small world’s boundaries. Similarly, the theory of information grounds describes normative behaviors that occur in a specific place and during a specific time; information flows from social activities that people perform while they complete tasks (Fisher et al., 2004, 2007; Pettigrew, 1999). Though earlier iterations of both small worlds and information grounds are tightly bound to space and time (Savolainen, 2009), subsequent work breaks these ties via investigations of how small worlds and information grounds develop in online contexts where space and time are more diffuse (e.g., Costello, 2017). Though online contexts fundamentally shift these key components of both theories, the theories’ remaining constructs remain relevant within digitally networked environments (Costello, 2017). Communities of practice, or groups of people who share an interest in doing something, and supposedly improve upon their abilities to do that something as they interact (Hislop, 2013), are perhaps less commonly discussed in the
context of small worlds and information grounds because they are more firmly rooted in learning theory than the other two perspectives. However, the community of practice perspective shares many commonalities with small worlds and information grounds, including the basic concepts that information circulates during and around social activities, and that people may be inside or outside of specific community constructions.

These three perspectives share another commonality: in information science literature, they are often discussed with little attendance to structural power dynamics (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010b). In particular, constructions of insiders and outsiders are individually focused rather than attendant to inequities that shape gradations of inclusion and exclusion (Kitzie et al., 2020). Perspectives focus on norms within individual communities rather than normative dynamics, such as white supremacy and cis/heteronormativity. This is particularly salient in the context of fanfiction, given that information science scholarship on fanfiction to date discusses fanfiction collectives as community spaces that are insular, but largely harmonious, and corners of refuge where marginalized people form small worlds and participate in communities of practice online (Floegel, 2020a; Hill & Pecoskie, 2017; Price & Robinson, 2017).

As discussed in chapter four, participants explore and create information about themselves and wider instantiations of queerness when they interact with and write fanfiction in online environments; such information is biopolitically charged. “Community” dynamics are no different: they are complex and structured by biopolitics. My analysis reveals sharp divides between white participants who feel as if they are a part of a fannish community versus participants of color who feel as if they exist outside of fannish “cliques.” In contrast to prior fan studies literature, my findings demonstrate
that structural instantiations of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism serve as biopolitical regulating agents such that fans who are the most marginalized are often excluded from fandom’s community dynamics. These exclusionary arrangements advance our understanding of “insider” versus “outsider” dynamics in communities that involve creating and exchanging information. Insider/outsider positionalities are not binary, and they are structured by institutionalized and normative power dynamics that are rendered clear along intersecting instantiations of race, gender, sexuality, and nation in fandom.

Race

While all participants claim to have made friends through their fannish experiences, only white participants wax poetic about the possibilities of community formation in fandom, especially as it relates to their creative practices. Participants of color say that they make, in Lyrical’s words, “a couple” of friends in fandom, but they do not feel strong or numerous ties to other fans. Lyrical explains why:

[F]andom is rotten to people of color, I think. It’s like, ‘Oh, we’re a family, but not you’… You know, fandom is family. But not really. Because it’s very cliquish, and it is so very, very white…overall, it’s just really, really cliquish.

Pilar discusses whiteness in fandom, explaining, “there’s almost a stereotype of the kind of person that writes fic and engages with fic. But I think that, when it comes down to it, people don’t really associate people of color engaging in a certain way.” Vince discusses the consequences of such stereotypes, describing instances in which “I’ve had racism. A lot of racism.” In a particular instance, when she wrote a story in which she transformed canonically white characters into Mexican characters, “people started—they started
“calling me racial slurs over it.” Vince’s experiences demonstrate that the collaborative environments that many white participants describe are not so for people of color, who are harassed when they make narrative choices that center race. For example, while Eliza says that comments within her fanfiction community are “sort of reciprocal, ongoing conversation” consisting of “writing questions,” Vince lists a slew of racial slurs they have been called in comments.

Though participants of color are also queer, structural racism blocks their abilities to construct chosen families within fandom. Ronan says:

Much like white feminism, white queer experiences are much different than that of POC, with their own sets of heteronormative expectations. White queer people, while not the most privileged, still come from a place of more inherent power than that of POC, who are marginalized twice over.

Queer fans of color occupy different positionalities within the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) than white queer fans: they face more structural oppression because, as Ronan says, their marginalization is two-fold: white supremacy and heteronormativity converge so that queer people of color are marginalized within spaces that claim to be queer-friendly. This is compounded by the fact that white supremacy and heteronormativity co-construct each other, meaning that normative conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality are tied together (Brim, 2018; Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018). While this can be easy to spot in the most normative of circumstances, e.g., affluent white cisgender suburbanites in a heterosexual marriage with children, it is also prevalent in how queerness is constructed. Though we may be living in a time where queerness is more accepted in western cultures than ever before, the limits of that acceptance are
constructed around normative whiteness: only certain bodies (those that appear white and cisgender) are accepted within both cis/straight and mainstream queer spaces (S. Stryker, 2008). This is especially true for Black people, and, in this context, Black fans. Anti-blackness is strong across western societies and in fandoms in particular (Keeling, 2019; Pande, 2018), with Black queer fans often occupying immensely marginalized positions despite their wealth of knowledge, experience, and talent (Crenshaw, 1989; Pande, 2018).

This is why, despite their creative endeavors and participation in fandom spaces, fans of color and especially Black fans describe themselves as outside fandom communities, which they widely describe as cliques. Lyrical calls cliques “unwelcoming,” explaining, “there’s like a bubble, and you can’t—you don’t fit in there anymore.” Interestingly, Lyrical further describes how exclusionary racist dynamics overlap with age differences in fandom; she says, “I was old guard, and the new guard came…and [they changed] everything so that you don’t fit anymore.” Dym and Fiesler (2018a) point out that divides exist in “old versus young” fandom due to shifting norms, but they ultimately conclude that despite these gaps, “fandom is and will continue to be a home for those pushed to the margins of media” (n.p.). Unfortunately, this type of sweeping statement is inaccurate, especially when we consider racism and other intersecting sites of oppression in fandom. In addition to Lyrical’s perspective on cliques, other participants of color describe their impressions. Pilar says, “I don’t feel like [fandom is] a very cohesive community. It does tend to get a little cliquish.” Meanwhile, Q is “scared to interact” with clique members, while Sunshine doesn’t “like publishing [fic] online because…fandoms are pretty clannish, if you’re an outsider, it’s hard to get in…and there’s always going to be a default person that dislikes you.” Thus, those who
are most marginalized in not only media, but in a variety of social contexts, find neither a home nor a family in fandom.

**Gender and Sexuality**

Racism in fandom does not exist in a vacuum; it is compounded by other inequities. In particular, participants who embody more marginalized queer identities, such as trans participants, are also excluded from fandoms’ community dynamics. Vince, for example, describes “surprising” homophobia they have encountered in fandom. He specifically describes instances of “sexuality erasing” wherein lesbians antagonize bisexual people when they comment on or otherwise discuss fanfiction texts. At times, Vince says these interactions devolve into “whole wars on Twitter.” Robosan, who says that she is continuing to explore her gender, describes a “devastating” interaction on a fandom-specific forum wherein she received negative feedback after swapping a character’s gender.

Interestingly, participants note that they also receive pushback from straight and cisgender people in fandom. Though participants describe their ties to other queer people within fannish spaces, platforms and forums are open to straight and cisgender people, who participants state can be antagonistic towards queer people who are not white and cisgender themselves, or who do not exclusively write M/M fanfiction. Maria relates these dynamics to typical conceptions of materials that are marketed towards are liked by women:

> You had something like superhero movies that are broadly loved by all kinds of people, and broadly loved by men, so, nobody really bothers with fans. As long as they have something that is mostly liked by women, it is suddenly more prone to
criticism, like, ‘Oh, no, women like that stuff’…I think this kind of is the same with the queer stuff.

Harriet’s experiences illustrate Maria’s conjecture. Harriet writes queer fanfiction for a fandom that she describes as “very straight.” She says that people who read her work and interact with her about her work become angry when she does not, for example, redeem heterosexual characters who mistreat queer characters in her fanfiction. She describes a specific encounter with an antagonistic fan: “[T]his incident made me say, like, ‘Should I be writing for this fandom?’ I don’t know, maybe this is not a good place to—Like, there aren’t queer people to [be] allies.” Harriet, then, illustrates the complexities of exclusion in fandom: in one sense, she is an “insider” in her fandom, as she continues to make social connections, create fanfiction, and interact with others’ texts in the context of her fandom and the platforms on which it is written about and discussed. However, she is simultaneously an “outsider” due to structural normativity: she has negative encounters with other people within her fandom because she deviates from the normative (e.g., straight and cisgender) standpoints that inform both the original texts and the epistemic of the fandom writ large.

Both Robosan and Harriet demonstrate that even community spaces that claim or appear to be welcoming to queer people can be exclusionary, partly because, as discussed above, normative conceptions of queerness do not only center whiteness, they also typically center identities that are more palatable to straight and cisgender people who occupy more dominant or privileged social positions (S. Stryker, 2008; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). Though often used as an umbrella term in popular discourse, “queerness” does not denote a cohesive group or community, nor does it imply that all
queer people are politically aligned (Jagose, 1997). Differences in how people who occupy a spectrum of queer positionalities are treated in fandom illustrates that not all queer spaces are created equal (Floegel, 2020a). Such differences further highlight a third intersecting site of exclusion in fandom communities: that of nation.

Nation

Our conceptions of national borders in the West are largely structured by settler colonialism, or forms of colonialism based on domination wherein original populations are subordinated to, assimilated within, and/or replaced with a new, often imperial society (Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). As opposed to other forms of colonialism, settler colonialism a) is characterized by a colonizing population that largely believes it is racially and otherwise superior to the native population, and b) evolves so that it often lasts indefinitely (Wolfe, 2006). Studies of settler colonialism often discuss physical locations, e.g., nations, and practices including taking possession of indigenous people’s land and possessions, genocide, forced assimilation, and cultural appropriation (Laidlaw & Lester, 2015). Academic studies often center histories of colonizers rather than indigenous people, though standpoints are shifting as post-colonial perspectives continue to intersect with queer, feminist, and critical race studies (e.g., TallBear, 2018). Further, a growing body of literature grapples with instantiations of settler colonialism in online environments. Such research notes that the internet’s transnational potentials are largely fallacious or unmet, partly because internet infrastructures and sociotechnical arrangements of actors are shaped by colonial practices and rhetoric (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).
Critical work in fan studies notes that fandoms hosted on globally popular platforms such as AO3, as well as fanworks inspired by major media franchises, are influenced by colonialist dynamics (e.g., Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Data from my present study reflects such dynamics when participants, especially those who live outside of the United States and/or whose native language is not English, discuss both how they have to adapt their creative and interactive practices to participate in fandom communities. Such practices often center language: to participate in most fandoms, people have to communicate in English. Some participants state that they have to adapt their practices to center the English language, which has consequences for their everyday experiences and the ways in which they relate to their cultures. Ash, who is Brazilian, says that to connect with other fans, he had to switch from smaller, Portuguese-language platforms to English-language platforms. Ash describes the consequences of this move:

I also stopped writing in my own mother-tongue. Nowadays, I have—I struggle a lot to write in Portuguese because I’m really used to writing in English. And it’s really weird for me to get anything to read in terms of fandom in Portuguese. So, it’s something that I’m trying my best to unlearn. To go back to writing Portuguese, because that’s my language. I love my language…And I think that’s that. It was…a loss of contact with my own language.

Vince, who resides in Mexico and whose native language is Spanish, says that English-language fandoms are “more accessible” “because more people in fandoms speak English.” In order to access fannish spaces, Vince has “to practice my English because I don’t have any classes in English or anywhere to, like, practice outside of social media.” Ash’s and Vince’s experiences draw attention to two key inequitable components of
colonialism in fandom. First, their experiences draw attention to assimilationist aspects of fandom: people who are not native English speakers have to adapt to reading, writing, and interacting with people in the English language to participate in the spaces they wish to join. Second, it takes a great deal of work to learn a language, meaning that fans who do not enter fandom with advanced knowledge of the English language must dedicate significantly more time and effort to participate in community dynamics. And because fandoms are largely dominated by the English language, such time and effort are largely unnoticed and uncredited.

Relatedly, NIV, who is from Argentina, discusses “the Western supremacy” in fandom, stating that “you have to move to English” to participate on platforms like AO3. He draws attention to problems that this raises not only for language, but for community connections between people who are from the same country. NIV says that because many fans from Latin American countries in particular leave country or region-specific platforms to make increased connections with fans on more globally popular platforms,

[I]t’s sad that sometimes you don’t recognize that people are from your own country…it happens that you lose people. It’s not so much that you lose content. I think that what you lose is maybe the connection of other people who have your experiences culturally, that you have a difficult time finding. Like, that is the main issue. I think that you lose that connection to people who share those little details.

Here, NIV draws attention to another injustice that stems from colonization and imperialism: diaspora. A diaspora describes a dispersed population whose origins lie in a common geographical location separate from their current residences; diaspora historically refers to involuntary mass dispersions of indigenous populations (e.g., the
Internet technologies are often credited with reuniting diasporic communities or shedding light on populations’ global dispersions (Xue et al., 2019; Yu & Sun, 2019). In the context of fandom in particular, Kizhakkethil (2019) argues that participation in a fandom small world helps women in a diaspora to connect via documentation and memory-making. Perspectives shared by my participants complicate these narratives around diaspora, internet affordances, and fandom. Here, participants describe dynamics wherein their desire to build connections with other fans strengthens or even creates diasporic conditions: they lose connections with their language and with fans from their home countries to participate on “global” platforms that, while seemingly transnational, are in fact structured by signs of western dominance including emphasis on the English language as a universal (see, Pande, 2018).

Community Revisited

The dynamics described above are consistent across platforms. While participants may be more active on certain platforms over others given where their fandoms are situated, across the board, intersecting instantiations of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism affect fans’ abilities to form and participate in fandom communities. Arrangements that more privileged participants describe as communities are described as cliques by fans who are more marginalized. Expressions of oppression therefore complicate conceptions of community in both information science and in broader literature about participatory communities and internet fandoms.

Information science’s individual focus (e.g., Gibson & Martin, 2019) is apparent in how we conceptualize community formations; as discussed above, Chatman’s (1991a, 1999) small worlds framework has been critiqued for its individualistic focus (Chatman,
1991a, 1999; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010a), while other common community-based perspectives including information grounds and communities of practice are similarly individualistic (Costello, 2017; Fisher et al., 2004; Savolainen, 2009), and therefore not sufficiently attendant to structural power dynamics and related oppressions. Further, when these perspectives are deployed to discuss marginalized populations, these discussions are typically monolithic, with limited attendance to intersectionality. Chatman, for example, crafts binary distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders” in her research on the working poor (Chatman, 1996) and incarcerated women (Chatman, 1999), while Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton (Fisher et al., 2004) broadly describe “immigrants” in New York City. My results therefore emphasize and expand upon two limitations to how communities are discussed in information science: they attend to intersecting oppressions related to race, gender, sexuality, and nation, and in so doing, they reject binary conceptions of who is “inside” and who is “outside” of fandom communities.

All participants interviewed for this study are queer, and queerness has a long history of being flattened despite its myriad intersections with other sites of identity (see, S. H. Jones & Harris, 2018). There is no singular “queer” community, and this holds in fandom spaces despite claims from some fan studies scholars that fandoms are open to, and accepting of, any queer person who has been marginalized in other spaces (Dym & Fiesler, 2018a). Participants’ experiences demonstrate that queer fans who are the most marginalized (i.e., those who are of color, trans or otherwise non-homonormative, and residing outside of western cultural contexts) are also the most systemically excluded from community formations in fandom. Arrangements of people into communities are
therefore biopolitical; these arrangements are regulated by structural power dynamics related to race, gender, sexuality, and nation, and such dynamics are reinforced by regulatory mechanisms that stem from hegemonic conceptions of race, gender, and language.

Consideration of inequitable biopolitical dimensions of communities that form around information practices such as reading and writing fanfiction enhances our understanding of concepts like information worlds, which aim to address the limitations of individualism in theories like small worlds. Information worlds are said to be informed by “social contexts,” (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010b), but the parameters of social contexts and, specifically, raced and gendered power dynamics within them, are ill-defined. Here, we see that fandom-related communities are specifically structured by biopower and associated inequities. Such inequities are not specific to fandom communities; they are expressions of biopolitics in queer communities as well. We can challenge singular conceptions of queerness and queer communities if we consider how queer people of color and queer people located outside of western contexts are marginalized within seemingly queer-friendly spaces (Morgensen, 2010; Puar, 2017). Said challenges further tie into limitations of community conceptions in information science because they dispel notions that insider/outsider dynamics are binary constructions. Put simply, my participants all identify as queer fans, and they all participate in online fannish spaces and activities. However, they do not all identify as “insiders” in fandom—how “inside” a person can become or feel, and whether they can construct arrangements like chosen families, ranges widely, and is tied to instantiations of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism in participatory communities.
Structural inequities within constructions of “community” are particularly well animated in the socio-economic arrangements within fandoms. Participants’ accounts of their fandom activities, in tandem with policies and features enacted on platforms like AO3 and Twitter, reveal complex attention economies within fannish spaces that are regulated by the intersecting inequities discussed above: instantiations of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism structure how attention is distributed, framed, and received in internet fandoms.

Community and the Attention Economy

Fandoms are often lauded for resisting or escaping capitalist dynamics: fanworks are often free from monetary exchanges (Jenkins, 2013), and fandoms themselves are perhaps most often discussed in terms of “gift economies” (Hellekson, 2009). Gift economies are framed as largely positive, and even feminist, forms of exchange that elide many of the inequities associated with capitalism; they are based on reciprocity and introspection (Hellekson, 2009). This conception of fandom is not without challenges: De Kosnik (2009), for example, argues that especially because fandoms largely consist of marginalized people such as women, creators should be able to profit from their work so that they are not exploited. As discussed in chapter four, scholars note the significant amounts of work involved in fannish participatory endeavors. Anselmo (2018) argues that fans’ “practices are labor—emotional, creative, therapeutic, often unremunerated and unappreciated labor” (p. 86), while Andrejevic (2008) notes that internet fans “may be working for free, but that does not mean they are not producing value” (p. 33). These ruminations on economic and labor-related concerns within fandoms tend to frame “fandom” as a singular entity, with limited attention to inequities within fandom
economies (Pande, 2018). Further, though literature points to injustices including unrecognized work (e.g., Anselmo, 2018) and exploitation (e.g., De Kosnik, 2009), the co-construction of these injustices with community arrangements and dynamics remain underexplored.

I argue that the intersecting inequities related to race, gender, sexuality, and nation that influence who feels “inside” fandom communities are tied specifically to attention economies, or economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018), in fandom. Rather than strictly circulate monetary forms of exchange, attention economies circulate popularity, or what is visible and acceptable (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 6). Attention economies are therefore in the business of visibility: if you are visible, you matter (Smith et al., 2020). Within attention economies, “currency” is exchanged via features of social media and other platforms for interaction and exchange; visibility, accessibility, and resultant popularity are denoted by clicks, follows, shares, “likes,” retweets, etc. (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). To participate in an attention economy, people must continuously work to gain and maintain popularity, “visibility is not a static thing; it has to be in a state of growth” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 11). Further, attention economies are structured by overlapping constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and nation, and therefore plagued by sexism, misogyny, and homophobia (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Therefore, what becomes visible and especially popular tends to conform to normative standpoints that uphold neoliberalism rather than challenge structural inequities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scott, 1991). By extension, people and content that promotes structural intervention is rendered invisible (Giles Deleuze & Rainbow, 2016; McRobbie, 2008).
Attention and popularity, then, are structured by a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Data from participants coupled with data from platforms including AO3 and Twitter reveal complex attention economies structured by inequities in fandom. Within these attention economies, people who are most “popular” tend to be those who belong to dominant identity categories, and whose content does not challenge normative conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality in and beyond canon media. Platforms encourage attention economies with features that signify capital such as “kudos,” “hits,” “likes,” “retweets,” and more. Participants’ practices are largely shaped by their desire to become more popular in fandom; they desire validation of their work, which translates into validation of themselves, and inclusion in fandom communities that may otherwise seem cliquish. These practices require a great deal of time, strategizing, and labor. However, participants of color have a more complex relationship with visibility than white participants: while they desire visibility, they also understand its ties to surveillance (see, Browne, 2015; Gray, 2013); they must perform additional labor to achieve visibility; and they are therefore concerned about visibility’s potential negative effects.

