

Out of the Cupboards and Into the Streets!
Harry Potter Genderfuck Fan Fiction and Fan Activism

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ABSTRACT

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Henry Jenkins' definition of fan activism emphasizes the tactics fans use to effect widespread political and social change at a grassroots level. Yet fan activism is also more of a loose or fluid concept that includes active *and* implicit manifestations of resistance. Surveying two different genres of Harry Potter genderfuck fan fiction - genderswap and transfic - helps illustrate the complex ways in which fans enact their political agency. The work that fans do in online communities, from writing contemporary academic theories into fan fiction to intervening in popular fan tropes that present problematic views of gender, opens up queer pedagogical spaces that extend beyond fandom. The transfic genre (as illustrated by the fic *The Relative Truth*) reflects a more nuanced and progressive space than the traditional genderswap genre (as illustrated by the fic *Being Liquid*), functioning for fandom as an internal critique that allows for the proliferation of a full-range of queer and transgender experiences in fan fiction. These fan interventions transpose Jenkins' concept of "textual poaching" from appropriating not only mainstream texts, but texts within fandom itself. Ultimately these online spaces function as popular and accessible alternatives to the pedagogical spaces opened up by academic discourse.

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Introduction – Genderfucking the Online Hogwarts

“Dumbledore is gay... and that’s okay!” This song lyric by fan wizard-rocker Justin Finch-Fletchley gleefully pokes fun at J. K. Rowling’s decision to “out” Professor Dumbledore as gay during a 2007 interview. Although several conservative critics chastised Rowling’s revelation as “distracting,” “disappointing,” and utter “nonsense,”¹ the popularity of Justin Fitch-Fletchley’s *wrock* (“wizard-rock”) song suggests otherwise – that Harry Potter fans were largely accepting of Dumbledore’s new queer identity. Since the overwhelming majority of characters in popular texts are presented as compulsively heterosexual, the outing of Dumbledore infused a bit of queerness into a vastly heteronormative culture.² Although in recent years there seems to have been an increase in the number of LGBT-identified figures in popular culture – from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s Willow and Tara to gay cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* to Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry* – when it comes to locating a more sustained proliferation of LGBT characters there is no place more abundantly queer than online fandom.

Fandom is a community-driven subculture that unites fans through a shared interest in certain popular texts, including novels, films, TV shows, comics, video games, etc. This

¹ Edward Rothstein, “Is Dumbledore Gay? Depends on Definitions of ‘Is’ and ‘Gay,’” *New York Times*, October 29, 2007, accessed May 21, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/29/arts/29conn.html?_r=3&; *Daily Mail*, “JK Rowling Under Fire from US Bible Belt After Outing Dumbledore as Gay,” October 23, 2007, accessed May 21, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-490261/JK-Rowling-US-Bible-belt-outing-Dumbledore-gay.html>; John Mark Reynolds, “Dumbledore is not Gay: Taking Stories More Seriously than the Author,” *The Scriptorium*, October 23, 2007, accessed May 21, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071025042354/http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2007/10/23/dumbledore-is-not-gay-taking-stories-more-seriously-than-the-author/>.

² *Heterosexual* refers to an orientation in which one is only romantically or sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex (in a two gender system). *Heteronormative* refers to a system in which both heterosexuality and cisgender are upheld as the most natural sexual orientation and gender identity, respectively. It is closely linked to heterosexuality, gender discrimination, and homophobia.

organized community is predicated on the production and circulation of fan-created texts that are alternative to the works published by mainstream media. In other words, rather than being passive consumers of popular culture, fans are active producers of new content inspired by their favourite works. According to fan scholars Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse in their anthology *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006), each fan-created text produced by the collective “hive mind” of fandom can be best described as a *work in progress* – an open text that “invites responses, permits shared authorship, and enjoins a sense of community.”³ These community-driven works include fan art, videos (“vids”), memes, songs, and, of course, fan fiction.