Seeking Attention

In chapter four, I discuss creative and epistemic labor in fandom. Here, I will discuss how work practices function with attention economies in digital fandom. Participants describe myriad concerns related to maintaining and growing their readership and making positive impressions within their particular fandoms. These concerns include preoccupations with metrics on platforms like AO3 and Twitter. Participants claim that when they and their work receive attention, they feel validated. Clara for example, says that receiving
attention for her work is “a great hit,” and she will post after a bad day “so that people love me.” Eliza echoes this, claiming that one of her favorite parts of fandom is “getting validation as a writer.” Pilar notes a general desire “to be recognized,” while Ash describes a complex set of steps he carries out across platforms every time he publishes something new on AO3:

I post it on Twitter. I post it on Tumblr or Instagram. I tell my friends. I retweet my own tweet. I talk a lot about the process; about what I’m doing, what I’m searching, to do the writing. And stuff like that… I try to post some loose paragraphs in it because, as some artists do, they sketch it and stuff, and that gets people’s attention. So, I try to post some parts of the fic and try to get people’s attention as well.

Similarly, Scatter says that he posts only on certain days and at certain times because he knows “which days are the best days.” Though Vince does not have as complex a strategy as Ash and Scatter, they say that when they write, they do not have any patience for proofreading because “I just want to already have the comments and kudos and stuff.” Vince also posts on her Twitter to provide updates about her fic. Pilar, Ash, Scatter, and Vince demonstrate participants’ concern with, and desire for, attention.

Such concerns are related to and amplified by platform dynamics, which are here exemplified by AO3 and Twitter. These two platforms are ostensibly quite different: Twitter is a “big tech” and corporatized space with policies that (with varying effectiveness) censor certain materials, limit the length of users’ posts, discourage anonymity, and create an environment that feels as if it is unfolding in real time. Conversely, AO3 is a “small tech” platform run by a volunteer non-profit organization
with policies that outwardly resist censorship, place no restrictions on contents’ length, require users to report little identifying information, and create an archival environment. However, despite these differences, in the context of attention, AO3 and Twitter serve similar functions for fans: they provide features and associated metrics that allow fans to track engagements with their fanworks. On both platforms, people can “follow” creators and receive updates when they post (Twitter) or publish (AO3) content. Twitter offers a “like” function, while AO3 offers “kudos.” Twitter tracks a person’s followers, likes, and retweets, while AO3 tracks a person’s followers, kudos, and hits (i.e., how many times a particular work has been viewed). On both Twitter and AO3, people, regardless of whether they follow a particular creator, can comment on and share that creator’s content, or they can privately message them. Further, while Twitter algorithmically promotes certain tweets that are a) advertisements generated revenue for the platform and b) deemed to be relevant to a person’s home feed, AO3 allows users to sort works by kudos and by popularity. These platforms therefore engage in comparable logics of visibility despite their apparent differences, and these logics are tied to measures of attention and associated popularity (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). Here, we see that despite fandoms’ seeming divorce from capitalistic forces, fannish practices and the platforms on which they occur are intricately tied to capitalist dynamics, especially as they relate to how content circulates and constructs the social, cultural, and economic conditions of popularity (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The specifics of each platform are widely irrelevant under these circumstances given that instantiations of “platform capitalism” in attention economies largely flatten platforms so that they perpetuate similar logics around metrics of clicks, likes, followers, etc. (Srnicek, 2017).
However, platform capitalism is not solely constructed by platforms and their features; people buy into these logics and, in so doing, create a co-constitutive feedback loop between platform features and people’s practices (Floegel, 2020b; Gentleman, 2019). Participants do so via self-tracking practices wherein they check their metrics on a regular basis; for many participants, metrics are a source of pride, or they are something to aspire to. Eliza, for example, debates between posting her fic on AO3 or fanfiction.net (FFN) because while AO3 and more “discoverable,” FFN “has much better statistic tracking…I just don’t get the same engagement on AO3.” K says, “as much as I hate the trackers sometimes and fight with myself about turning them off, it’s helpful for me to know that what I’ve put out there is being touched. You know, people are reading it.” Harriet can name her “most-kudosed fic ever” off the top of her head during our interview. Relatedly, Willow takes advantage of a feature on AO3 that allows people to hide their fics rather than remove them from the platform; due to her job, she wants to hide some of her more explicit fics, but she does not want to take them down because I can still see all of my stats and, like, hits counts and kudos counts and reviews and everything on each story. Which I know that if you take a story down, they email you a copy that has all of that. But like, I don’t know. I don’t want to, like, lose that from the internet. Especially if I decide to unhide it in the future. I would be nice to still have all of those statistics on them.

Due in part to these logics, participants do not simply and neatly experience “validation” from their attention-related practices. Participants describe feeling a great deal of pressure to perform, and this pressure is strongest if they already have a loyal audience. Scatter explains, “There’s a lot of pressure to stay relevant…if you’re not posting something
often, you’re going to get forgotten or left in the dust…it does put a lot of pressure on creators. And it’s definitely stressful.” Participants struggle to respond to this pressure under the constraints of their other everyday obligations, including work, school, and general time away from fanfiction. Sunshine, who at one point had a large readership, had to modify her practices in order to avoid frustrating or losing her readers:

[B]ack then, people wanted updates chapter-ly. And since my schedule couldn’t afford, like, posting it every two weeks or every few weeks, because I wanted to edit it and make sure that everything is okay, I eventually decided, I am going to finish a story, edit it, and then publish it on AO3.

Vince echoes this, stating that writing fanfiction most clearly “feels like work” “when people are “waiting for an update or waiting for another chapter.” Robosan explains, “I am one of the people that frustrates the hell out of fic readers because I don’t update for years at a time because I’m an adult with a job and I don’t have time.” Ronan notes that “trying to keep up…can feel very exhausting,” and during member-checking, he notes that real-world events can impact both his desire to produce and the expectations of his audience. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, he says, “there’s definitely pressure to churn out content now that ‘we have time’…[this is] negative in that there’s also a demand rather than a request on the consumer side, not to mention creator burnout” (emphasis in Ronan’s text). The validation that may be gleaned from receiving attention for a fanwork, then, comes at a high cost.

Interestingly, Scatter relates fanwork to “anyone who starts a blog or YouTube creators,” and the practices he and other participants describe echo literature on creative labor carried out by populations like bloggers and social media influencers. Much like
perceptions of fanfiction authors, perceptions of social media influencers including Instagrammers, bloggers, and vloggers advance narratives that these workers authentically do what they love (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). However, these perceptions are widely mythologies; they obscure realities including demands for myriad types of labor including emotional and promotional labor, as well as expectations that influencers always be “on” (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). They also obscure the significant dimensions of surveillance involved in tracking metrics in order to determine one’s impact; neoliberal discourses obscure surveillant properties of tracking such that digital and corporatized exploitation are elided, and inequities exacerbated by surveillance are ignored (Elias & Gill, 2018; Lupton, 2015). These same dynamics are at play in fanfiction creation practices: while fanwork may be seen as a hobby that people do for fun outside of their more normalized careers, economic arrangements within fandom require labor practices that mirror those of bloggers and influencers, as well as tracking practices wherein fans self-monitor their accounts and publications in order to gauge their impact and experience related validation.

However, there is a key difference between influencer labor and fan labor. While both influencers and fans certainly participate in similar economic constructions around attention, the currency traded within these contexts differs between the two populations. Bloggers, vloggers, Instagrammers, etc. often make (or have the goal to make) money through their activities by promoting products as part of their personal branding strategies (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Participants in this study, however, universally say that making money is not their main concern: many participants outright reject tying fanwork to monetization, and other participants charge small fees or work on commission only in
specific circumstances while their main fanworks remain volunteer endeavors. In fannish attention economies, currency largely revolves around *affect*: participants want to feel validated and good about their creative endeavors. While affect is certainly a component of influencer labor (Elias & Gill, 2018), it is not the sole driver. This means that, broadly, the stakes of attention economies within fannish spaces are unique because they are not dictated by money. At the same time, however, the practices associated with garnering visibility are similar in both contexts in terms of labor and tracking—this further illustrates that fandoms are not free from capitalist dynamics.

Because fandoms are not free from capitalist dynamics, we can see myriad inequities manifest and grow within attention-related practices. Commenting cultures within fandoms illustrate these dynamics.

*Commenting*

Platforms on which participants publish their fanfiction encourage commenting—AO3 and FFN have specific fields where readers can comment on works, while Twitter offers “replies” and Discord offers threaded discussions that fans may appropriate so that one person posts a piece of fiction, and others comment on it. Comments are prevalent in the fic data participants provided for this study; as most participants sent either AO3 links or screenshots of fics posted in sections on platforms like Twitter, I could see the comments on participants’ work. As discussed in [chapter three](#), I will not discuss the specifics of these comments for confidentiality reasons—both because some reveal personal sensitive data, and because I do not have permission from commenters to share their text.

However, comments that I read on participants’ fic sensitize my perception of commenting cultures within fandom.
Comments serve a dual, overlapping, and perhaps contradictory purpose. On the surface, they seem to indicate community bonds; participants, especially those who receive favorable comments on their work, claim that commenting cultures are essential to community formations, partly because they are often reciprocal exchanges. Eliza calls commenting “investing in the community,” and she says that she is always sure to respond to new commenters on her works “to sort of cultivate people in…I want to have more community.” Ash further explains:

I don’t see comments as only that. Only a comment. I see that as the beginning of a conversation. So, they post it saying they loved my work, and I’m not going to leave them hanging, I want to tell them, ‘Oh, my god, I’m really glad—I’m really happy—that you liked it. That you took time; took a bit of time to come and say, ‘Oh, I love this.’ And when I get long comments, I almost cry, because it’s amazing what a few words can do to us. And I try my best to keep a conversation on Twitter, on AO3, to understand what they thought about my fanfiction. About the, the feelings it got out of them.

Here, Eliza and Ash demonstrate the significance of positive comments in fandom: comments open up possibilities for conversation and community formation, and they are often extremely affective. Commenting cultures emphasize and further construct affective dimensions of fanworks and the fannish communities that develop around them (Lamerichs, 2018). Lydia explains that affective exchanges within comments can be particularly significant for queer people: “it’s really interesting to see what other queer people will comment on…it seems really meaningful for people who are reading the stories.” Participants emphasize that comments often make them feel good: Sue says that
comments inspire her to keep writing because positive feedback feels good, while Harriet says, “knowing someone is gonna say something to you about your story is a nice thing.” Related to niceness, participants note that norms in most fandoms dictate positive commenting cultures. Vince and Qwuik attribute current iterations of niceness in comments to AO3; according to Qwuik, “AO3 in general is much more positive than a lot of other sites.” This niceness, however, breaks down quickly, especially for participants of color and participants who write less normative fanfiction. This is so because conceptions of “niceness” and “positivity,” especially in Western contexts, are bound to normative whiteness: according to Low (2009), “niceness” encompasses moral and aesthetic judgements that maintain white supremacy and resultantly control social and physical environments. Though Low’s study specifically discusses gated communities, her argument that niceness cloaks racism and exclusion under the guise of liberal values translates to fannish contexts.

This leads us to the second function comments serve in fandom: like kudos, likes, and hits, comments are forms of currency within fandom attention economies, and here we see how they emphasize inequitable divides in fandom communities. Participants’ discussions of comments relate to economic arrangements: Sue says that comments make her feel like she “succeeded,” K says that they have “value,” and Ronan explains that he tries to encourage commenting because “there’s a decline in the ratio of hits vs. comments.” Comments, then, comprise a particularly affective dimension of attention economies and their intersection with community formation in fandom.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, that which receives attention typically conforms with what is mainstream, i.e., white and normative. Ahmed’s (2004) discussion of
affective economies aligns with this perspective, and emphasizes its transferability to contexts that deal specifically with affective arrangements of bodies: “emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individuals and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs” (p. 117). As established earlier in this chapter, participants of color, trans participants, and/or participants who reside outside of the global north are largely excluded from participating in fandom communities because their bodies and the perspectives from which they write largely do not conform with white homonormativity. They therefore do not experience the “nice” and positive comments described by the majority of white participants—emotions that circulate in their direction starkly contrast with the affirming comments described above.

For example, Pilar describes her exclusion from positive commenting cultures: “seeing these other people kind of clique up and sort of spread each other’s stuff around and laud each other, you know, really publicly, when you think, ‘Okay, well, I think I’m doing a good job. Where is, kind of, mine?’” Though Ash loves to receive comments, he rarely does, and he says, “I feel like I’m alone in the sea…I feel really lonely in fandom because of this.” Eliza, who writes for a fandom that is predominantly comprised of straight people, says she receives “angry comments” on her queer fic. Maria, who is from Russia and who writes trans characters, says, “I think sometimes, like, quitting writing a lot…I write about stuff that’s not popular; that’s why nobody reads my stuff. This is—that can be very discouraging.” She further explains, “When you write less popular, you don’t feel like part of a fanfiction community.” These participants’ perspectives emphasize that perceptions of “positive” affective and community-based exchanges in comments are not inherent to fandom, nor are they necessarily tied to a writer’s skills.
Participants whose identities and fanworks are less normative both lack positive comments and, in many cases, receive negative comments that shape their affective experiences with fandom and further marginalized them from fandom communities. We can think of both negative comments and dearth of comments as symbolically violent (Bourdieu et al., 1992; Floegel & Costello, 2019) toward their receivers, especially because they draw on, or reinforce, systemic inequities. Comments and the roles they play in a fandom attention economy construct and perpetuate instantiations of normativity and resultant inequities (see, Gray, 2013).

I should note, however, that participants who receive positive comments are not unaware of negativity. Lydia, for example, notes during member-checking that fans of color are treated differently from white fans. K says that when people write for a “no-one-gives-a-shit-about pairing,” they can receive “nasty and unhelpful” comments, while Sue acknowledges that people who write “darker tropes” may “worry about getting harassed and stuff.” However, there are two important points to emphasize here. First, with the exception of Lydia, white participants do not name race and other sites of oppression as reasons that people may receive negative feedback in fandom, nor do they relate negative feedback to systemic discrimination. Second, participants who express awareness of negative or violent comments without actually having actually experienced them argue that such negativities can be avoided. Clara, for example, says, “I sort of gravitate to contributing to communities where I know that positivity is the goal…I don’t want negativity to, like, harsh my glow.” Despite their awareness, these participants have the privilege to avoid negative spaces, partly because of their whiteness and the

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11 This is not to call these participants out, but rather to point out an important pattern in the data that is echoed by findings from other critical fan studies scholars (e.g., Pande, 2018).
positionalities from which they write their fanfiction. More marginalized participants do not experience such privileges.

Resisting Attention

Due in part to symbolic violence perpetuated against marginalized fans within a fandom attention economy, some participants claim that they no longer desire popularity or seek validation from others via their fanworks. Participants who resist attention do so for two main reasons: to avoid surveillance tied to racism and transphobia, and to avoid pressure from readers.

As indicated by negative comments participants receive, attention and visibility, though often discussed in favorable terms, are not always positive experiences; in fact, they can be immensely problematic for marginalized people (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gray, 2013). This is so because marginalized people—especially those who aesthetically, epistemically, and practically do not conform or assimilate to normative ideals—are over surveilled, often with carceral consequences (Browne, 2015; Puar, 2017). In many cases, carceral may be taken literally—people of color, queer people, poor people, and disabled people are disproportionately institutionalized due to long-standing systemic punitive inequities that are heightened by digital surveillant assemblages (Benjamin, 2019b, 2019d; Browne, 2015; Eubanks, 2018). However, carceral may also be taken symbolically—marginalized people are constrained by myriad converging institutional forces that systemically oppress them, and these forces curb their behaviors in spite of or in addition to individual and collective resistances (Benjamin, 2019b).

Qwuik nods to this when she says, “I have never been really, I guess a big enough popularity person to have a lot of negative attention come to me.” We see surveillance, its
negative consequences, and its effects on marginalized fans with a fandom attention economy. After experiencing abusive community dynamics, interactions, and comments, some participants re-tool their approach to fandom so that they avoid attention and the negative iterations of visibility that it can beget. Maria provides shadow data about someone she knew in a fandom, who was eventually “bullied…out of the internet” after their fanfiction drew attention. Maria explains why:

[W]hen some kind of half-anonymous queer, sometimes woman, sometimes not, person from the third world somewhere likes to just, just really doesn’t have anything else to do but just write some stuff they enjoy it’s much easier to go attack this person.

Lyrical has similar experiences to Maria’s friend. Her main handle on AO3 is well-known and while she is popular in one respect, she also receives negative comments both about her works, which incorporate aspects of Black cultures, and about her general existence as a queer Black person. Lyrical therefore has a second, anonymous handle that she uses when she wants to write things that are more “unsavory,” partly because she is afraid that if she were to write more explicit content under her known account, she would receive increased negative feedback. Though Lyrical acknowledges that someone could figure out that her anonymous account belongs to her because the writing styles and references are very similar, this has not happened yet.

Like Lyrical, Vince experiences abuse in fannish spaces “on Twitter, on Tumblr, and on Instagram…people get really bold there.” Because of this, they try to mask their identity on AO3 in order to avoid violent comments; if they were to say, “I’m Mexican and I’m a lesbian,” they know they will experience overlapping racism and homophobia.
Vince is able to avoid negativity surrounding their identity on AO3 because the platform does not require authors to upload pictures and other personal details to their profiles. However, the effectiveness of anonymity on AO3 remains up for debate; while Ronan says “the general anonymity is nice” because “people like my work based on merit,” both Lyrical and Robosan argue that it is easy enough to determine who someone is on AO3, especially if they have other social media profiles. Robosan explains, “it’s easy to track someone down.” Further, while anonymity can provide some protections, Sue points out that it can also heighten abusive situations when commentors themselves are anonymous, and/or when they do not feel responsibility towards the person they are disparaging (see, M. L. Radford et al., 2020). Out of fear of abuse, NIV says, “I particularly try to avoid interactions sometimes.” Though participants who have experienced or who fear experiencing abuse in comments and other fannish contexts enact resistance strategies including leaving fandom, anonymizing themselves, and avoiding interactions, they have limited power in protecting themselves against structural surveillance tactics reified by internet cultures and platforms; they are, in a sense, trapped in order to participate (Benjamin, 2019b; see Browne, 2015).

In addition to avoiding or deflecting negative attention by leaving fandom or attempting anonymity, some participants reject the logics of an attention economy and either wrestle with, or diminish, their participation. For example, though NIV promotes his work and likes receiving hits, kudos, and comments on AO3, he admits, “you’re kind of forced to advertise yourself on another site. I think that’s an issue.” However, NIV also confesses that he is “a lot more chill” than other fanfiction authors because, “I don’t think I’m the kind of writer that sells to fandom. My writing is inherently weird, it is inherently
complicated…There’s a lot of weird shit…And I know that people don’t necessarily want
that.” NIV is aware that normative content “sells” better than what he creates, and so he
does not expect his work to generate a great deal of attention,12 nor does he want to
change his writing practices to conform with normative expectations. Austin also dislikes
attention-related dynamics, and they claim to not care about metrics and responding to
comments. They say, “that sounds like it would require a lot more dedication than I’m
willing to put forward.” Scatter confesses that he sometimes has to pull back from
activities like tracking: “your mental health should be way more important than hits on
AO3.” Q says that he sometimes struggles when he believes his audience expects updates
(e.g., new chapters of ongoing fic):

I feel like somebody’s expecting something specific, then it kind of cripples me.
And I can’t really do anything… And people are always like, ‘Oh, you’re such a
good writer and stuff.’ But I really don’t think so. And it feels like, if I put out
anything subpar, then it’s, ‘Oh, then you’re actually not that good.’

Q’s perspective in particular allows us to circle back to the amount of labor required to
participate in an attention economy; some participants are unwilling or unable to put in
this work. Unwillingness and inability are exacerbated amidst COVID-19. Sue had to
“take a hiatus” due to pandemic-related stress, while Pilar notes that because people may
be more “plugged in” due to the pandemic, everyone should “make sure that you are kind
of being cautious with yourself and the way you interact.” However, for other

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12 Based on my conversations with NIV and my reading of his fic texts, while he certainly engages with
queerness in a way that might garner some transphobic responses, the main non-normative thrust of his
work is gratuitous violence. This may be why he takes a more relaxed approach to his promotional
practices as opposed to other participants, who experience negative visibility and abuse rather than merely
a small number of hits, kudos, comments, etc. However, note that in the prior paragraph, I quote NIV
saying that at times, he will step back from interactions to avoid abuse.
participants, COVID-19 prevents them from promoting their work in face-to-face contexts that complement their online presences. Here, participants lament lost visibility, as well as lost community connections, further highlighting the intricate connections between these constructions. Lyrical notes that the largest Sherlock Holmes convention was cancelled; while Robosan cannot see her girlfriend, who lives in another country, at a fandom convention where they planned to meet.

Resisting attention can take many forms, but all forms trace back to power: the individual actions participants take to grapple with, function within, and/or resist attention and visibility are tied to structural articulations of power. When participants’ identities and fanworks deviate from normative standpoints, or when participants write content that deviates from both fandom-related norms and broader instantiations of social normativity, they either receive less attention or experience abusive dimensions of visibility. We can therefore see biopolitics at play in constructions of attention communities and, especially, how attention is bestowed, transferred, and framed across platforms. The normative dynamics and neoliberal ideologies that structure economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018) are, in and beyond fandoms’ cases, biopolitical: participants are regulated based on their bodies and the bodies they write about, and emotions are politically charged so that those who are the most structurally powerful build community and receive positive attention while those who are the most structurally marginalized are excluded from community formations and experience violence by either being ignored, or being abused. As echoed within broader studies of biopolitics in modern society, the marginalized bodies who best conform to normative ideals are
permitted to participate in capitalist systems, while other bodies are rendered “non-productive” and are consequently further marginalized (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discuss the complex community dynamics that develop within fandoms to argue that what appear to be “communities” to some participants appear to be “cliques” to others. I argue that perceptions and experiences of “community” in fandom are inequitable, especially in relation to intersecting instantiations of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism in fannish contexts. In conversation with literature about platform capitalism and economies of visibility, I illustrate inequitable dynamics in community formations via a discussion of how attention economies develop within fandoms. Data from participants, fic, and platforms such as AO3 and Twitter suggest that though fanworks and their creators are often praised for operating outside of capitalist dynamics, tracking, surveillance, and affective commenting cultures are prominent in fannish contexts. The dynamics, or logics, animate privileges and inequities in across fandoms that are biopolitically charged: constructions of community and popularity privilege what is normative, even in a queer space, and relegate what is non-normative.

These findings highlight the limitations of information science’s individual focus, especially as this focus pertains to community-centric theories such as small worlds, information grounds, and communities of practice. Findings draw connections between inequitable community dynamics and inequitable distributions of attention within economies of visibility, and they also emphasize negative dimensions of visibility in addition to more positive conceptions of popularity.
However, findings should also raise additional questions about hate and harassment in fandom, as well as how platforms and their governance structures respond to abuse; fandom communities (or, perhaps more appropriately, cliques) are not free from intervention. In the next chapter, I will discuss how platforms, moderators, and other fans govern fannish spaces in ways that can reify the inequitable power dynamics discussed throughout this and the prior chapter.
CHAPTER 6: Governing Platforms and People

Introduction

In the prior two chapters, I discuss expressions of power, including biopower, in fandom and how they affect transformative writing practices (chapter four) and community formations (chapter five). This chapter delves more deeply into how and why inequitable power dynamics govern fannish spaces on the internet. Via a critical examination of how platforms and participants define what is inappropriate within fanworks and interactions between fans, I describe how tensions rooted in intersecting instantiations of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism affect ways in which fandoms are formally and informally governed. These tensions manifest on three intersecting levels: platform, interactive, and cultural.

The Platform

Longstanding intersections between platform governance, corporate take-overs, and constructions of what is “appropriate” to post on platforms shape how inequities continue to advance within multiple types of platform used for fanwork. Here, we see that shifts in platform governance (i.e., from a fan-run model to a corporate ownership model) often result in mass removal of “inappropriate” fanworks, which corporations typically define as not safe for work (NSFW) materials that are unsuitable for minors. When NSFW contents are removed by both humans and algorithms on fannish platforms, queer fanworks are often purged from platforms because queerness, especially in relation to children’s sexuality or exposure to sexual content, is inherently politicized due to its deviance from heteronormative standards (K. H. Robinson, 2012). Platforms ban queer people and content, and the few queer users who survive typically leave said platforms
because they are no longer relevant to them. Designs of newer fan-run platforms such as Archive of Our Own (AO3) and Discord respond to patterns of purges and queer exclusion in fandom (Dym & Fiesler, 2018a; Fiesler et al., 2016). However, they also reflect what is missing from definitions of NSFW content: namely race, gender, and nation. Therefore, while newer platform governance structures protect sexuality, they are less attuned to intersecting sites of oppression at play in fandom platforms.

Purges

Online fandom is plagued by platform “purges” and “deaths,” or circumstances wherein a platform is abandoned or otherwise defunct due to user flight (Baumer et al., 2013), disappearing mediums (Ballatore & Natale, 2016), and other shifts. Fandom is a generally underexplored area of platform evolution (see, Helmond et al., 2019) with great potential for increasing our understanding of the politics of platform death, particularly because fandom-related “deaths” span small tech and big tech environments, and follow a common formula: fannish spaces such as LiveJournal (LJ), Fanfiction.net (FFN), and Tumblr that were advertiser-free and moderated by fans are purchased and then governed by large corporations. New policies are then introduced to make the platforms “advertiser-friendly.” Under these new rules, arrangements of human and algorithmic moderators systematically remove content deemed to be inappropriate, resulting in purges of content and users.

According to NIV, “[suffering] from purges” is “the quintessential fandom experience.” Similarly, Robosan calls purges “the pattern” in fandom. Participants, especially those who were over the age of 25 when interviewed for this study, describe multiple experiences with platform purges. Table 4 provides a brief timeline and
overview of fandom-related platform governance shifts and their effects on queer fans

(Fanlore: Main Page, 2020; Fiesler & Dym, 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Initial Governance</th>
<th>Governance shifts</th>
<th>Effects of the shifts on queer fans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fanfiction.net</td>
<td>Founder Xing Li published the site in 1998 along with a handful of other staff based at UCLA. Exact governance is unclear; some posit it was a single-person operation, but other people have said they moderated for FFN</td>
<td>1. Shift to an advertising model to generate revenue (2000)</td>
<td>Fans publicly share their outrage when NC-17 content, forums, and personal messages are removed without warning. Following each purge, hundreds of fans move to other forums. Fans continue to question how the platform is run, especially because its policies say that it is a non-profit when advertisements are clearly visible. Though the platform remains the second-largest English-language fandom archive, it is significantly less active than it was in its earlier days, especially following the 2012 purge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. FFN staff publish “What Everyone Should Know about Fanfiction.net,”(^\text{13}) claiming that it is mismanaged and catering to advertisers (2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Content classified as NC-17 is banned and removed automatically (2002 and again in 2012)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Forums and personal messages are deleted automatically over Thanksgiving weekend (2010)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Xing Li stops communicating, but is still listed as the site owner (~2014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LiveJournal</td>
<td>Founded in 1999 by programmer Brad Fitzpatrick and moderated by platform users</td>
<td>1. Sold to American company Six Apart (2006)</td>
<td>Controversy starts shortly after the Six Apart sale when people are asked to remove images of breastfeeding. This starts a cycle of controversies over what content counts as sexually explicit. In 2007, users are banned for posting sexually explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Sold to Russian media company SUP Media (2007)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. All servers relocate to Russia (2016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{13}\) Excerpts from this letter can be accessed at:  
https://fanlore.org/wiki/What_Everyone_Should_Know_About_Fanfiction.net
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Developed in 2006 and launched in 2007 by David Karp and Marco Arment, with lose moderation from staff members of Karp’s software consulting company, Davidville</th>
<th>4. Terms of service changed to comply with Russian law (2017)</th>
<th>content, including fic, and therefore violating the new terms of service. Users protest and more are removed. Terms of service become more stringent with the sale to SUP Media. Topics such as “bisexuality” are banned in 2008, and hundreds of fans leave. Russian politicians and George R.R. Martin remain.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Tumblr | 1. Yahoo! Inc. acquires for $1.1 billion (2013) | Platform users including fans circulate a petition that gains 170,000 signatures following the Yahoo! sale. The petition is not met with much of a response. Fans’ accounts are deleted and/or they voluntarily leave the site. By December 2018, Tumblr loses 30% of its user traffic due to the adult content ban. | 2. Advertising is introduced, but sales are poor (2013-2016)  
3. Verizon acquires Yahoo! and Tumblr is placed under its Oath subsidiary (2017)  
4. A strict content policy is introduced that bans adult content (2019)  
5. Ad sales continue to disappoint, and Verizon sells Tumblr to Automattic for 3 million (2019)  
6. Automattic CEO Matt Mullenweg says that there are no plans to reduce the content ban |

*Table 4.* A brief summary of governance shifts and purges on FFN, LJ, and Tumblr.
Platform purges and subsequent deaths constitute major losses for queer fans: people’s accounts and creations are deleted because they no longer fit into platforms’ “advertiser-friendly” arrangements. Persephone explains:

[O]nce you start taking revenue from other sources, then that has its own issue. If we look at what happened to LiveJournal, LiveJournal is basically useless now because they took so much Russian money, that it’s useless as a fandom platform now. Where Tumblr…it’s like, you know, Tumblr is useless as a platform now too because they took commercial money.

Purges most often target material classified as NSFW, and they are therefore framed as moralizing endeavors that remove pornography from platforms that host under-aged users. In practice, however, what becomes classified as “not safe for work” is inherently tied to the presence and arrangements of different bodies on platforms—bodies of users, and bodies depicted in the contents that users create. Scatter notes that differences between banning child pornography and banning queer content can be a “very slippery slope” when platforms like Tumblr try to become “more appetizing to investors and stuff.” This is because in reality, purges of now-defunct fannish platforms are biopolitical acts wherein platforms that were largely run by and for queer fans are regulated in ways that make them more normative: because marginalized sexualities are inherently politicized (Ahmed, 2006), queer people and queer creations are purged because they are automatically labeled NSFW (see Haimson et al., 2019a).

Participants describe the effect these policy changes have on their relationships with and use of platforms. In this context, participants can generally be divided into two overlapping camps: those participants whose own work and accounts were removed, and
those participants who lost accounts and works that they followed. Ash, who writes NSFW fic, recalls

    [M]y entire experience online has been around not safe for work content…I used Tumblr to see not safe for work content of fandoms, specifically. So, when Yahoo! bought it and said, ‘You cannot post not safe for work anymore,’ I was like, ‘Well, I’m not going to use it anymore’…if you are a not safe for work blog like mine was, it disappears…I can’t see my own archive because my entire blog got flagged. And I can’t even reach it through the link. So, it became a completely useless platform for me.

Participants who lost accounts frame their experiences as deeply unpleasant and even traumatic. Vince says, “that was awful,” while Robosan says, “that was absolutely devastating.” While other participants did not lose their own works, they describe similar feelings of loss and displacement. Lyrical remembers, “nobody really wanted to use Fanfiction.net…it was kind of like, you can’t—‘We’ll take your slash, but clean it up. No NC-17 stuff.’” Describing purges on both LJ and FFN, Pilar says, “It just got so much quieter.” Persephone explains, “I’ve seen so much stuff get lost to the purge of LiveJournal…one of my favorite pieces…it’s gone forever.” Recalling her time on LJ, Sunshine says, “All of the best fanfics were on LiveJournal. I will probably defend that to my death.” Participants lose both the fic that results from their creative labor and the fic that they enjoy interacting with during platform purges.

    However, texts are not the only materials lost to platform-level changes. Participants explain that purges and deaths also result in significant social losses; they lose community and friendship ties when platforms displace them. Q emphasizes the
consequences of platforms’ switch to commercial revenue, explaining, “once that happens, there’s a lot of censorship, and wanting it to be advertiser friendly. And so, a lot of communities get destroyed.” Sunshine says, “we lose contact with people…I know that we’re not going to be as close as we were.” Robosan laments, “I lost half my audience. Literally, half my audience went in the Tumblr purge…It really destroyed a lot of the community.” Importantly, community losses due to changes in platform governance relate to queer people’s positionalities within wider society. NIV explains this:

I feel like it’s this weird cyclical history of, we move to social media, there’s a purge. We move to another social media, there’s a purge. We wait for a while, another social media, another purge. Like, I feel like there’s a lot of—I feel like the main thing with fandom is that we’re a community in general that is based on the experience of freak-ness, in a way. Like, a lot of people in fandom are queer or they’re disabled or they’re non-white or a combination of that. There’s a lot of relationship with fandom and feeling out of place in normal spaces, maybe. And the history of fandom, along with that, is inherently interwoven with the experience of loss.

Queer communities, especially those that are primarily comprised of queer people of color, disabled people, and/or trans people, have a long and documented history of often-violent displacement from any number of settings ranging from bars to places of employment to housing (Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018; West et al., 2019). Such displacements may stem from processes such as gentrification, wherein wealthier and more normatively located bodies drive queer (and especially queer people of color’s) networks out of
neighborhoods that they have historically occupied, or dismantle queer spaces so that they are no longer in use. Scholars relate such processes to biopower and ways in which it both formally and informally regulates bodies within space and over time: marginalized people are kept on the periphery (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015), especially if they do not conform to normative institutional agendas (Puar, 2017). Fandom provides a context in which we can see queer displacements in digital environments. On platforms like Tumblr, processes akin to gentrification occur wherein queer content is largely purged from the platform while the platform itself becomes increasingly corporatized and remains open to and used by cisgender and heterosexual people. Platforms like LJ, on the other hand, are largely abandoned and defunct; no one maintains or updates them. LJ’s circumstances are emphasized by an instance during Persephone’s interview wherein she visited an LJ forum she used to moderate and found that it is largely gone. She says, “It looks like a lot of my CSS14 got killed, which makes me sad because I spent a lot of time on that CSS.” Initially, Persephone sent me a link to examine, but she told me not to bother after she discovered the state of the page.

But while platform purges affect queer fans across the board, they do not affect all queer fans in the same way because of how platforms define NSFW content. As noted above, there is a specific focus on sexually explicit materials that minors may be exposed to, and this focus does not account for intersecting instantiations of oppression. Queer people of color and trans people are more deeply affected by gentrification and displacement in offline settings, and they are also more affected by online purges due to ways in which NSFW content is constructed by corporate platform policies. On the one

14 CSS is a programming language.
hand, material from participants of color, trans fans, and fans who reside outside of western cultural contexts is more vulnerable during purges because, especially when compounded with depictions of queer sexuality, it is hyper-visible and correspondingly hyper-politicized. These materials and their creators experience increased surveillance because they are less legible and therefore more dangerous to corporations that wish to monetize fannish spaces (e.g., Browne, 2015). At the same time, other (white, cis, and/or western) fans may not protest the removal of such works and their creators due to systemic racism in fandom (Pande, 2018). For example, NIV notes that while purges of LJ, FFN, and Tumblr are discussed frequently across fandoms, Spanish-speaking platforms that have been similarly co-opted are less often discussed and have yet to be replaced. NIV explains that due to these circumstances, “people in Spanish-speaking places adapted to English-speaking spaces.” Maria describes similar circumstances for Russian-speaking platforms but says that she has trouble adapting to English-speaking alternatives; she has trouble making friends in English-language spaces. The most marginalized fans often experience the most harm from platform purges and associated deaths: their content and accounts are overly surveilled and more subject to removal, and their community losses are more difficult to recuperate. Here, too, we see an expression of biopower: per Puar’s (2017) queer expansion of Foucauldian biopolitics, biopower does not only regulate who lives, but also who dies (p. 32-33).

On the other hand, how platforms define “NSFW” content disadvantages many queer fans because policies that focus on sexuality ignore intersecting oppressions, meaning that purges advance agendas that do not seek to remove racist and transphobic contents and accounts. Changes in governance and associated regulations target
“pornographic” materials, “NC-17” materials, and “adult content,” all of which are defined by the presence of sexual acts. No policies attempt to factor race, gender, and nation into definitions of inappropriate or NSFW materials. Explicitly racist and transphobic fanfiction remain, while fanfiction that depicts sexual relations between trans people is removed. For example, Q maintained multiple blogs on Tumblr that were removed during content bans. He says that with the removal of so-called NSFW works authored by actual queer people, Tumblr was “mostly taken over by…TERFs,” whose contents are not considered to be “inappropriate” even though they invalidate trans people. Participants also note that racist content, including fanfiction about Nazis, remain on platforms. Participants largely blame these platform-level circumstances on corporates take-overs and associated advertising structures: platforms protect and preserve oppressive content in order to cater to privileged users, while actively engaging in subjugation via purges that remove the very contents that aim to push back against such oppressions.

However, fans are not helpless against these circumstances. Many launched campaigns against content bans and purges on LJ, FFN, and Tumblr; such campaigns remain largely unsuccessful. The most impactful actions to date include constructing or making use of new platforms such as AO3 and Discord to attempt to recreate lost fandom environments, rescue lost fanworks, and form governance structures that protect creators and their fic. But while these newer platforms provide vital spaces for many fans, they simultaneously enact many of the same limitations of past platforms, especially in regard to racism and transphobia.
An Archive of Our Own?

Participants discuss the development of AO3 and use of Discord as responses to purges and platform deaths across fandoms. Though I discuss AO3 and Discord in this section, they serve as illustrative cases of how newly designed platforms both respond to and uphold oppressive dynamics at play in older or defunct platforms. Queer fandom provides a context through which to consider how inequities intersect with platform death, both in terms of how and why platforms die, and in terms of how “reborn” platforms respond to and perpetuate harms against marginalized people on the internet. Table 5 provides information about AO3 and Discord.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Circumstances of Creation</th>
<th>Governance Structure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive of Our Own (AO3)</td>
<td>The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) creates AO3 in 2008 and betas it in 2009, specifically in response to monetization of fanfiction on the internet. Co-founder Naomi Novik says fans need a space “of their own” on the internet to be creative. AO3 defines itself as an archive, not a community forum. It continues to develop its organizational structures and policies. It receives praise as a platform and wins the Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2019.</td>
<td>The OTW is a non-profit. About 700 of its volunteers work for AO3. The majority of volunteers are fans who use the platform. They belong to committees including Communications, Open Doors, Policy &amp; Abuse, and Tag Wrangling. Each committee is responsible for overseeing different aspects of the platform. Committees generally communicate via Slack. Platform users may submit requests for features and changes via Trello. Moderators do not monitor the site, but instead respond to users’ reports of misconduct, spamming, etc. AO3 is funded primarily through donations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>Discord is not fandom-specific, but it is popular among fans. Discord starts as a platform for gamers developed by Jason Citron and publicly released in 2015. After its launch, many gaming subreddits replace their servers with Discord servers. The platform raises money, grows, and changes its motto from “Chat for Gamers” to “Chat for Communities and Friends” in March 2020. Users increase during COVID-19.</td>
<td>Discord uses distributed servers and channels. This essentially means that a user can create a server, manage its public visibility, and create channels (i.e., categories of content/interactions) on the server. Visibility of and access to each channel are customizable on each server. Moderation of servers is up to their respective creator(s) and members. However, Discord has some central policies that are maintained and enacted by its “trust and safety” team. Members are available at any time to respond to user-generated reports of harassment, spamming, etc.; they do not monitor servers.</td>
</tr>
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| Table 5. Creation and governance of AO3 and Discord. |

AO3 most clearly follows the tradition of platforms like LJ and FFN; it is created by and for fans, fans moderate the platform, and it is a non-profit. Participants largely discuss AO3 in favorable terms. Qwuik says, “AO3 is definitely my favorite of all the things I’ve used,” while Pilar applauds that “it was definitely made with fans in mind.” However,
AO3 is primarily an *archive*; it does not bill itself as a social media platform. NIV explains, “Archive of Our Own isn’t really a fanfiction site as much of an archive. Like, it’s not their job to connect people…there’s no real way to form a connection directly.” Some fans appropriate AO3’s features so that it seems more social. Lydia and Crowgirl, for example, say that they sometimes write “comment fic” with their friends wherein one person publishes a fanfiction, and the comments on said fanfiction turn into a collaboratively sourced extension of the story. AO3’s “kudos” button can also serve a social function (similar to the “like” buttons on Facebook or Twitter), but the platform does not offer other opportunities for social engagement. Features from platforms like LJ and FFN such as chat rooms and community forums are absent from AO3. This is a main reason that participants use Discord in addition to AO3; while they post fic and comment on AO3, they engage in more social and community-building activities on Discord. Robosan calls Discord “an outlet for people” because “a lot of new people have come [in]…following the fandom purge because there is no central location for fandom anymore.” Scatter notes that Discord “is very accessible, very easy…As long as you can find the link to the server, you’re good.” While Discord was not built by and for fans, its server-based structure allows participants to create and/or join spaces that are chiefly fan-moderated.