Fan fiction is a broad term for a practice in which fans of a popular text, such as J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, write their own stories using characters or settings that have already been established in the original source material. The term also refers to individual fan fictions (or “fics”). By writing and reading fan fiction, fans can pick up where an original author left *off* – continuing the story – or on what they left *out* – filling in the gaps. In its modern iteration, fan fiction is published and circulated online where other fans can read and provide feedback to the author(s) in an open forum. Online fan fiction communities encourage these productive dialogues between producers and consumers: even after the story is published online, “the work in progress among the creators shifts to the work in progress among the readers, and a whole new level of discourse begins that provides engagement and both positive and negative

³ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 6.

feedback.”⁴ The mode of circulation of these online texts facilitates rapid interactions and exchanges between fans: fics are published on a variety of platforms (*LiveJournal*, *Dreamwidth*, *Tumblr*, etc.) where comment sections and forums allow readers to instantly engage with their favourite authors. As we will see, the uniquely collaborative and participatory quality of these online spaces allows fans to propose (and then implement) positive and productive changes in their own communities.

Fan fiction is not only a more participatory model of textuality, it can function as a site of resistance to the mainstream. Preeminent fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins has described fandom as an “alternative social community”⁵ that functions as “a site of ideological and cultural resistance to the heteronormative and patriarchal values often shaping mass media.”⁶ He argues that fandom is *always* at odds with mainstream media because it occupies a marginalized position that exists at the “borderlands” between mass culture and individual experience.⁷ The idea that fans “operate from a position of cultural marginality” is what, according to Jenkins, gives them the agency to “poach” well-known texts for their own purposes.⁸ Although Jenkins has always maintained that participation in fandom automatically demands a certain level of

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 254.

⁶ Henry Jenkins, “‘Cultural Acupuncture:’ Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012): [1.9], accessed June 30, 2013, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/305/259>.

⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 254.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

active engagement, his contemporary work on *fan activism* more concretely explores the political potential of fandom.

Fan activism refers to a process in which fan involvement in the participatory culture of fandom develops into involvement in fan-led political activities. In a 2012 article entitled “‘Cultural Acupuncture:’ Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance,” Henry Jenkins defines fan activism as

forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture.⁹

It is Jenkins’ definition of fan activism that concerns me in this thesis and, more specifically, how it applies to queer fan activities. Jenkins’ concept of fan activism bridges the gap between fandom and political action by foregrounding campaign-based grassroots movements taken up by fans to effect social or political change.¹⁰ Prior to this article, the majority of academic discourse on fan activism was centred around the idea that fans are “accidental activists,” in other words, formerly passive consumers that only stumble upon or become invested in political activism through a catalyst event such as a television network threatening to cancel their

⁹ Jenkins, “Cultural Acupuncture,” [1.8].

¹⁰ A notorious example of one of these fan-led movements includes what Jenkins’ has coined “Avatar Activism,” when five activists (of Palestinian, Israeli, and international origin) painted themselves blue like the indigenous Na’vi in James Cameron’s *Avatar* and marched through the occupied village of Bil’in in protest of the Israeli military. For more information see Jenkins’ article: <http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar>.

favourite show.¹¹ Conversely, Jenkins' contemporary research on fan activism illustrates the specific ways in which fan-based political campaigns have effected political change. For instance, Jenkins would consider the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit fan-led organization founded in 2005, a vehicle for fan activism because it uses elements from J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series to propel a variety of successful grassroots campaigns.¹²

As mentioned, Jenkins has always extolled the political potential of fandom, suggesting it functions as "a site of ideological and cultural resistance" to mainstream media. However, his more recent work in "Cultural Acupuncture" indicates that he favours a more rigid definition of fan activism. While, on the surface, he assures us that the concept of fandom as a site of ideological resistance "remains highly valuable," he ultimately dismisses this more subtle approach for one that "pushes beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance."¹³ Although Jenkins' work on fan-led political campaigns marks an invaluable contribution to contemporary fan studies, I take issue with his restrictive definition of fan activism. In my view, Jenkins' desire to move beyond "ideological" or "abstract" forms of resistance overvalues what he deems more measurable tactics (the so-called "specific ways that fan culture has affected debates around law

¹¹ Melissa Scardaville, "Accidental Activists: Fan Activism in the Soap Opera Community," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 900, accessed May 9, 2013, <http://0-search.proquest.com.mercury.concordia.ca/docview/214767042?accountid=10246>.