Policies on both platforms, especially AO3, respond to content bans, purges, and platform deaths. AO3 was established in response to monetization of fannish online spaces; its name, a riff on Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, is an indicator of AO3’s resistance to corporatization in fandom. AO3’s moderation structure and content policies particularly reflect how past purges inform not only the platform’s design, but
also its epistemic and aesthetic standpoints. Aesthetically, AO3 does not look like a modern internet space. Its design is plain and features a white background with red and black text. The navigation structure is simple and, save the platform’s logo and a fundraising progress bar, there are no images. Figure 3 showcase’s AO3’s homepage.

**Figure 3.** AO3’s homepage on January 19, 2021.

This aesthetic is perhaps meant to capture the OTW’s approach to AO3: the platform is meant to be open in multiple areas including its open-source software, its accessible terms of service, its communication with users (e.g., via announcements on the platform and the Twitter account @AO3_Status), etc. Especially given ways that fandom has been burned on the internet in the past, AO3 and the OTW try to be transparent, clear, and clean.

Transparency extends to AO3’s moderation system, though moderators’ exact actions are not always publicly known.15 Due, in part, to governance shifts that gutted

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15 Participants who moderate for AO3 note that they cannot provide specific answers to some of my questions, especially those related to how particular harassment cases are handled. They speak more generally about these topics.
spaces such as LJ and Tumblr, AO3 is clear that moderators are fans. To become a moderator, an interested person has to apply, then complete rounds of interviews, then complete extensive training. Moderators are all-volunteer and the OTW does not disclose commercial interests. Further, the moderation committees and their relationships with platform users reflect problems that internet fandoms faced in the past. As I discuss in chapter four, a team of moderators called “tag wranglers” exists to maintain AO3’s hybrid classification system, which consists of both standardized tags from the platform and user-generated tags. However, creators are largely responsible for tagging “ratings” and “warnings” on content they post to AO3. Subsections 2b and 3b of the “Tags” section of AO3’s terms of service (ToS)\(^\text{16}\) respectively state, “As a rule, the creator controls the ratings,” and “As a rule, the creator controls the warnings.” In part, these policies respond to adult content bans discussed above wherein humans created automated systems that classified (and eventually removed) NSFW materials on LJ, Tumblr, and FFN. On AO3, users determine whether their works are NSFW, and they decide how to tag these works.

However, standardized tags exist for ratings and warnings on AO3; users select from a number of options that the platform offers. Ratings options include general audiences; teen and up audiences; mature; explicit; and not rated. Implicitly, these ratings most often refer to whether and how sex and physical violence are depicted in fic. In terms of warnings, creators choose among standard warnings that include choose not to use Archive warnings; none of these warnings apply; graphic depictions of violence; major character death; rape/\textit{non-con}; and underage. If a creator uses tags other than “none

\(^{16}\) AO3’s ToS is located here: https://archiveofourown.org/tos
of these warnings apply,” readers will be met with a pop-up (see Figure 4) that they must click through in order to view the fic.

**Figure 4.** AO3’s Archive warning on January 21, 2021.

Creators also have the option to add additional tags that, according to the ToS, “can be serious or humorous. They can be warnings or promises, or whatever else the creator chooses.” Participants who tag wrangle explain that this system is meant to provide a middle-ground wherein creators have some control over their works, but readers are warned that they may encounter sexually explicit and/or graphically violent materials. This is especially important for participants who do not want to read “non-con” fic, explicit fic with underage characters, and violent fic. It also provides a way for AO3 to keep NSFW fic on the platform and to warn readers of its existence. Crowgirl explains that she needs “to put major trigger warnings” on her fic to protect potential readers, while Sue explains that ratings and warnings are among the only tags that wranglers “actually enforce” because they are important for readers, and because sexually explicit materials have such a fraught history in fandom. As a member of the Policy & Abuse committee, Sue further explains that if a user reports that a fic was not correctly rated and/or does not have accurate warnings, someone will investigate that report and ask the author to fix the tags if they deem that they are inaccurate.

Discord’s stance on NSFW content is laxer than AO3’s, partly because they do not have a centralized moderating structure like AO3. However, their policies appeal to fans who have experienced porn bans precisely because they are lax, and because they
ostensibly grant control to fans themselves. Though Discord began as a platform for gamers, it now markets its utility for a range of communities and other groups, especially in light of social distancing imposed by COVID-19 (see Figure 5). Each Discord server is governed by members who are selected according to rules and processes developed within that server. Moderators have the ability to create different “boards” on each server, and boards typically classify content and/or interactions within a server. According to Discord’s ToS, server moderators may choose to create an NSFW board, but they do not have to.

![How People are Using Discord to Keep in Touch](image)

**Figure 5.** A screenshot from Discord’s announcement of their COVID-19 updates sent to users on April 8, 2020.

Fans therefore experience a great deal of freedom on Discord. Robosan moderates a Discord server and explains that she and her co-moderator created an NSFW board so that people can choose whether to interact with NSFW content. Interestingly, Robosan and her co-moderator discussed splitting the NSFW board into more specific categories,
but ultimately decided not to do so because “we don’t want to be the arbiters… there’s a lot of kinks that go up in the not safe for work board that I am super not into, and I just go to another board.” Robosan, Scatter, and Ronan, who all moderate for Discord, explain that they attempt to solicit feedback from their respective server members when making decisions such as whether to include one or many NSFW boards. They report that this works well for them, though they also admit that their servers are small and specific to one fandom, and therefore easier to manage than a larger multi-fandom platform like AO3. AO3, however, does invite users to submit feedback and suggestions via the management software Trello.

AO3 and Discord share another commonality that addresses the effects of platform purges and deaths: fanworks and connections between fans that were lost are “rescued” or revived on both platforms. In AO3’s case, rescuing fanworks from defunct archives and platforms is part of the OTW’s mission. AO3’s “Open Doors” committee exists expressly for this purpose. Willow, who volunteers for Open Doors, explains, “what Open Doors does is preserving at-risk and offline fanfictions…taking archives of those fanworks and importing them to AO3 so that they don’t get lost.” Willow also says: [T]his is is kind of near and dear to my heart to begin with because I had been a member of, like, small archives and small forums when I was, you know, kind of a pre-teen and teenager. And a lot of the sites that I had been on at the time, like, no longer existed or were no longer being updated by their moderators. And so, I just thought that it was a really great mission that Open Doors would exist to preserve things because, you know, I could kind of relate to that.
Willow and Sue (who also volunteers for Open Doors) stress that fanworks are not imported to AO3 without permission from platforms’, archives’, or forums’ original moderators. Permission from creators is difficult to obtain because creators use pseudonyms, and fanworks may be relatively old. Willow and Sue also explain that they do not save everything from defunct platforms; Open Doors only imports fanworks, meaning that materials like comments and discussions are not preserved. Open Doors received recent attention in fandom for rescuing fanworks from Yahoo! Groups, which were used by fans including participants such as Lyrical, but which are now defunct. According to Sue, the Open Doors committee received “feedback from fandom people…that they’re very glad this is happening.” Occasionally someone will ask, “‘Please don’t import my fics,’” and the committee will honor that request. Fans may express disappointment if Open Doors cannot save an archive. Sue says, “we say, like, ‘Oh, well, we’ve reached out to the mods several times. We’ve just never heard anything and there’s nothing we can do.’” AO3 therefore tries to rescue or revive content that fans lose during purges. Such rescue efforts are limited, however, by problems with preserving born-digital materials (Floegel et al., 2020). Sue says:

I think sort of in general, people are still figuring out how to preserve born-digital materials like this. And there are things lost. You know, the structure and the look of the original site is lost. If there were associated forums or an associated mailing list, because really, we do only import the fic. So, it’s not perfect, I’d say. I think as far as preservation, there is sort of things about these communities that don’t get saved…But I think it’s a good middle-ground of trying to save these works. Even if there is sort of necessarily things lost in that process.
Open Doors’ specific focus on rescuing fanworks makes sense in light of AO3’s status as an archive rather than a social media platform. Fans on Discord try to make up for what AO3 cannot preserve, especially in terms of resuscitating community and friendship ties. Pilar says that fandoms on Discord are “almost the answer to, like, a LiveJournal community with joining servers about particular things…I was waning interactions, so, I created [an account].” NIV explains that Discord can be a good place for fic exchanges and finding beta readers, while Robosan notes that people will recommend fic on AO3 on boards within her server. Further, Discord was in use before the Tumblr purge, and it provided spaces for fans to process Tumblr’s changes. According to Robosan, “it was a, basically, public mourning on our Discord over the loss of the not safe for work aspect of Tumblr…And a lot of new people have come into the Discord following the fandom purge.” Robosan also notes that Discord is especially useful during COVID-19; she can check-in on fandom friends from around the world, and she can keep in contact with friends who she normally sees at annual conventions.

AO3 and Discord therefore do good for fans, especially in light of abuses that queer fans face from other platforms. However, both platforms’ content policies and governance structures are informed by past NSFW bans that are not attendant to intersecting power dynamics. Unfortunately, neither AO3 nor Discord sufficiently address intersecting oppressions: biopolitics continue to regulate both platforms. For example, because purges are attributed to depictions of sexuality on now-dead or defunct platforms, AO3’s design and governance (e.g., its ratings and warnings policies) focus on sexuality with little attendance to intersecting power dynamics related to race, gender, and nation. Writ large, fandoms’ efforts to create new spaces do not address historical
instantiations of racism, transphobia, and colonialism in fandom, and they elide these intersecting inequities as they are currently expressed.

However, platforms’ focus on sexuality is not the only reason they elide policy changes that could address intersectional oppression. Partly due to the circumstances of past platform purges and deaths, fans who govern AO3 and Discord servers typically adopt a similar standpoint on content. Willow says that the AO3 moderators’ stance is typically, “I wish people would just leave each other alone and let them like what they like without trying to moralize it.” Discord adopts a similar point of view by allowing servers to set their own rules, save a few centralized bans that focus almost exclusively on child pornography involving real children. On the surface, these policies may seem appealing, and in a sense, they are meant to protect marginalized users so that content which depicts their (inherently politicized) identities is publishable, findable, and safe from removal. However, in practice, these policies are problematic precisely because they are so laissez-faire: racist and transphobic content remains on platforms because it also deserves to be “left alone” so that people may choose whether to consume it. We see such contents on AO3 where, for example, racist and pro-Nazi fanfiction is not removed from the platform, and is not tagged as such because AO3’s required tags do not mandate that racist content be marked. Similarly, Discord’s openness is partially responsible for alt-right groups’ occupation of the platform; most notably, groups involved in the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA used Discord to organize themselves (Roose, 2017).

Essentially, despite their inclusive veneer and the good that they do for fandoms, platforms such as AO3 and Discord adopt an epistemic of neutrality: they are not going
to remove fanfiction with queer sex, but they are also not going to remove fanfiction that glorifies Nazis. As critical library and intellectual freedom scholars note, neutrality is fallacious, and it serves to uphold oppression by legitimating the standpoints of the oppressors (Gibson et al., 2017). Further, because these platforms were created by, and are still largely moderated by, white people (see, Fiesler et al., 2016), addressing racism in particular is often not a priority; structurally, the platforms reflect whiteness (Pande, 2018). In 2020, AO3 co-creator Franzeska (2020) admitted in a Tumblr post, “We picked the archive warnings from the things that were common on older fic archives. Which, yes, reflects what fandom cared about at the time and is not neutral…Including something about racism straight up never occurred to me in 2008” (emphasis in original). This post reflects common arguments in defense of racism and other instantiations of oppression on AO3, Discord, and other small tech platforms. However, it is easily critiqued. To say that “fandom at the time” cared about sexuality and nothing else is to say that white fandom cared about sexuality and nothing else. Fans of color have existed since fandoms formed, and they have pointed out racism from fandoms’ beginnings. Further, prominent and well-documented examples of racism in fandom occurred prior to AO3’s design and during its continued development, yet AO3 and the OTW still have not clearly addressed racism on the platform.17

17 While racism is an everyday process in fandom communities, there are some major touchstone examples of racism in internet fandoms’ history. These include RaceFail ’09, wherein white people attacked fans of color for speaking out about racist fandoms (see, https://fanlore.org/wiki/RaceFail_%2709); publication of and responses to the J2 Haiti fic, which used the 2010 Haitian earthquake as a backdrop for a slash fic that included racist portrayals of people of color (see, https://fanlore.org/wiki/The_J2_Haiti_Fic); and Te’s 2006 LJ post, “My Other Problem with Recent DC Events,” which chronicles racism in DC Universe-based fanfiction (http://thete.t.livejournal.com).
Racist incidents and processes continue to be publicly shared, with anemic or no acknowledgement from platforms like AO3 and Discord. This is particularly upsetting given that both platforms claim to be attuned to users and willing to incorporate feedback based on users’ needs. This contradiction became abundantly clear following public knowledge of police killings of Black people including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, as well as associated Black Lives Matter Protests, in the summer of 2020. These protests brought increased attention to racism in fandom, and especially to ways that often-lauded spaces such as AO3 remain racist. AO3 initially responded defensively to such attention, publishing a blog post that praised fan activism and, at the end of its conclusion, nodded to critical scholarship that discusses racism in fandom. In this post, the author (who represents the OTW) included links to informative resources about race in fandom. While this action is useful, it is geared primarily towards white fans who do not experience and/or know much about racism in fandom. The post does not acknowledge ways in which the OTW and AO3 in particular are racist; people who commented on the post note that the OTW needs to listen to Black people, and they also argue that the OTW elides anti-racist work by merely telling people “not to be racist.” Commentors further point out that the OTW offers no concrete acknowledgement of its role in perpetuating and maintaining racism in fandom (one even says that AO3’s neutral stance is problematic), and that the post offers no actionable steps the OTW and especially AO3 will take to confront and combat racist behaviors. As Robosan says, “There’s so much that can be done with platforms to make it a safer, kinder space for people that are not being done.” A few commentors offer ideas developed among fans of color in Discord servers for ways that structural racism may be addressed in fandom.
Unfortunately, many of these comments were deleted both before and after the OTW removed the initial blog post.

It is essential to discuss how platform policies and governance affect queer fans’ everyday experiences in fannish spaces. Purges, deaths, and responses to these circumstances from newer platforms shape how fans behave and how they are treated within internet fandoms. The next section discusses how interactions encompassing self-maintenance practices and harassment intersect with platform polices and governance that dictate not only what is inappropriate, but also who is protected from inappropriate and, at times, violent exchanges.

The Interactive

Fannish inequities are not only situated in content. While platform-level governance that responds to bans, purges, and deaths often focuses on content due to the circumstances of said situations (e.g., automated removal of adult content), inequities in fandom are not only perpetuated through content (i.e., fic). Some of the most egregious and, arguably, harmful instantiations and expressions of oppression occur during interactions between and among fans on various platforms, as well as interactions between fans, platforms, and moderators. It is therefore worth exploring how governance manifests in two domains that involve interactions between actors rather than constructions of content itself: fans’ individual maintenance of their online presence, and fans’ experiences with harassment both as receivers and moderators of hate.

Maintaining Presences

Despite platforms’ power, it is a mistake to say that fans are universally subordinate to, or powerless, within them. Such a perspective would advance deterministic viewpoints that
oversimplify complex dynamics between people, technologies, and the structures and individuals who create and maintain tech infrastructures (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2012; Browne, 2015). Fans, especially given their general interest in and/or knowledge about technology (Fiesler et al., 2016), are aware of how both big and small tech platforms used for fandom operate. They have therefore designed ways to at least partially circumvent longstanding problems with platform purges. While these workarounds are imperfect and often result in increased work and stress for individual fans, they demonstrate ways that fans incorporate their understanding of both past and current problems with platform purges into their individual everyday practices. Such practices are clearly demonstrated by ways that fans construct their presence, or presences, on platforms. Here, “presence” is used as a catch-all term that encompasses accounts, personas, and handles on platforms including Twitter, AO3, Tumblr, and more. However, participants most often discuss Twitter in this context. On Twitter, it is relatively simple to maintain multiple accounts. The desktop and mobile interfaces, for example, allow you to stay logged into multiple accounts, and to easily switch between them.

When maintaining their online presences, participants often craft ways to classify their identities so that they and their works are protected from entities that may harm them based on their creative endeavors. These entities include the platforms that fans inhabit as well as spaces that are outside of fandom, such as places of employment. Platform purges shape fans’ approach to crafting personas on Twitter in particular, because it is a big tech platform. Participants fear that it may one day be subject to a

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18 It is worth noting that my interview data alone confirms this. Participants explain AO3, Twitter, and other platforms better than the platforms’ terms of service.
purge like Tumblr’s. They therefore take steps to ensure that if a content ban occurs, they will not lose the entirety of their presence on the platform. NIV explains, “That experience [with purges], I think, is inherently part of why fandom is the way it is.” Thus, this fear leads many participants to, at minimum, create an account that they refer to as their “main” account as well as an account that is specifically for NSFW content. To the best of their ability, participants classify the content they post—whether that content be their personal thoughts and feelings, links to their fanworks, or other information—so that they only post it to the account that is the best “fit” for that element of their persona or creative work. This way, in case of a purge, they have a better chance of losing only one account (e.g., the NSFW account) rather than their entire platform presence and its intersection with their creative works.

When developing categories for accounts and determining what content to place in which category, participants necessarily imagine audiences for each account. Said audiences include people who may be actively interested in certain content, as well as people who may serendipitously discover an account without seeking it out. Per Vince:

I have a fandom account. I have a private account for venting or ranting. I used to vent on my fandom account, but then I got all those followers. I don’t want attention when I’m venting, and so, I just do it on my private account. I have an account that is a personal and an art account…And I also have a not safe for work, which is just fandom stuff… a lot of minors are following me, and I don’t want to expose them to not safe for work stuff…I also have a horror account. I have a horror account for the gore…But I knew that not everyone enjoys horror,
and not everyone wants to see blood on their timeline. So, I was like, ‘Okay, I’m gonna open a different account for this interest of mine.’

Here, Vince explains how real and imagined audiences shape their approach to constructing various Twitter accounts. Aligned with internet fandom’s past experiences with platforms, Vince is particularly cognizant of classifying and separating NSFW content, especially for audiences that may include minors. Other participants relate audience concerns to their non-fan and physical-life contexts, such as places of employment. Here, while there is particular concern about sexually explicit NSFW content, participants are more generally concerned about their workplaces discovering that they a) participate in fandom, which remains marginalized in many formal settings despite its heightened presence in mainstream culture (e.g., Thomas, 2019), and b) participate in queer fandom in particular. For example, Persephone explains that on Twitter, she has her “main” account as well as “a separate writing Twitter that I don’t use as often. That’s the one that I link to in my fics and stuff.” Persephone maintains separate accounts because she “has to be careful now too with my job”; she is concerned that her fic will jeopardize her job because of its queerness: “I will not mention anything to do with anything on public where it can be searched.” Platforms, then, are not the only institutions that affect participants’ practices. The wider normative dynamics that structure platforms also structure other environments that participants say concern them, including workplaces, schools, and, domestic spaces. Given that queer people can be fired, barred from school, and expelled from their homes in many countries and US states, it unfortunately makes sense that participants are concerned about being, for lack of a better term, outed as authors of queer fic and participants in queer fandoms.
In addition to creating multiple accounts, participants who fear being discovered by non-fans with power over their everyday lives often decide to make one or more of their Twitter accounts “private." On Twitter, “private” accounts provide some protection to users, as people must request to follow these accounts, and only followers can see content. Maria, who wanted no one in her everyday life to find her fanworks for fear of being outed in her homophobic national, school, and home environments, says, “I kept it private for, like, two years, I think. Maybe more. Because I was kind of afraid that my real-life people would find it.” However, there are downsides to having to keep an account private, especially in light of fans’ desire for community and dynamics spurred by the fannish attention economy I discuss in chapter five. Maria explains, “I was also worried that when your account is private, it’s really harder to connect; to contact other people.” Interestingly, elements of AO3’s design allow authors to mark certain fics “private” while others remain public. In this way, authors do not have to create multiple accounts merely to protect their fanworks, or to keep them out of the public eye. Willow says, “I previously published…on my AO3 account but subsequently hid them from the public due to the inclusion of incest and sexual content.” Her motivation is similar to Persephone’s: “I started working tutoring high school students and there are a few people in my real life who know that fandom identity and I’m a little paranoid that it’s gonna leak out and get me in trouble professionally. So, I’ve taken them—I haven’t removed them from the site, but I’ve created an unrevealed collection and stuck them in that collection so that they’re hidden.” In this way, AO3’s designers try to address missed
opportunities and lost connections that may be attributed to split identities and privacy settings on social media like Twitter.\textsuperscript{20}

This is especially important because participants like Maria who are most concerned about the consequences of being outed as fans are often the people who most need or crave connections in fandom because their physical environments are less welcoming of, or less safe for, queer people. Practices like those described above that encompass catering to audiences on social media are often attributed to “context collapse,” or the confluence of various imagined audiences online that causes people to perform for the “lowest common denominator” audience members when they interact with a platform (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Alternatively, such practices may be placed within Chatman’s (1996) theory of information poverty given that they appear to be self-protective or defensive measures. However, fans’ practices cannot be fully explained by context collapse or information poverty because neither theory explicitly accounts for power dynamics. Instead, they focus on individuals’ interactions with audiences or people who appear to be “othered” from themselves. Though we see dynamics similar to those raised above during discussions of context collapse and information poverty, participants here are not merely thinking about individual self-presentation and/or ways in which presentations differ between face-to-face and virtual conversations. Participants’ practices are structured by long-standing power dynamics that politicize queer identities. Just as queerness may be “inappropriate” for platforms and their users, so is it

\textsuperscript{20} Discord was not discussed in relation to maintaining multiple accounts. I posit that this is because Discord’s function, as discussed earlier, differs from spaces like AO3 and Twitter. Discord is mainly for community interactions and dialog within small communities. People do not “follow” each other on Discord. The platform is designed for more intimate social connections, meaning that the stakes of holding an account are different and, ostensibly, less public.
constructed as potentially harmful within any number of contexts including workplaces and schools. Participants therefore do not only construct and maintain online presences to gain attention; they also do so to protect themselves from inequitable dynamics that may, at minimum, erase their presence and content from an online space.

Moreover, participants’ personal experiences with maintaining multiple online presences, especially on a single platform, are mixed, and further complicate notions such as context collapse. While Ronan says that the “organization makes it easier for me to think” when they split their accounts, other participants feel that maintaining multiple presences may be tiring or even problematic. Regarding the former, maintaining multiple accounts takes a great deal of work; presences must be kept up, and participants must be careful to sort the correct content into the right account. Though studies of context collapse relate the phenomenon to self-promotional practices (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Radford et al., 2020), they do not go so far as to discuss the amount of work that people must do to promote themselves in not only one, but many, contexts (see Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Moreover, perhaps especially as queer people, participants are sensitized to the fact that classification is neither neat or nor perfect (Drabinski, 2013), meaning that their accounts will necessarily overlap or even perpetuate problems with classification. Referring to how presences and associated content may be classified, Persephone says that at times, “we’re not giving it the spotlight it deserves” because content like sexually explicit material is separated from someone’s “main” account.

Therefore, due in part to institutionalized biopolitics, queer fans must engage in self-regulation via protective measures such as creating and maintaining multiple online presences. Biopower that regulates and oppresses queer bodies and renderings of queer
actions leads queer fans to develop practices so that they avoid the consequences of biopolitical regulations. As noted above, fans do not trust platforms or other actors to keep them safe. As NIV says:

I feel like that kind of relates to the queer experience in general. It’s like, we need to protect ourselves because the populace in general is not going to do it. And in the same way, we need to protect what we create because nobody else is gonna do it.

NIV draws attention to the wider context in which queer fans’ self-regulation occurs. These practices take place in one of many contexts in which queer people need to develop their own networks and coping mechanisms, whether they be chosen families (Weston, 2005), underground community and media organizations (Nappo, 2010), archives (Latimer, 2013; Thistlethwaite, 1989), etc., to protect themselves and their cultures under structurally cis/heteronormative constraints.

**Harassment**

Fear of platform purges and lost jobs or other securities are not the only circumstances that lead participants to siphon their fannish identities into categories or take other actions to protect themselves. Participants, especially those who are queer fans of color and/or queer fans who reside outside of western cultural contexts, receive a great deal of harassment from other, often white queer fans across platforms. Here, I find another stark racial divide in my data: while white and/or cisgender participants (especially those who moderate, which I will discuss later in this section) are often aware that harassment occurs, they rarely experience it themselves, while participants of color and/or trans participants are personally targeted. This difference aligns with studies of marginalized
populations’ experiences in online environments (see, M. Duggan, 2017). For example, while queer people in general face hate and harassment online, more marginalized queer people tend to receive the brunt of that hate, sometimes from fellow queer users. Powell, Scott, and Henry’s (2018) survey of sexuality- and gender-based harassment found that trans respondents were harassed more severely than cisgender queer respondents; the same can be said for queer people of color versus white queer people (Ahmed, 2012).

When asked what they dislike or would change about fandom, participants note that fandom can be extremely toxic and hateful. This toxicity surpasses the insider/outsider dynamics I discuss in chapter five, given its vitriol and its perpetuation outside of particular community or clique-based contexts. It is worth noting, however, that fans who have less of a community in online fandoms may be more prone to harassment because they are less popular, and therefore have fewer people to defend them. Per Maria, “you’re not protected…when you’re a small creator.” Fans are therefore targeted specifically because of their identities and, often, the intersection of their identities and their creations. Those who do the targeting are often other fans or groups of fans who embody varying and intersecting levels of trans/homophobia and white supremacy via harassment campaigns. Maria further explains:

[W]hen some kind of half-anonymous queer, sometimes woman, sometimes not, person from the third world somewhere likes to just, just really doesn’t have anything else to do but just write some stuff they enjoy, and it’s much easier to go attack this person. And, like, it can actually drive them off internet.

Lyrical, the oldest person I interviewed, notes that she has been targeted as a Black queer person in fandom since she joined online spaces in the early 1990s. Lyrical explains that
she writes in “white fandoms” where “people don’t think that a Black woman could or should write these characters.” Shortly before our interview, Lyrical received racist hate mail in her email inbox, which she says rarely bothers her anymore because she has dealt with this kind of harassment for around 30 years. However, this practice illustrates additional regulatory practices and mechanisms in fandom. People are racist towards Lyrical because she is a Black woman who writes for popular pairings; she receives hate mail from people who want to police her Black body and her ability to write about white bodies. Because Lyrical has dealt with racism both in and outside of fandom for her entire life, she disciplines herself to not exert the energy needed to respond to racist fans. However, white fans who write characters of color are not subject to such abuses, and are instead either left alone or praised for advancing racial justice in white fandom spaces (Pande, 2018). In addition to Lyrical, other participants relay similar injustices. Q, for example, maintains six Twitter accounts not only due to fear of a platform purge, but also because he received negative comments from other fans on his tweets and “got so irritated” that he separated the topics he discusses in order to avoid further harassment. Before Tumblr’s content ban, Qwuik had to “take a break” from the platform because it became, in both Scatter’s and Clara’s words, “toxic.” However, some fans do not have the option to merely take a break from a particular platform because harassment campaigns against a creator can extend to multiple platforms, or even offline spaces. Robosan, for example, recalls that her friend was doxed. Per NIV, “the current situation in fandom is not very healthy, and I don’t particularly like it.” Persephone says that it can be “exhausting” to see and receive “constant threats”—this is yet another example of ways in which additional labor is extracted from marginalized people in online settings.
Moreover, we once again see that perceptions of fandoms as positive and cathartic are sharply contradicted by these circumstances.

Interestingly, language used to describe harassers was consistent across participants: they call fans who harass other fans “antis” (short for anti-fans or anti-shippers) and the “fandom police.” Antis, according to participants, may exist within a particular fandom and harass other members of that fandom, or they may attempt to infiltrate a fandom or fannish platform to target marginalized people and/or generally spread hate in those spaces. However, while participants agree that antis and the fandom police serve to target creators within internet fandom, they do not agree on what the term “anti” actually refers to. In other words, the so-called fandom police may be “anti” any number of things, and ways in which antis are discussed (and by whom they are discussed) draw further attention to inequities in fandom, and how they manifest within harassment cases. For example, while participants such as Robosan and Q frame antis as people who do not support certain ships in fic due to qualities such as age differences (e.g., if one character is older than another character, if both characters are minors, etc.), participants such as Sunshine consider antis to be people who do not want to see sexually explicit (and especially non-con) content, and others like NIV and Pilar think of antis as TERFs and racists. Maria says that antis “[act] like Boomers.” Still other participants bring up the point that people who call out racism, transphobia, and other oppressions in fandom maybe accused of being anti-fans or the fandom police (Rendell, 2019). While no participants I interviewed claimed to feel this way, the stance is not uncommon in fandom (Stitch, 2020c, 2020d).
Given this, a major issue with the “anti-fan” framing has to do with the language of anti-fandom itself. First, discussions of anti-fans versus other fans creates a binary that is false both because all binaries are artificial (Jagose, 1997), and because there are no clear divisions between antis and other fans. Someone may be an anti for being a racist, or someone may be an anti for calling out racism. The stakes and politics of each possibility are quite divergent. We may therefore think of the term “anti” as relatively meaningless, excepting its ability to reveal where a person stands within, as Pilar calls them, “schisms” in fandom having to do with sexually explicit, racist, and transphobic content. The “anti-fan” label is, essentially, a boundary object (Huvila et al., 2017; Star & Griesmer, 1989): “anti” is contextual and applied, or weaponized, differently in different circumstances and by different populations within wider fandom spaces. I say “weaponized” because perhaps the only consistency in participants’ framing of “antis” lies in its negative connotation, despite critical work from Rendell (2019) and Stitch (2020c, 2020d) who point out that some “antis” are doing important anti-racist work in fandom. A problem arises when the same term and its accompanying connation are applied to anti-racists and trans activists, as well as racists and TERFs in fandom.

It follows that when participants use the term “anti-fan” to discuss harassment, they actually reveal tensions regarding what “freedom of expression” means in fandom. Given the platform purges discussed above, as well as general suppression of queer-related information throughout history (see, McKinney, 2020), freedom of expression is widely an important and prominent value in fannish spaces. Many queer fans, and especially older queer fans who have themselves experienced state-sanctioned oppression and multiple online purges (see Dym & Fiesler, 2018a), want to avoid what they consider
to be censorship. Discussing her take on the OTW’s stance on freedom of expression, Willow says, “my opinions are probably about roughly the same as the next OTW volunteers, which is like, you know, I wish people would just leave each other alone and let them like what they like.” While the roots of this stance perhaps make it seem understandable or even logical, the laissez-faire approach to expression advanced by the OTW can actually fuel harassment and protect harassers while silencing the harassed (Gibson et al., 2017; J. Rodriguez, 2020). NIV, for example, explains that while fans may be free to post sexually explicit content on platforms like Twitter and AO3, they are also not protected from receiving “death threats, rape threats…horrible things.” Similarly, under the guise of “freedom of expression,” people may feel entitled to uphold white supremacy and cis/heteronormativity because, in their view, they are merely sharing their beliefs (J. Rodriguez, 2020). Per Ronan, “people are generally allowed to write what they like…it can be harmful to others.” A large component of this harm is that the stakes of fans’ freedoms to express themselves are seen as equal, when they are uneven. While any form of harassment or negative feedback is harmful, there is a power differential between white fans who are called out for, for example, writing a non-con scene without using one of the warnings provided by AO3 and fans who are harassed simply for being Black or brown (Mercado, 2020). In many cases, especially as described by participants, issues such as non-con may be discussed via dialog. Consider the following example from Lydia:

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21 While Twitter has more strict content policies than AO3, if a text-based fanwork or a link to an AO3 fic is posted on Twitter, it is often safe from removal. Further, problems with Twitter’s policies around violence such as death threats were thrown into sharp relief in October 2020, when the platform’s reaction to death wishes directed at Donald Trump spurred many users of color and queer users to call out Twitter hypocritical given its failure to address harassment against them (Paul, 2020).
I think I said something like, I put a content note at the top of the chapter, but it said something about a dream involving dubious consent. And the, one of my readers…emailed me and was like, this is really not dubious consent, this is not consent. And so we had a conversation…and I was able, I changed the content note. But I think those kind of conversations can be really fruitful.

As Lydia herself admits during member-checking, her ability to have a dialog with this reader in part relates to her positionality; Lydia is a well-known author within her fandoms, and her readers know that she is white. Structural whiteness in fandom means that she and others who may otherwise be harassed are often able to diffuse the situation, and/or the situation is a one-time experience rather than an ongoing process for them personally. For participants of color, harassment is much more of a part of their entire fandom experience; it is an ongoing process both personally and systemically within fandoms. Racism also differs from disagreeing with how a sexual act is depicted in fic; while they may both stem from interlocking normativities (e.g., Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018), one cannot (or should not) have a “conversation” about a Black person’s right to exist.

Further and as described above, while participants of color develop their own strategies for grappling with harassment, such as ignoring it or leaving a platform, these actions place the burden of ending harassment on vulnerable fans, and do nothing to address systemic whiteness and racism in fandom.

**Moderation**

Harassment, however, is not only between everyday fans on platforms; it is also *moderated* by people who are employed by, or who volunteer for, platforms including Twitter, AO3, and Discord. Politics that inform interactions between people and
platforms are rendered clear by examinations of platform moderation structures, given that such structures are, in essence, systems of internet governance (Schoenebeck et al., 2020). Data from participants who moderate and participants who interact with moderators reveals complex interconnections between people and platform policies, as well as significant tensions within moderation duties: while moderators may themselves uphold systemic oppression baked into platforms, they also experience oppression. As I will explicate below, though moderators volunteer for their positions and therefore do not expect fiscal compensation, the demands that small tech platforms’ volunteer moderation structures place on moderators’ time and emotions disservice moderators and non-moderators alike.

Moderation describes techniques and practices for evaluating content posted online to determine whether it should remain accessible. Moderators may evaluate whether content violates platforms’ policies and/or whether it is unduly offensive (Roberts, 2019). My reading of the literature reveals three types of moderation, described in Table 7.
<table>
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<th>Type</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Moderators</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial content moderation (e.g.,</td>
<td>Internet governance</td>
<td>Combinations of algorithms and humans</td>
<td>Platform-level removal of content that violates</td>
<td>Algorithms on platforms like Facebook or Tumblr classify a</td>
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<td>Haimson et al., 2019a; Roberts, 2019)</td>
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<td>employed by tech companies</td>
<td>terms of service on big tech platforms</td>
<td>Tumblr classify a photograph of a gay couple kissing as pornographic,</td>
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<td>and remove it from the platform</td>
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<td>Local community moderation (e.g.,</td>
<td>Maintaining norms in participatory online spaces</td>
<td>Human volunteers</td>
<td>Community-level removal of content and/or</td>
<td>Moderators of an online fandom community remove fanfiction that</td>
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<td>Fiesler et al., 2017)</td>
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<td>removal or suspension of people’s profiles or</td>
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<td>on small tech platforms</td>
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<td>Dual commercial and community moderation</td>
<td>Intersections between internet governance and</td>
<td>Algorithms, humans employed by tech</td>
<td>Intersections between platform-level and</td>
<td>Members of a fanfiction community hosted on Twitter report someone’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>(e.g., Gillespie, 2018; Schoenebeck et al., 2020)</td>
<td>participatory community norm maintenance</td>
<td>companies, human volunteers</td>
<td>community-level removal/</td>
<td>tweet because they find it offensive, and Twitter’s structure</td>
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<td>suspension of content or people’s accounts on</td>
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<td>Big or small tech platforms</td>
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Table 7. Types of online moderation

Moderation research focuses mainly on commercial content moderation (Seering et al., 2019). Moderation practices under this umbrella serve an inherently regulatory function: they tell us who and what “belong” in a certain space (Fiesler et al., 2017). Such practices are demonstrably inequitable, with particularly negative consequences for marginalized people (Gillespie, 2018; Haimson et al., 2019b; Roberts, 2019). Though moderators are meant to enforce terms of service and social norms in online spaces, these
polices and norms may themselves work against marginalized people (Gillespie, 2018). Further, within commercial content moderation, end-users are not the only people who experience inequities spurred by moderation: human moderators are not free from these kinds of oppressive dynamics, as they perform often-invisible labor for Big Tech platforms (Roberts, 2019).

However, because literature largely focuses on commercial content moderation, our knowledge of moderation and its inequitable dynamics is largely situated in corporate contexts, specifically those that involve Big Tech companies like Facebook. It is difficult to study the intricacies of moderation in these contexts because Big Tech platforms’ innerworkings are notoriously difficult for researchers to penetrate. Moreover, studies tend to focus on content that people post rather than interactions between people in online spaces, meaning that our knowledge of how moderation influences people’s behaviors is limited (Fiesler et al., 2017). Moreover, our understandings of the complexities of human moderation, including how moderators may both experience and exacerbate inequities, is largely limited to workplace contexts with little attention to the myriad volunteer moderators who regulate less corporatized corners of the internet. My dissertation findings begin to shed light on the second and third types of moderation described in Table 7: local community moderation, and dual community and content moderation. Specifically, data from participants and platforms demonstrates how volunteer moderation structures in fandoms may change the stakes of moderation practices without sufficiently addressing structural inequities tied to internet governance, particularly in the context of addressing hate and harassment online.
Participants who currently moderate or who moderated in the past include Austin (a self-designed platform), Lyrical (obscured for confidentiality purposes), Persephone (LJ), Qwuik (AO3), Robosan (Discord), Ronan (Discord), Scatter (AO3 and Discord), Sue (AO3), and Willow (AO3). All of these participants volunteer on their respective platforms, and they describe their moderating duties as avocations as well as occupations. The avocational stance becomes clear when moderators describe why they chose to govern fandoms. For example, Lyrical is “proud to be the keeper of that information,” especially because she knows that fanworks on her platforms may be “landmarks” because they are from “people who died.” Persephone was “proud” to help fandoms “keep going” before the LJ purge, while Qwuik describes moderating as “giving back” to communities that she belongs to. Similarly, Robosan started to moderate out of “need” when previous moderators left her fandom’s Discord board. She continues to moderate because, “I like being able to help people…I can fix things immediately if things need to be fixed.” Willow says that she also likes “helping” and “being involved,” and Ronan enjoys both “having a degree of control over the experience” and “having a direct hand in helping people.” According to Sue, moderation work is “valuable and important.” On the one hand, what these participants describe is rather noble; they volunteer their time in the midst of school and work to contribute to the fannish spaces to which they belong. However, the language that they use to describe their moderation duties (e.g., “help,” “pride,” “need,” “fix,” “value,” etc.) mirrors language that, according to critical scholars, may mask oppressions that occur in a particular context (Ettarh, 2018). We can understand the complexities of moderation, especially in the context of volunteer dual
community and content moderation in fandoms, via Ettarh’s (2018) concept of vocational awe.

Writing about the maintenance of white supremacy in librarianship, Ettarh (2018) coins the term “vocational awe” to describe “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique” (n.p.). According to Ettarh, vocational awe correlates to problems such as burn out, low salary, and the masking of institutional oppression in libraries because, by framing librarianship as some type of calling, it requires “absolute obedience to a prescribed set of rules and behaviors, regardless of any negative effect on librarians’ own lives” (n.p.). Further, per Ettarh, if librarians are framed as “saviors” who can accomplish things that are “bigger than themselves,” disadvantages emerge in multiple domains. Librarians as individuals are put under undue stress and expected to work more than their job descriptions dictate in order to fulfill their “calling.” Moreover, librarians remain undercompensated, and meaning that those with little or no financial safety net and/or with major life responsibilities beyond their profession are put at a disadvantage. Finally, white supremacy is maintained in the library because myriad inequities perpetuated by libraries as institutions are masked, and because white people are more easily digested as “saviors.” Though Ettarh writes about the library profession, like any good theory, these constructs are transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to other contexts. In particular, Ettarh’s ideas align with more general research into “feminized” work, which includes both professional (Williams, 1992) and domestic (Hochschild & Machung, 2012) contexts in which women, and especially women of color, perform work that is
undercompensated and underrecognized (hooks, 2000; Williams, 2013). As a concept, vocational awe extends literature on feminized labor because it provides some explanation as to why women and, more generally, members of marginalized populations continue to perform such work: they feel as if they are giving back or responding to some higher calling, as my participants demonstrate when they explain that moderation makes them feel as if they are “giving back” to their fandoms.

Given the ways that participants speak about moderation duties above, volunteer moderation certainly mirrors many elements of vocational awe. In a fannish context in particular, vocational awe and the inequities it masks are relevant to studies of moderation given that the majority of moderators (and, by extension, policy developers) on platforms like AO3 are white (Pande, 2018). Further, the challenges that moderators face in spaces like AO3 and Discord mirror those that are associated with feminized labor, particularly in relation to time, compensation, and job duties.

Literature to date on moderation notes that human moderators who work for social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter perform a great deal of taxing and often invisible labor to govern platforms (Gillespie, 2018). In addition to the time it takes to review content, moderators must contend with potentially traumatizing texts that include hate speech and images that graphically depict human suffering (Roberts, 2019). While experiences of these moderators should not be diminished, moderators who are employed by social media corporations are compensated (though not nearly enough) for their work. Volunteers who moderate for platforms like AO3 and Discord, on the other hand, are not fiscally compensated for their work (e.g., Postigo, 2016), and my participants perform their moderation duties in addition to holding full-time jobs and/or
attending school. When asked whether moderation feels like work, participants specifically discuss the amount of time it takes to perform moderation duties in light of other obligations. Qwuik says that “the time commitment is a little troublesome,” while Scatter says that he sometimes equates moderating to “going postal”: “it’s like post office workers, they’re just doing the same thing every day without end.” Sue, who serves on multiple AO3 committees, can have trouble “trying to keep track of tons of things and making sure that things happen on a schedule.” Persephone notes that in addition to the time commitment, which she calls “way to much fake internet responsibility”, she found that reviewing content for LJ could become burdensome, especially when she read fic about pairings that she did not like: “Having to read through, like, pages and pages and pages of just, like, updates and fic about it was, like, ‘I don’t give a shit about that.’”

Moreover, AO3’s moderation structure in particular asks volunteers to perform numerous duties. While AO3’s system has been lauded for its thoroughness (see, Fiesler et al., 2016), it demands considerable effort and knowledge from its participants. Qwuik says that AO3’s onboarding is “similar to any sort of job training”; she explains that new moderators are trained on OTW-led Slack channels. Training requires its own time commitment, as well as knowledge of platforms and technologies (e.g., Slack) outside of AO3’s own infrastructure.

Further, moderators in fandom do not have corporate platform infrastructures behind them. While such infrastructures are certainly problematic, they can potentially provide some distance between moderators and people who post harmful content. Volunteer moderators also do not have job benefits such as time off. Willow says that she had to take “a hiatus” from moderating “just because of stress from COVID-19.” While
she was able to take this hiatus, it took extra work to set it up because there is no official “time off” in a volunteer structure. Further, in addition to the temporal and content-related dimensions of volunteer moderator labor, fans, and especially fans of color, who moderate have to deal with some of the same harassment they contend with as everyday fans on the internet. This occurs in part because moderators who work in service of smaller fan community platforms may be less anonymous than those employed by big tech firms (Fiesler et al., 2017). Lyrical, for example, says that the hardest part of moderating is “the people…people are exhausting because people can be very hateful.” Persephone says that when they moderated for LJ, they got “death threats” from an everyday user who was unhappy with their governance decisions. Persephone was fourteen at the time. For this reason, Persephone no longer moderates. After LJ’s purge, she no longer had the time or energy to continue moderation work. Lyrical, on the other hand, continues to moderate because she is proud of her moderation work, and because she worries that no one will take over if she stops. She does not want her fandom to get to a point where fics “aren’t anywhere.” For Persephone, moderation became too toxic to continue. For participants who continue to moderate, the feelings of accomplishment and pride that they gain from maintaining their particular environments outweigh real or potential abuses.

However, moderators may be tasked with major decision-making endeavors that fall outside of their specific purview and training. For example, unlike AO3, Discord does not have an extensive system for training moderators; it is up to members of each board to determine how moderation works. Therefore, on Discord, moderators are often fully responsible for managing content and harassment within their particular
communities. Scatter explains that he and the other moderators on his server are responsible for ensuring that content is posted on the correct board, and for messaging people and asking them to move their content when it is not, from the moderators’ perspective, in the proper place. Scatter himself is responsible for maintaining and modifying the board’s “trigger list”; everyday members ask him to add content to this list that they think requires a trigger warning. Robosan and her fellow moderators created a “special” board on their server specifically for moderators so that they can collectively discuss how to “create an environment of acceptance for people in the fandom.” Around the time of data collection, she had to contend with so-called anti-fans who joined her server and started to post transphobic and ace-phobic slurs and content. After trying to have a discussion with these people, Robosan and the other moderators ultimately decided to ban them from the server to maintain an environment where “we all co-exist.”

But while Discord has a looser structure than AO3, moderators on AO3 also need to make decisions about what counts as a violation of the terms of service. Sue notes that moderators, especially those who volunteer for the Policy & Abuse Committee, must “mediat[e] harassment cases.” Willow notes that while AO3 provides plenty of on-the-job experience and training, she and others who volunteer for the OTW may not “have any experience outside of the OTW of doing that.” Overall, moderators are responsible for a stunning amount of work and policy-related decisions that they rarely receive credit for completing, and that they may not be in a position to complete in the first place.

Though many moderators’ positive experiences can outweigh these negativities, such positive experiences do not discount the inequities that occur in this context. Nor do they account for moderators like Persephone who stop volunteering after facing abuse. As I
note in chapter seven, the dynamics of volunteer moderation on small tech platforms are heuristically rich areas for further investigation.

It is worth noting, however, that to other fans, moderator labor is not wholly invisible. Everyday fans who discuss moderators note that they feel sympathetic towards the amount of work they have to do, especially because this work is largely on a volunteer basis. When asked about moderation, everyday fans share problems they and people they know experience in fandom, but qualify these problems with sympathy towards moderators. For example, when Maria describes her frustration with tagging practices on AO3, she says, “I mean, it’s a volunteer thing and I guess they have lots of stuff to deal with.” Similarly, NIV says, “I respect moderators a lot because they probably have to deal with a lot of shit…I feel it’s a very time-consuming job, but on top of that, it’s a very mentally consuming job…It’s not an easy job and I have a lot of respect for that.” This is itself an extension of vocational awe—fans demonstrate respect for moderators’ jobs without necessarily acknowledging the severe consequences that relate to problems with moderation structures. Thus, while everyday fans express sympathy and some understanding for moderators, this does not mean that they do not experience consequences of insufficient moderation policies. NIV, for example, recounts an experience where his friend was severely harassed by someone on AO3. The harasser made multiple accounts and sent NIV’s friend death threats and other violent messages from each account. NIV says, “Archive of Our Own took their time with that which, again, because they’re volunteers, obviously they don’t necessarily have all the time in the world, but they kind of ended up resolving it.” Here, awe around moderation and what moderators do obscures moderator labor and its intersection with time, as well as
how labor and time may intersect so that extreme harassment cases are not promptly or sufficiently addressed.

This leads us to consider how vocational awe around moderation obscures oppressive governance policies that operate at an institutional level on platforms like AO3 and Discord. Here, I will briefly discuss two problematic aspects of these policies: placing burdens on individual fans who are harassed, and perpetuating carceral logic. Schoenebeck, Haimson, and Nakamura (2020) find that content moderation policies on Big Tech platforms such as Instagram place the burden of identifying, reporting and, at times, addressing harassment on individual users who are being harassed. This is also true on small tech platforms like AO3 and Discord. AO3’s Policy and Abuse team is responsible for addressing harassment cases. Volunteers for Policy and Abuse do not identify harassment cases themselves; instead, they respond to “tickets,” or reports from everyday fans on the platform, that someone is being harassed. Sue explains:

[I]t’s a reporting system, so, we don’t seek out violations. So, you know, we’re not, like, going through AO3 tags, like, looking for people who are breaking the rules. We investigate reports that users make. And so, you know, and we have, like, a ticketing system, basically.

According to participants, reporters tend to be targets of harassment themselves, or friends of targets. Given that we know that targets of harassment tend to be the most marginalized of queer fans (Pande, 2018), this means that individuals who already experience the consequences of systemic inequities both within and outside of fandom have to do the work to stymie harassment. Such work often involves revisiting, recounting, and reliving abuse and associated trauma that may, at times, be ongoing given
that AO3 moderators’ responses tend to be slow. Sue, for example, explains, “sometimes you get harassment cases where it’s already been going on for two weeks.” Placing such burdens on individual users is problematic in part because it reifies and deepens experiences with inequities, and in part because such policies do not address systemic issues on a platform—instead, they frame systemic issues as problems within individuals’ experiences. Critical fan scholars including Rukmini Pande (@RukminiPande, 2020), Stitch (@stichomancery, 2020), and Samiria Nadkarni (@SamiraNadkarni, 2020) called out many of these problems during Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, noting that they, as fans and fan scholars of color, have been trying to draw attention to such problems for years. Unfortunately, both AO3 and Discord responded to such critiques with more individually based policies, adding options such as the ability for individual users to block people rather than addressing structural racism on either platform (see Figures 6 and 7).
• **Providing work creators more control over comments on their works** by offering the ability to freeze specific comment threads or turn off comments entirely. The option to turn off comments will be on the posting and editing forms for individual works and on the Edit Multiple Works page, alongside the existing options to turn off guest comments and/or turn on comment moderation.

• **Improving collection searching and filtering** to make searching collections by fandom return collections that include bookmarks in the specified fandom. This will help users build and locate curated spaces within AO3 using the collections feature.

• **Improving admin tools** behind the scenes to facilitate investigations by our Policy & Abuse team.

• **Reviewing our Terms of Service** and potentially drafting revisions that will allow our Policy & Abuse team to address different types of harassment not covered under the current Terms of Service.

• **Reassessing current warnings** and discussing the possibility of implementing others in the future. This is an extremely complex issue in terms of definition, implementation, and sustainable enforcement. It is not one that will be quickly or easily addressed, but we are discussing all possibilities in detail.

• We will also continue our design work on additional features like **user muting and blocking** and explore other possibilities like saved searches to filter out certain works, tag muting, or taking user-added bookmark tags into account with filtering.

**Figure 6.** AO3’s proposed TOS changes in response to BLM protests, published on June 24, 2020. Note that the first and last bullet focus on individual control, while the bullets in the middle offer few concrete plans and use language such as “potentially” and “discussing all possibilities.”

<table>
<thead>
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<th>4. Block other users when needed</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>We understand that there are times when you might not want to interact with someone. We want everyone to have a positive experience on Discord and have you covered in this case.</strong></td>
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**How blocking works**

- When you block someone on Discord, they will be removed from your friends list (if they were on it) and will no longer be able to send you DMs.
- Any message history you have with the user will remain, but any new messages the user posts in a shared server will be hidden from you, though you can see them if you wish.

<table>
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<th>CONTENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Secure your account</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Set your privacy &amp; safety settings</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Follow safe account practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Block other users when needed</td>
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**Figure 7.** Discord’s policy changes in response to BLM protests, published on July 3, 2020. Note that all four main contents are about individual action (“Secure your account”; “Set your privacy & safety settings”, etc. [emphases added]). Further, blocking is framed as a way to “have a positive experience” on Discord.
“Blocking” as a solution to harassment upholds similarly faulty and individualized logic; it essentially suggests that removal of “bad actors” will stop harassment. Participants who moderate frequently mention blocking and banning as solutions to harassment cases. Lyrical will “just unsubscribe” people, while Robosan “banned” people from her Discord server. As Hoffman (2019) argues, the “bad actor” frame reduces a system’s shortcomings to individual biases; it highlights “narrow causal links and ‘blameworthy’ perpetrators” (p. 905), and therefore elides structural inequities such as racism and transphobia as they manifest on platforms. Further, “blocking” as a solution brings us to the second institutional problem masked by the vocational awe surrounding moderation: carceral logic. Carceral logic comes from the criminal justice system, especially as it is established in the United States. Rather than focus on visibility and reparation for those who are harmed and rehabilitation for those who do harm, carceral logic focuses on punishment (Jackson, 2013). Per Benjamin (2019a), carceral logic not only punishes, but also discriminates; carceral technologies aim to correct “wrong” behaviors, and because of this stance, they often punish marginalized people who do not conform to normative standpoints. What carceral logic does, then, is uphold biopolitics in technoscience (Foucault, 1977, 2007). While it may be meant to punish people for their wrong-doing, it in fact perpetuates long-standing inequities wherein criminal “justice” systems reduce systemic inequities to individualized problems and surveille, target, and attempt to control non-normative behaviors with severe consequences for marginalized people (Benjamin, 2019a). Moderators, then, are comparable to law enforcement officers on platforms; as Scatter says, “you have to kind of be the bad cop.” Such mimicry of law enforcement means that violences of the literal
criminal justice system translate into carceral moderation so that current structures and policies neither instantiate nor enforce justice and collective accountability on platforms (e.g., Schoenebeck et al., 2020).

Briefly, I should note that blocking may not be an entirely inappropriate practice in context, particularly in the short term. For example, if someone is frequently making death threats or doxing people, that person may need to be removed from a platform for others’ safety. Perhaps the most immediate problem arises when blocking becomes a “one-size fits all approach,” which Schoenebeck et al. (2020) find “may fail to support some users while privileging others” (p. 18). Overall, however, given the inequities that intersect with moderation, it is necessary to consider how to construct more just moderation structures that acknowledge and address systemic power dynamics, and that account for the needs of marginalized fans rather than primarily white fans. A major component of constructing such policies will necessarily involve demystifying and eradicating vocational awe that surrounds moderation so that institutional injustices both faced and perpetrated by moderators are rendered visible and addressed. Ettarh’s (2018) assertion that “we need to…stop using vocational awe as the only way to be a librarian” (n.p.) also applies to volunteer moderators, who need to be recognized as human workers who experience and perpetuate privileges and oppressions, and who cannot be divorced from wider structural inequities on the platforms for which they work.

The Cultural

Above, I state that a one-size-fits-all approach is not a sufficient path for moderation policy development. The same can be said for governance structures at all levels—top-down from platforms, bottom-up from volunteer moderators and community members,
and combinations of the two (Schoenebeck et al., 2020). While this finding is small in comparison to other constructs developed from my dissertation data, it is worth noting that perceptions of internet (and all) governance are shaped by cultural context, and the dominance of English-language, US-based platforms in fandom affects how people from different cultural contexts interact with these such platforms. As Morimoto (2019) contends, fandoms are often transnational and therefore comprised of multiple cultural lenses, but said lenses have inequitable influences over how governance, rules, and norms are shaped in fannish spaces.

For example, participants who reside outside of the global north frame platform purges differently than participants who reside inside the global north, and they find US Americans’ focus on antis (no matter how they are defined) to be trivial in comparison to national-level censorship that they face or faced in their home countries. NIV says that it is wrong to ban any type of content at platform or human-moderator levels because of his knowledge of “the experience of censorship in history” in the context of his home country, Venezuela. After describing dictatorships installed by the US in Latin America in the 1960s and ways in which those dictatorships implemented strict censorship policies amidst “the extra-judicial killings and the stealing babies and the torture that they did there,” NIV says:

And it’s horrifying to think that some things might inherently be lost forever because someone just said, ‘You know what? Let’s just burn that because I don’t like it...I don’t want this to exist.’ And to me, that’s inherently dangerous because the moment—I understand that there’s things that make people uncomfortable. I have things that make me uncomfortable. But when I see the attitude towards that,
I think…the only thing that you’re going to do allowing censorship is giving someone the power to eventually censor you.

While NIV’s perspective may sound like the thinly veiled neutrality espoused by the OTW and many of its volunteers, his perspective is not entirely comparable because it is rooted in cultural experiences of violence and terror that the largely white and US-based people who run the OTW and AO3 cannot fathom. In a sense, NIV demonstrates how a different biopolitical context can leave traumatic memories that shape political perceptions in nationally-situated milieus (Puar, 2017). Maria mimics NIV’s perspective when she speaks about her home country, Russia. She says that because Russia has gone through cycles of imperialism and revolutions, artists in particular fear curbing creation because of their experiences with censorship. Per Maria, “we, like, understand what is the real danger, and what is something fictional.” Maria notes that constructions of content bans, antis, moderation policies, and more arise in part “because international internet, English-speaking, is really Americanized.” Vince can tell that major platforms like AO3 are highly American because of their policies—she recognizes that said policies try (and fail) to promote neutrality, which she knows is not possible based on her experiences in Mexico. According to Vince, the smaller Spanish-speaking platforms they frequent are “very political…because we’re in Latin America.” Vince continues:

But in English-speaking fandoms, they really don’t like talking politics. And everyone is like, “Oh, I just don’t want the stress.” Like, okay, this is a really cultural thing. Because it’s your life, at the end of the day. It’s not like you can just ignore all of this. But they see it as a way to ignore what’s going on around them even though it’s not as bad as it is in other countries.
While power dynamics and associated inequities surrounding gender, sexuality, and race are certainly global phenomena (Vidal-Ortiz et al., 2018), ways that these categories are constructed and manifest in fandoms relates to western (and especially US) dominance in major global big tech platforms like Twitter and small tech platforms like AO3. Perspectives from NIV, Vince, and Maria in particular further demonstrate that governance policies on these platforms are also shaped by cultural context, and by nationalized experiences with censorship and other traumas. What “makes sense” in one cultural context may not be legible or sensible in another, and it is necessary to keep cultural differences in mind when considering more just ways of de- and re-constructing governance policies across fannish spaces, especially those that claim to be “global.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine how platforms and participants define what is inappropriate within fanworks and interactions between fans, and I explain how tensions rooted in intersecting instantiations of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism affect ways in which fandoms are formally and informally governed. I provide a brief history of major platform purges in fandom that shape the design of current popular platforms such as AO3 and Discord, and I relate such histories to long-standing and continuing inequities such as racism and transphobia in fandom. I further explain that platforms are not the only governing agents in fandom via discussions of self-governance and identity maintenance, harassment cases and processes, and moderation structures. I discuss how self-regulation is shaped by power dynamics beyond mere context collapse, how faulty constructions of “anti-fans” allows harassment to fester in fannish spaces, and how vocational awe surrounding moderation disadvantages both moderators and everyday
fans. I finish the chapter with a brief discussion of how participants’ cultural experiences shape their perception of governance in fandom.

It is important to note that the issues I discuss here are not limited to fandom, and are relevant topics that, as Persephone says, “We’re seeing…in everything,” are transferable to other contexts. It is therefore crucial that we consider ways in which to critically understand and address these problems. My project may be suited to offer such paths given its queer and theoretically minded stance. Therefore, following this chapter, I present ideas for reorienting the biopolitical normativities I describe throughout this dissertation, as well as future directions based on two ideas raised in this chapter: a) moderation, and b) cultural differences.
As articulated in chapter two and chapter three, the major goal of my dissertation research is to describe assemblages within queer fandoms that account for the myriad structural, intersectional, and biopolitical power dynamics at play in information interactions, especially those that concern information creation. Assemblages are necessarily messy, complex, and transformative between time and in space; per Puar (2017), assemblages are “collections of multiplicities…more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (p. 211-212). If we are truly to move LIS beyond individualized notions of information interactions that lack attention to power, we need to accept that bodies, actions, and affects cannot be neatly arranged into a chart or diagram.

Though I will articulate future directions for theorizing assemblages and conducting empirical research in LIS, these directions will not provide concrete suggestions for how platforms should change, look, and feel. Following contributions from critical internet scholars including Hoffmann (2019) and Benjamin (2019a), I am not interested in improving the “status quo” of internet spaces and cultures so that they somehow become more ethical despite their oppressive foundations and development. I am instead interested in considering how we may deconstruct and, if deemed appropriate by the marginalized communities who are most harmed by these dynamics, reconstruct assemblages in imaginative ways that are not dictated by inherently inequitable expressions of biopower, platform capitalism, carceral logics, and the like. Though current systems may seem inevitable or “the best we can do,” I believe in the potential of the liberatory imagination (Benjamin, 2019a) to help us consider how to construct and
interact with technologies without, to apply Lorde’s (1984) terminology, using the master’s tools to destroy the master’s house.

This final chapter will therefore proceed in the following manner. First, I will summarize my results and discussion, as well as their implications. Second, I will discuss the limitations of my work. I will then provide an overview of what I think research on queer fandoms and, more broadly, studies of assemblages and information creation, should think about in the future.

Summary of Contributions

This dissertation is an interdisciplinatory endeavor that combines perspectives from Library and Information Science, Media Studies, Fan Studies, Gender and Sexuality studies, and Science and Technology studies, among other fields. I largely contest the separation of these areas of inquiry given their overlap and that artificial divides often keep disciplines from speaking to and about each other. I combine these fields primarily so that I can examine structural articulations of power in information creation using queer fandom as a context through which to consider how power operates within assemblages, or fused arrangements of bodies, technologies, institutions, and affects (Puar, 2017). I take a queer approach to understanding assemblages, and this approach is informed by critical stances on institutionalized normativities, rather than more individualized notions of identity and identity politics (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Collins, 2000, 2015; Jagose, 1997; Puar, 2017).

Methodologically, this dissertation is a constructivist grounded theory project (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), meaning that while it is sensitized by myriad contributions from the fields I list above, it is neither designed nor implemented with deductive logic or an informing theoretical framework from which to build on. Instead, I
remained open to developing codes, categories, and constructs during data collection and analysis. Via theoretical sampling (Draucker et al., 2007) over the course of two years, I triangulated data from semi-structured interviews with queer fans, examples of fanfiction texts, and content analyses of platform policies and features to develop three constructs: transforming bodies and feelings; forming communities vs. forming cliques, and governing platforms and people. As I engaged in focused and theoretical coding (see Charmaz, 2014, 138-161) and continued to expand my literature review in light of my findings (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I identified biopower as an additional salient theoretical perspective through which to understand my data given the prevalence of information I possessed about ways in which people’s bodies, feelings, and interactions with technologies were formally and informally regulated in fannish spaces. I therefore also adopted biopower as it has been conceptualized through queer (e.g., Puar, 2017) and feminist (e.g., Schuller, 2018) lenses as another major sensitizing concept for this project.

Briefly, my major findings and their contributions are as follows:

• Creating fanfiction is often framed as a “transformative” experience, meaning that authors transform canonical media into fanfiction texts. However, transformation is multifaceted and complex. Reading and writing fanfiction are embodied and affective experiences for participants who interact with fic texts to depict bodies or express emotions that are in some ways queer and therefore unavailable or inaccessible in other contexts. Despite the potentials of these interactions, texts and accompanying writing practices are typically homonormative and white, and therefore frustrating and disappointing in addition to being cathartic, especially
for participants of color, trans participants, and ace participants. Here, we see biopower at work in terms of how bodies and feelings are depicted and regulated in fic texts. Further, I argue that creating fanfiction is an iteration of creative epistemic labor wherein more marginalized fans must physically and emotionally work harder in order to experience (some of) the positivity that white and cisgender fans easily locate in so-called queer fic. Biopower and associated degrees of work manifest in platform design, and I explain how Archive of Our Own’s (AO3’s) taxonomic and folksonomic features and policies affect how bodies and feelings are constructed and perceived in fanfiction texts. Policies that seem progressive are shaped by and shapers of biopower wherein bodies and feelings are regulated on the platform level in ways that uphold normative white queerness.

• Participants explain that their interactions and relationships with other fans are sometimes more important than their reading and writing practices. Though studies of media fandoms and, more generally, shared online spaces in which people co-exist often frame these arrangements as “communities,” my findings trouble this myopic classification. Participants’ experiences are divided along racialized, gendered, and national lines. Complex insider/outsider dynamics within and across platforms lead my participants to describe fandoms as “cliques” rather than “communities” given rampant racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism in fannish environments. Grouped with platform policies and features, fandoms can be described as biopolitically charged affective attention economies subject to the inequitable dynamics of platform capitalism and
associated constructions of success and popularity. At time of writing, fandoms are systemically exclusionary.

- Governance is a key mechanism through which power and, in particular, biopower is expressed throughout fandoms. I identify three overlapping areas in which intersecting instantiations of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism influence how fans and their creations are formally and informally governed: platform, interactive, and cultural. Platforms for fanworks (e.g., LiveJournal, Fanfiction.net, Tumblr) follow a common trajectory: shifts in governance from fan-run to corporate-run models result in policy changes and “content bans” that expel most queer content and people from previously welcoming spaces. While the effects of these “purges” or “platform deaths” should not be underestimated, their histories tend to erase systemic racism perpetuated by white queer fans long before formal policy shifts were put in place. Current platforms including AO3 and Discord have policies that are informed by past purges, meaning they have certain protections in place for queer fans, especially those who write NSFW fanworks. But because these spaces are informed by a whiteness and colonial history, they do little to address or acknowledge a) racialization’s intersection with constructions of NSFW content, and b) racism expressed within fanworks and by fans themselves. Regarding the latter, inequities in governance also come into play when we consider how fans have to self-govern via maintenance of their online presences, and how fans interact with moderators when they experience hate and harassment. Data from participants and platforms that relate to harassment and moderation shed light on
myriad concerns with ways that fannish platforms are regulated, as well as ways that moderators view and complete their work. Finally, participants from outside the US and, especially, western cultural contexts describe how governance tactics enacted on platforms that are billed as global or transnational are in reality informed by western constructions that privilege English speakers.

Taken as a whole, these findings demonstrate that information creation, the idea that spurred this dissertation project, cannot only be examined as a practice, or even a suite of practices. Information creation is a sociotechnical and ecosystemic phenomenon that involves complex arrangements of bodies, technologies, discourses, and social worlds. Fanfiction as creative output, queer fans as creators, and systems that people design, enact, and inhabit feed into each other so that they cannot be separated. Examining structural articulations of power in “information creation” requires us to acknowledge that the arguably narrow confines of what information science defines as “creation” or even “information interaction” are far from adequate.

My findings perhaps paint a bleak picture of fandom. This picture is grounded in data from my participants and analysis of their fanfiction texts and the platforms they use for online fanwork. The experiences of my participants and the data I examined reveal realities that, to borrow Pande’s (2018) phrase, negate the neat narratives of subversion that surround a great deal of fan studies scholarship. However, it is incorrect to say that fandom is only negative. My data reveals that nothing, including fandom environments, is monolithic. Claiming that fandom is fully lost or irredeemable would do a disservice to my participants, who continue to participate and, largely, believe in fandoms despite the harms they perpetuate. Despite their (many) flaws, fandom environments offer
possibilities for creative expression, friendship, and the discovery of queer content and queer social networks beyond what more normative media and social environments have to offer. Fandom assemblages and the interactions that construct them are not deterministically negative, but they are located within wider inequitable systems that uphold white supremacy, cis/heteronormativity, and colonialist logics. Contributions from my sensitizing concepts to my data analysis rendered inequities clear along intersecting and biopolitical racialized, gendered, and colonized lines. This is why addressing structural articulations of power in fannish and similar contexts will not be solved by steps like policy shifts on AO3 or banning white supremacists on Discord. These steps, while important, are akin to band aids that hardly cover gaping wounds.

Rather than offer these and other small-scale suggestions, I therefore offer less specific, but more radical and potentially transformative, suggestions for theoretical and methodological routes toward structural change in fandoms and similar contexts. These recommendations are informed by my research, including its limitations.

**Limitations to This Work**

Like any endeavor, this dissertation research has its limits. As an interpretivist enterprise, the research I present here is not meant to be generalizable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Its limitations are therefore not rooted in its metrics, such as its sample size or the strict amount of data I collected. I believe that the limitations to this work are rooted in its design. I started with a sample of ten white people, and this realistically means that in spite of my best efforts, I was sensitized by my initial participants’ perspectives. When I collected and analyzed my initial data, I did not account enough for whiteness as a racial construct rather than a norm (see, Floegel, 2020a). I worked towards addressing these
shortcomings with my theoretical sampling and subsequent analysis and use of sensitizing concepts.

This research is also limited because it was primarily conducted and evaluated by white westerners. While I did peer debrief with people of color and people from outside the US and Canada, I will be more intentional about these processes in future work. Intentionality could look like co-authorship and/or compensation for peer debriefing, which is itself laborious.

Certain linguistic constructions and classificatory devices that I use in this work are also subject to critique. Here, I highlight my use of terminology such as “marginalized” and “members of marginalized populations,” as well as my use of “colonialism” and “colonialist logics.” Particularly in light of my queer stance, I am aware that my decision to use “marginalized” is itself a political act that may reinforce structures of domination and Otherness (Ahmed, 2006). Along the same lines, it can be problematic to invoke colonization when one is not literally referring to settler colonialism and violence against Indigenous populations. Per Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonization is unsettling precisely because it centers Indigenous perspectives, and we can therefore critique metaphorical uses of the phrase (e.g., “decolonize syllabi”) that evade injustices against Indigenous peoples while assuaging settler guilt.22 To the best of my ability, I invoke colonialism only during lines of inquiry wherein I specifically discuss westernization and associated inequities.

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22 This is why I am not recommending “decolonization” as a metaphorical path toward justice in fandom and information creation.
Future Directions

With my findings and their limitations in mind, I present three overlapping directions for future research that may lead to more just fandom assemblages: getting angry, embracing failure, and imagining futurities. Note that I do not believe these recommendations are only for academics, nor do I believe that academics should be the only parties engaged with this work. Activists, organizers and, most importantly, marginalized communities and individuals themselves should be part of these processes to ensure that they reflect the needs and desires of people who are most harmed by the inequities I’ve described throughout this dissertation.

Getting Angry

Information science and sociotechnical research tend to exalt positivity, or what Benjamin (2019a) calls “feel-good grammar” (p. 9) that obscures maintenance of the status quo via a misplaced focus on “improving” practices and systems. As I note in my results, nicety and positivity tend to promote and reify whiteness and related notions of white utopia, especially as they apply to projects rooted in design and improvement (S. Low, 2009). Per Benjamin (2019a), feel-good grammar “makes it difficult to recognize, much less intervene in, deadly status quo” (p. 9). To put it simply, being nice and maintaining a positive attitude in the face of the structural oppressions I discuss throughout this dissertation will do nothing to dismantle inequitable power dynamics. Niceness is a weapon of biopower, not a path towards justice; it is part of the “the biopolitical logics of whiteness” (Schuller, 2018, p. 27).

Critical race theorists and especially Black women activists note the power of and necessity for anger in dismantling systemic oppression. I believe that anger is particularly
important to draw upon when studying assemblages given the central role that affects play in groupings of people, technologies, discourses, and institutions (Puar, 2017): if we maintain logics rooted in white affects (i.e., niceness), then we maintain assemblages rooted in white supremacy. Audre Lorde discusses anger’s value in both naming and dismantling oppressions—two types of action needed in information science, studies of fandoms and other creative communities, and the academy writ large. Per Lorde (1984), “anger is loaded with information and energy” because it involves naming practices and experiences such as racism, as well as imagining a different kind of world (p. 127). Anger is therefore necessary when describing structural inequities and developing paths through which to reorient and dismantle them. Further, “anger” is not a simple emotion, nor does its power lie in conventional (i.e., white and colonialist) notions of the term. In Ahmed’s (2004) words:

Anger against injustice can move subjects into a different relation to the world, including a different relation to the object of one’s critique. The emotional struggles against injustice are not about finding good or bad feelings, and then expressing them. Rather, they are about how we are moved by feelings into different relations to the norms that we wish to contest, or the wounds we wish to heal (p. 201).

Ahmed’s words draw attention to a few key points about anger’s utility in research and work that takes place in and beyond the academy. First, the burden of getting angry rests largely on privileged people. Marginalized people and especially Black and trans people are already angry because they directly experience oppression due to their relationship to objects and their place within assemblages. However, their anger
is either dismissed or weaponized against them via harmful constructions of, for example, “angry Black women” (Cohen, 1997; Audre Lorde, 1984). Stitch (2020c) discusses how these racist constructions support and advance antiblackness specifically in fandom:

In fandom, where white women again reign supreme and binaries abound, you see this misogynoir in how Black women across multiple fandoms are constantly treated as violent aggressors out to destroy the utopic happy fun times white women deserve. (n.p.)

It is therefore essential that a) these takes on marginalized anger be reoriented so that anger is legitimated and accepted as a valid road towards critique, and b) privileged and especially white and cisgender people accept that their relationship to objects and place within assemblages are the exception rather than the norm. White and cis people need to both get angry and move out of the way so that their anger supports, rather than overshadows, the experiences and emotions of BIPOC and trans people.

Ahmed’s and Stitch’s writing draw attention to another component of de- and reconstructing assemblages in more just ways: the need to form different relations to both norms and wounds that need healing. I believe that queer theoretical perspectives on failure may help to advance these aims.

Embracing failure and forgetting

Failure is often associated with negative emotions; we do not like to fail. However, the very construction of failure can rest on normative foundations: failure implies that someone or something or some group did not meet the standards to which they were held. Failure can therefore be inevitable for some people and populations whose very existences do not conform to normative standards. To quote Halberstam (2011), “Failing
is something that queers do and have always done exceptionally well” (3). However, queer people are not a monolith, and their failures are not always counter to heteronormative standards. As trans and queer scholars including Stryker (2008) and Puar (2017) note, queers can also fail the ideals of queer theory via homonormativity. Per Puar’s (2017) notions of homonationalism and the “disjuncture of the regulating and regulated queer” (p. xxi), queer people (especially white, Western, and affluent queer people) can participate in regulatory biopolitics as strongly as cisgender and heterosexual people, often with myriad violent consequences for queer people of color.

At risk to my own standing in fannish communities, I propose that we can think about fandoms, including queer fandoms, as failures. Queer fandoms’ failures are not monolithic. On the one hand, fandom assemblages fail because they often contradict normative ideals surrounding gender, sexuality, media production, creativity, and more. Fandoms are not devoid of subversion. But on the other and arguably more important hand, fandom assemblages also fail because despite their subversive potentials, they continue to advance widely white and otherwise-normative agendas. As noted by my participants, fandoms perpetuate serious harms against queer fans of color, obscure exploitative working conditions, and hide behind hollow claims of kindness and inclusivity so that they continue to elide responsibility for any wrongdoing.

As I’ve discussed throughout this dissertation, analysis of data from participants, fic texts, and platforms has revealed that one reason that fandoms fail, especially in terms of platform development and governance, has to do with fandoms’ selective memories: policies on platforms like AO3 are informed by homophobia and not racism, with no attention to ways in which constructions of race and sexuality intersect (e.g., Cohen,
This phenomenon is certainly not exclusive to AO3. However, my analysis of AO3 serves as a case for how policies develop according to norms’ intersections with selective memories, often in ways that are deemed “successful” or, at least, more successful than past iterations of a particular technology or assemblage. In their rumination on queer failures, Halberstam (2011) recommends *forgetting* as a strategy through which to both address harmful failures and move towards failures’ radical potential to “stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend on ‘trying and trying again.’” (p. 3). On forgetfulness as a radical strategy, Halberstam (2011) says:

> For women and queer people, forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary. These operations, generally speaking, take on an air of inevitability and naturalness simply by virtue of being passed from one generation to another…To say that we might want to think about memory and forgetting differently is in fact to ask that we start seeking alternatives to the inevitably and seemingly organic models we use for progress and achievement; it also asks us to notice how and whether change has happened (70-71).

We can therefore consider how forgetfulness may be a more justice-oriented approach to studying assemblages and considering perpetuation and dismantlement of inequities. Forgetfulness allows us to interrogate how memory informs design and development, and to question the very constructions of design and development themselves. And while I do not advocate for fully forgetting the circumstances of platform purges, especially in light of their violences against trans people, I do believe that some level of forgetfulness is
useful. It may help us focus less on sexuality as an isolated component of identity and more on interlocking systems of oppression that include constructions of sexuality within assemblages.

In this manner, forgetfulness provides needed change to perceptions of “systems design” and “improvement” in academic and other technoscientific endeavors. Essentially, we are not looking for “success” here, in part because success is tied to the narrow and normative confines of innovation that drive people to spend their time building racist and transphobic machines rather than actually learning about racism and transphobia. A link exists between anger, failure, and forgetfulness, and that link is imagination, or the necessity to think outside of current binary, disjointed, oppressive, and normative systems.

*Imagining Futurities*

With anger, failure, and forgetting in mind, I believe that imaginative futurities are an effective means through which to dismantle and address the systemic sociotechnical inequities I discuss throughout this dissertation. Futurities move beyond conceptions of the future that maintain or seek to merely improve the status quo. They include speculative “fantastical wonders” (Puar, 2017, p. 222), or imaginaries that “imagine and creative alternatives to the techno quo – business as usual when it comes to technoscience” (Benjamin, 2019a, p. 12, emphasis in original). Importantly, imaginaries and futurities are rooted in both “a black racial tradition that has continuously developed insights and strategies grounded in justice” (Benjamin, 2019a, p. 12) as well as queer orientations that “affectively [produce] new normativities and exceptionalisms” (Puar, 2017, p. 222). Futurities’ roots in Black (especially Black feminist) and queer
perspectives distinguish them from other forms of imaginaries. It is crucial to note that some forms of imaginaries may be used as tools of oppression. Schuller (2018), for example, describes a “biopolitical imagination” (p. 15) that maintains binary classification schemes and other white capitalist logics. As opposed to queer and anti-racist imaginaries, constructions such as the biopolitical imagination use current inequitable power dynamics to maintain long-standing unjust systems. They are, in a sense, not imaginative at all. The imaginaries I refer to here are explicitly queer and anti-racist endeavors that take a liberatory approach to recrafting social worlds, institutions, and political formations (Benjamin, 2019a; Halberstam, 2011). Per Benjamin (2016):

[N]ovel fictions that reimagine and rework all that is taken for granted about the current structure of the social world—alternatives to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—are urgently needed. Fictions, in this sense, are not falsehoods, but refashionings… elaborating new values and testing different possibilities for creating more just and equitable societies. Such fictions are not meant to convince others of what is, but to expand our own visions of what is possible (n.p., emphasis in original).

Imaginaries therefore have great potential to change how we think about, construct, and study sociotechnical phenomena. Puar (2017) argues that futurities informed by queer and critical race theories provide a method through which to think about assemblages as groupings and fusions of objects. Via imaginative futurities, we may be able to de- and reclassify actors within assemblages, and we may be able to change the power dynamics that both inform and emerge from arrangements of bodies, feelings, technologies, and institutions.
However, it is important that academics, especially white and cisgender academics, consider who the “we” refers to in conversations about futurities. This is particularly true when we think about futurities as a method through which to conceptualize and enact more just systems. A team of white academics with an IRB simply do not have the experience or ability to deploy queer anti-racist strategies on their own, particularly given the institutional constraints of universities and their tendency to use diversity and justice as appropriative marketing strategies rather than actual initiatives for institutional change (see, Ahmed, 2012). Further, despite academia’s apparent desire to claim that interesting and radical methods were born within university walls, imaginative futurities are not originally academic endeavors. They are based on long-standing Black and queer storytelling traditions used to great effect by, for example, fiction authors like Octavia Butler who belong to the marginalized communities from which imaginaries develop (Benjamin, 2016, 2019a).

With this in mind, if we are to consider futurities and their potential to lead us to more just assemblages, we need to consider the power dynamics that are present in academics’ appropriation of sociotechnical imaginaries. Methodological means for advancing justice must themselves center equity. I believe that design justice provides a useful lens through which to consider how academics may work with members of marginalized populations to consider futurities. Design justice is a community led perspective wherein members of marginalized populations, rather than academics themselves, lead design projects that are both ecological (i.e., holistically focused on assemblages rather than individual actors; Fidel, 2012; Puar, 2017) and liberatory (Costanza-Chock, 2018, 2020). Design justice is both a theory and a suite of flexible
methodological practices that, in its best form, asks academics and other “designers” to use their resources (e.g., funding, institutional support) to funnel assets to marginalized communities. Members of marginalized communities then use those resources to design projects that are rooted in said communities’ needs, wants, and lived experiences (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Design justice defines marginalization based on the matrix of domination, and therefore recognizes intersecting structural oppressions and ways in which they stall liberation. Further, by putting marginalized communities in charge, design justice initiatives are meant to avoid universalized technological design (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Design justice centers emergent design rather than projects that begin with a clear process and end-goal; here, designers and academics are facilitators while the communities in question are developers and experts (Design Justice Network Principles, 2018).

Imaginaries may be a part of design justice. Members of marginalized communities can craft and direct their own speculative fictions in service of imagining best (and, in some cases, worst; e.g., Benjamin, 2016) case scenarios for technologies, assemblages, and sociotechnical worlds relevant to the liberation of their respective groups. Moreover, imaginaries may address one of the largest shortcomings of design justice: its focus on building systems. At time of writing, the principles of the Design Justice Network (Design Justice Network Principles, 2018) suggest a strong emphasis on building technologies as a way to “sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from our exploitative and oppressive systems” (n.p.). The Design Justice Network centers the “design process,” “design solutions,” and “outcomes,” all of which suggest building or system modifications of some sort. However, tweaking
existing oppressive systems or building new systems in their image are not the keys to liberation, especially within marginalized communities who have already been harmed by technologies. Liberatory goals may best be met by dismantling systems with the expertise of community members who are most harmed by these systems, and then reconstructing or rebuilding alternatives where needed and desired. Imaginative futurities leave room for eliminating systems in addition to or instead of constructing them (Benjamin, 2019a). At the same time, futurities themselves may seem fuzzy, especially as a method, and design justice provides more concrete principles along which academics may support communities in their speculative endeavors. The two therefore complement each other.

Based on my dissertation findings, I argue that futurities and imaginative affects like anger and failure may be used to consider the inequities discussed throughout this dissertation. While my understanding of these dynamics is shaped by my focus on fandom, fannish contexts are easily transferable to other creative assemblages, information interactions, and online environments. The following areas may benefit from future research focused on queer, feminist, and anti-racist approaches to studying assemblages and information interactions:

- Notions of freedom of expression and censorship in online and offline contexts, especially as they relate to intersectional community norms and dynamics.
- Development of classification schemes including folksonomies that are informed by group dynamics and histories.
- The politics of platform policies and ways in which they are enforced.
• Content and community moderation structures and tactics, especially in
  understudied contexts including small tech social media environments, volunteer
  moderation systems and the intersection of moderation with carceral logics.

• Overlapping streams of work including creative, epistemic, and emotional labor
  involved in contexts that are often cast as “fun,” “leisurely,” or “hobby-based.”

Overall, these endeavors should focus on de- and re-constructing assemblages so that
marginalized populations who are most harmed by systemic whiteness,
cis/heteronormativity, and capitalistic logics that inform the above phenomena (as well as
research into these phenomena) can be identified and reoriented in imaginative ways that
challenge the status or “techno” quo.

Conclusion

This dissertation is itself an assemblage, subject to my own experiences, interpretations,
and limitations, as well as those imposed by myriad institutions including the university
in which it is produced. My largest hope is that I did my participants justice, especially in
terms of communicating their experiences with care and nuance. I say this knowing that
this dissertation will not, and cannot, ever be “complete” in terms of describing fandom
assemblages, information interactions, and the power dynamics therein.

However, my grounded analysis of three data sources—semi-structured
interviews with queer fanfiction writers, content analysis of their fanfiction texts, and
content analysis of platform polices and features—developed sophisticated theoretical
contributions that explicate how structural power dynamics operate within queer fandom
assemblages. With my data, I demonstrate how institutionalized intersections between
race, gender, sexuality, and nation complicate monolithic conceptions of queerness and
inclusion within fandom environments. Specifically, I discuss ways that people’s creative practices and platforms’ taxonomic systems intersect to produce embodied and affective inequities within fanfiction texts. I also explicate how longitudinal enactments of racism, trans/homophobia, and colonialism structure who can and cannot experience queer community arrangements within fandoms. I relate these so-called community dynamics to instantiations of an attention economy across platforms that participants use for their fanworks. Finally, I explore how fandoms’ past experiences with platform purges affect ways that platforms are governed and, in particular, how policies and fans themselves define what is inappropriate or NSFW within fanworks. I demonstrate that governance on platform, interpersonal, and cultural levels affect how overlapping inequities are maintained within seemingly queer spaces. In tandem, my findings demonstrate that online inequities are extensions of longstanding global oppressions, meaning that they will not be eradicated with small technical fixes. Queer fandoms serve as contexts through which we can consider more radical, liberatory, and structural interventions into inequitable assemblages.

My dissertation therefore contributes to our understanding of power in information practices, fannish contexts, and online communities. The flexible and interpretive nature of constructivist grounded theory allowed me a great deal of freedom in data collection and analysis, which I attempted to approach with as much consideration and care as possible. The three main constructs that developed from this research—transforming bodies and feelings; forming communities vs. forming cliques; and governing platforms and people—draw on queer theory, intersectional theory, and assemblage theory to discuss constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and nation in the
context of sociotechnical assemblages and associated inequities. Throughout this
dissertation, I extend the significance of myriad perspectives including embodied and
affective information interactions, creative and epistemic labor, intersectional approaches
to internet studies, platform capitalism, vocational awe, and more. The future directions I
pose may further advance my findings and, perhaps within my own queer imaginary,
advance the deconstruction of unjust and reconstruction of new systems, which may not
look like current assemblages at all.
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APPENDIX A: Glossary

**Asexual spectrum:** A spectrum of sexualities that encompasses people who do not experience one or more of the following: sexual attraction, sexual drive, romantic attraction, or attraction before personally knowing someone (i.e., demisexual people) (Pasquier, 2018).

**Beta:** Practices wherein people read others’ fanfiction before it is published in order to flag grammatical errors, typos, insensitive or inaccurate depictions of certain people or groups, etc. (Beta - Fanlore, 2020).

**BIPOC:** Black, indigenous, and people of color; an acronym that may be critiqued for collapsing multiple and divergent experiences and socially constructed identities into one group (The BIPOC Project, 2021).

**Cisgender/cis:** Describes individuals who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (What Do Transgender and Cisgender Mean?, 2021).

**Cisnormativity:** The assumption that all people are cisgender (i.e., they identify with the gender they were assigned at birth). This assumption structures social interactions and institutions so that they erase or otherwise disadvantage people who are not cisgender (Russo, 2014).

**Colorism:** Prejudice or discrimination based on skin color (Greenidge, 2019).

**Deadname:** The name a transgender person is given at birth (“Definition of Deadname,” 2021).

**Epistemic authority:** In a feminist context, the standpoint of marginalized populations which makes them experts on their own experiences, especially those that concern normativities and associated oppressions (Janack, 1997).

**Fannish:** Encompassing of people, spaces, environments, creative outputs (e.g., fanfiction, fanart) and other ephemera related to fandoms (Fannish Community - Fanlore, 2020).

**Fanfiction:** Fictional texts written by fans; works are often based on canon media universes, but can extend to any number of entities (e.g., sports teams, locations, etc.) (Jenkins, 2013).

**Femslash:** Fanfiction that depicts “f/f” pairings, or relationships between two or more women (Rosenberg, 2007).

**Gender:** A socially constructed social and legal status; inclusive of gender roles, or sets of culturally-based expectations from society about behaviors, characteristics, and thoughts, often based on the gender someone is assigned at birth; inclusive of gender.
identity, or how someone identifies themselves and how they may express that identity (Sex and Gender Identity, 2021).

**Gender-bend:** Narrative practices wherein a character’s canon gender is changed (Genderfuck - Fanlore, 2017).

**Heteronormativity:** The assumption that all people are heterosexual. This assumption structures social interactions and institutions so that they erase or otherwise disadvantage people who are not heterosexual (Rich, 1980).

**Homonormative:** Phenomena wherein individuals who identify along spectrums of queer identities assimilate to cis and heteronormative structures, often in terms of their normative family structures, political orientations, affluence, etc., so that they uphold systems that are designed to oppress queer people (Stryker, 2008).

**Non-binary:** Describes individuals whose genders are outside of the Western gender binary of man and woman (Susan Stryker, 2009).

**Non-con:** non-consensual sex in fanworks (Non-Con - Fanlore, 2020).

**Open Doors Committee:** The group of Archive of Our Own (AO3) volunteers that is responsible for importing defunct archives of fanwork into AO3, with permission from defunct archives’ original moderators (Open Doors, n.d.).

**Policy & Abuse Committee:** The group of Archive of Our Own (AO3) volunteers that is responsible for addressing reported cases of people’s violations of AO3’s terms of service (Committees – Organization for Transformative Works, n.d.).

**Postcolonial:** Critical study of the cultural legacy of imperialism, focused on exploitation of indigenous people and their environments (Ivison, 2020).

**Purge:** In the context of fandom, processes wherein works and creators’ accounts are systematically (and sometimes automatically) removed en masse from a platform (see Fiesler & Dym, 2020).

**Queer or slash fanfiction:** Fan-authored fictional texts that reorient characters, settings, and other narrative elements from original, or canon, cis- and heteronormative media so they are queer. Though “slash” initially referred to “m/m” pairings, or fanfiction that depicts two men in a romantic or sexual relationship, “slash” may also refer to types of fanfiction that represent a spectrum of queer identities. Alternatively, fans may use “queer” rather than slash to define their fanfiction in order to be more inclusive (Jenkins, 2013).

**Racism:** the marginalization and systemic oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people (Anti-Defamation League, 2020).
**Ship:** An abbreviation for “relationship” that refers to a fans’ desire for two or more characters to be in a relationship with each other (e.g., “I ship Angel and Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” (*Shipping - Fanlore*, 2020).

**Tag wrangle:** a practice wherein AO3 volunteers group and organize user-generated tags for fanworks published to the platform (*AO3 Tag Wrangling - Fanlore*, 2020).

**TERF:** Trans exclusionary radical feminist; a person (who should perhaps not be called a feminist) who denies trans people their existences; a transphobic person (*Burns*, 2019).

**Transgender/trans:** Describes individuals who are not cisgender (i.e., who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth). Transgender may be used as an umbrella term to include men, women, and non-binary people who are not cisgender (*Susan Stryker*, 2009).
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

Opening

Hi, thanks so much for talking with me today. My name is Diana and this interview will inform my dissertation research. I’m a queer person—I identify as gay, queer, and non-binary, and I use they/them pronouns—and I’m a fan. What questions do you have for me before we get started?

[If consent form does not come up] I just want to make sure that you are okay with everything that was outlined in the consent form. What questions do you have about it?

Okay, let’s get going.

We’re going to start with some broad questions:

1. In your own words, what does it mean to be queer?

2. In your own words, what does it mean to be a fan?

3. Do you see any connections between queerness and fandom?
   a. If yes: Tell me about those connections. Why do you think they exist?
   b. If no: Tell me why you don’t see any connections.

Let’s talk about fanfiction now. I’m going to use the term “slash” when I ask these questions, but I’m not only talking about m/m pairings. I am talking about queering cisnormative and/or heteronormative storylines more broadly. [Explain as needed]

1. Tell me about how you first discovered slash.

2. Tell me about the fanfiction you like to read.
   a. Probe, if not mentioned: Are there any conditions under which you are more likely to read fic?

3. What do you get out of reading slash? What does it do for you?

4. Is there anything you don’t like about reading slash?
   a. Probe, if not mentioned: Have you noticed anything missing in fic? Does anything about fic bother you?
      i. If not mentioned: What do you think of how sexuality is represented in fic?
1. …how gender is represented in fic?
2. …how race is represented in fic?
3. …anything else?
4. Why do you think [gender, sexuality, race] are represented like this?

5. Tell me about how reading slash relates to your queerness.
   a. Probe, if not mentioned: Is it related to your identity development?

6. How would you compare slash to canon material?
   a. Probe, if they mention differences: Why do you think these differences exist?

Next, we’re going to talk about writing slash.

1. Tell me about when and how you started to write fanfiction.

2. Tell me about why you write fanfiction.

3. What do you get out of writing slash? What does it do for you?

4. Tell me about what you write [use specific examples if they sent fic].
   a. Probe: How do you choose your fandoms?
   b. Probe: How do you choose your content or narratives?
   c. Probe, if they shared fic: Why did you share these specific pieces with me?
   d. Probe: How does queerness factor into your narratives?
      i. Probe: Are there particular conditions under which queerness is more or less important in your writing?
   e. Probe: Other than gender and sexuality, do you think about other aspects of identity or experience when you write?
      i. If yes: When and why do you think about these things?

5. How does your content compare to canon material [use specific examples if they sent fic]?

6. How do you think slash compares to other types of fanfiction, like het or gen?
   a. Probe: Why do you think these differences exist?

7. Who do you write your fanfiction for?
   a. Probe: Why do your write for [this audience]?
b. Probe: Do you want [this audience] to take anything in particular away from your work?

8. Do you share and/or publish your fanfiction?
   a. If yes, where or with who, and why?
   b. If no, why?
      i. Did you ever share your fic in the past? Why did you stop?

9. Do you interact with your readers at all?
   a. Probe, if yes: Tell me about these interactions. Are there any times when they are especially positive or especially negative? Are you comfortable sharing examples?
   b. Probe, if no: Why? Was there any point at which you interacted with readers?
      i. If yes: Why did you stop?

10. Do you ever collaborate with others when you write?
    a. If yes: With whom do you collaborate, and why?
       i. Probe: How is collaborating different than solo-authoring work?
    b. If no: Why not? Did you ever collaborate in the past? Why did you stop?

11. Do you feel like you’re part of a fanfiction community?
    a. If yes, why?
    b. If no, why not?

12. If you’re comfortable answering, have you experienced nor noticed any homophobia in fic spaces?
    a. …any transphobia in fic spaces?
    b. …any racism in fic spaces?
    c. …any other forms of discrimination, prejudice, or injustice?
       i. If yes: When have you experienced or noticed this? If you’re comfortable, can you tell me more about it?
       ii. If no: Do you think these exist in fic spaces? Why or why not?

13. Is there anything that you find difficult about writing fanfiction?
    a. Does fanfiction ever feel like work to you?
       i. If yes: Under what conditions does fic feel like work to you?
       ii. If no: Why not?

14. How do you feel about monetizing fanfiction?
    a. Are there any conditions under which you think monetizing is okay, or not okay?
Now, I want us to talk about online fanfiction platforms.

1. Do you interact with any online platforms for fanfiction?
   a. Probe, if yes: Which platforms?
   b. Probe, if no: Why don’t you use any platforms?
   c. If not AO3: Why don’t you use AO3?

2. Are there platforms that you used in the past that you no longer use?
   a. If yes: Why did you stop using these platforms?
   b. If yes: Did you feel a sense of loss when you stopped using these platforms?
   c. If yes: Have you been able to find content and people that you used to interact with on these platforms elsewhere?

3. [If yes] Tell me about your experiences with fandom platforms you use now and you used in the past.
   a. Probe: Why do/did you use these platforms over others?
   b. Probe: Do/did your read fic on these platforms?
   c. Probe: Do/did you post your fic on these platforms?
      i. Probe, if yes: How do you make decisions about posting fic?
         [Tags, warnings, chapters, author profiles; specific examples from fic]
      ii. [If they sent fic]: Can you take me through your tagging process for your fic?

4. Other fans shared a lot of feelings with me about classification on these platforms, like tagging systems. What do you think of how works are classified on [insert platform(s)]?

5. [If yes] Do you interact with other fans on online platforms?
   a. Probe, if yes: Tell me about these interactions.
   b. Probe, if no: Why?
   c. Probe, if not mentioned: Do you notice that different platforms have different “cultures”? For example, do people act differently on [x platform that you mentioned] as opposed to [y platform that you mentioned]?

6. Did you or do you play a role in designing any online fanfic platforms?
   a. Probe, if yes: Tell me about designing the platform. What were you thinking about when you designed it?
b. Probe, if no: What would you tell platform designers, if you could? What should they think about?

7. Did you or do you moderate on any of these platforms?
   a. Probe, if yes: Tell me about moderating.
      i. When, why, and how did you decide to moderate?
      ii. What do you like about moderating?
      iii. What do you dislike about moderating?
      iv. What is challenging about moderating?
      v. Do you like moderating for [x] platform specifically? Does the platform matter? Why or why not?
      vi. What motivates you to keep moderating? OR Why did you stop moderating?
      vii. Does moderating ever feel like work to you?
           1. If yes, under what conditions?
           2. If no, why?

8. Thinking about the platforms that you use and other platforms that you know about…
   a. What good do you think these platforms can do? Under what conditions could they do good? Can you give me examples?
   b. What harms do you think these platforms can do? Under what conditions could they do harm? Can you give me examples?

**Okay, we’re almost done.**

1. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

2. Is there anything I didn’t ask that I should have asked?

3. When I report findings from my dissertation, I’ll keep your identify confidential. Is there a pseudonym you would prefer I use? And what pronouns should I use to refer to you?
APPENDIX C: Pre-screening survey

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH
PRE-SCREENING INFORMATION

The following pre-screening form was created using Google Forms. Participant data will be automatically entered into a Google Spreadsheet, which the PI will use to determine individuals' eligibility to participate in the study. Below are screenshots of what the pre-screening questionnaire will look like. Here is a link to the form: https://goo.gl/forms/upQcfYlc4OESdNLe2

Prescreening Questionnaire for "Investigating Structural Articulations of Power Through a Constructivist Grounded Theory Study of Queer-Created Slash Fanfiction"

Hi! My name is Diana Floegel and I'm a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University. My pronouns are they/them/theirs. I'm interested in learning more about your experiences with reading and creating slash or queer fanfiction. A lot of research that looks at fanfiction either focuses on cisgender and heterosexual authors, or it idealizes fanfiction creation and the platforms on which creation happens. I'm interested in hearing from queer or LGBTQ+ people who create slash or queer fanfiction, and I'm interested in taking a more critical approach to fanwork and spaces.

I'm conducting interviews about this topic. Interviews may take place on the phone, via a video conferencing service like Skype, or in person. If you're interested in participating in an interview, please complete the following pre-screening survey. The survey also asks if you are willing to share two pieces of your own slash or queer fanfiction with me; I'd love to read and chat about your work! However, you are not disqualified from participating if you don't want to share your writing with me. I will contact you via email only if you are selected to participate. Filling out this survey does not mean you have to participate in any interview if you change your mind for any reason. If you are not selected for an interview, I will destroy all of the data you leave in this survey.

If you are selected for an interview, it will last for about an hour and I will send you $35 to thank you for your insights.

Thank you! If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at diana.floegel@rutgers.edu.
Name and Email

Description (optional)

Full name *

Short answer text

Email address *

Short answer text

Demographic Information

For this research project, I am requesting demographic information. Due to the make-up of certain populations, the combined answers to these questions may make a person identifiable. I will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.

What is your gender?

Short answer text

What are your pronouns?

Short answer text
What is your sexual orientation?

Short answer text

What is your race/ethnicity?

Short answer text

What is your age?

- 18-25
- 26-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

What country and state/region do you currently live in?

Short answer text
Fanfiction

Description (optional)

Have you written slash or queer fanfiction within the past year? *

- Yes
- No

Have you read slash or queer fanfiction within the past year? *

- Yes
- No

Do you serve as a moderator for any online fanfiction platforms (e.g., Archive of Our Own, fanfiction.net, or another)?

- Yes
- No
- I used to, but I do not currently moderate

Have you played any role in designing an online fanfiction platform (e.g., Archive of Our Own, fanfiction.net, or another)?

- Yes
- No
In addition to interviewing people, I’m also reading examples of fanfiction. Would you be willing to share two fics you wrote before our interview? We may chat about these texts during the interview. If you say yes, I will email you to ask for the fics when we schedule our chat. However, you do NOT have to say yes to participate in an interview.

- Yes
- No