¹² The Harry Potter Alliance's current "Not In Harry's Name" campaign against Warner Bros.' unethical sourcing of cocoa for their Harry Potter chocolate products is an example of one of these grassroots movements. For the Harry Potter Alliance's Mission Statement see: <http://thehpalliance.org/what-we-do/>.

¹³ Jenkins, "Cultural Acupuncture," [1.9].

and public policy”)¹⁴ and dismisses more subtle acts of resistance.¹⁵ I view fan activism as more of a loose or fluid concept that may include either active *or* implicit manifestations of resistance.

Queer fan fiction (more commonly referred to in fandom as *slash* or *slashfic*) can function as a site of resistance to heteronormative models of gender and sexuality presented in popular texts.¹⁶ In these queer narratives, fans demonstrate (intentionally or not) their objections to the underexposure and misrepresentation of queer characters in popular culture by rewriting well-known characters as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and more. In a 2010 online post, a fan writer named Bookshop discusses the political potential of queer fan fiction:

The most empowering aspect of slash for me is that it takes *beloved, known* characters, and strips away their heteronormativity. Yeah, countless people have accidentally discovered Harry Potter slash on the internet, and gone “ACK MY EYES” and hit the back button as fast as they can, but that also means that for half an instance, countless people *were forced to grapple with the idea that someone they loved was gay*, even if that someone was a fictional character. And maybe

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ There is an internal polemic that I (and others) have identified in Jenkins’ work on fan activism. At a 2013 public lecture I attended at Concordia University called “The Transmedia Generation,” Jenkins discussed how the immense popularity of the *Kony 2012* YouTube video reflected how social media channels can work to facilitate civic engagement, especially by people with no background in political activism. During the question period, when asked about the relationship between the evidence that something is popular (e.g. reaching 1 million hits on YouTube) and its potential to effect political change, Jenkins responded that it is difficult, and even impossible, to discern whether a video’s popularity has any effect whatsoever on a viewer’s civic engagement or, in turn, on specific amendments to law or public policy. It seems to me that the inability to measure the effectiveness of these fan-led movements works directly against Jenkins’ own conception of fan activism as something that “pushes beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance.”

¹⁶ *Slash* or *slashfic* is one of the three main genres of contemporary fan fiction, the other two being *gen* – general stories that do not involve romantic or sexual relationships – and *het* – stories that feature heterosexual relationships. Despite fan-use of the term *slash* to refer to all non-heterosexual fan fiction, for my discussion I will substitute this term with queer fan fiction so as not to imply a privileging of homosexual identities (gay and lesbian) over other queer identities (transgender, genderqueer, bisexual). I view *queer fan fiction* as an umbrella term that includes *any* and *all* stories that pertain to queer identities or experiences.

they didn't get it, but maybe that moment brought them closer to acceptance or tolerance or empathy.¹⁷

As Bookshop indicates, queer fan fiction can enact a certain degree of fan agency – it not only works to counter the heteronormative bias in mainstream texts, but it can also expose people to queer characters and narratives. Although there are numerous genres of queer fan fiction, I am interested in *genderfuck fan fiction* and the particular ways in which it, and its *own* sub-genres, uniquely present gender and sexuality according to very specific fan tropes and generic conventions.

Genderfuck fan fiction is an umbrella term for any stories that undermine traditional understandings of gender. In LGBT culture, “genderfuck” is a verb – a deliberate effort to disrupt, destabilize, or quite simply “fuck with” traditional notions of gender through cross-dressing, drag performance, androgyny, etc. As such, genderfucking constitutes an inherently political action: it is a “full frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of gender- and sex-roles.”¹⁸ Although genderfuck includes its own distinct sub-genres of fan fiction (as we will see), it is generally characterized by its use of “science fiction and fantasy tropes to alter and reimagine characters’ sexed and gendered bodies.”¹⁹ According to fan scholars Kristina Busse

¹⁷ Bookshop, “I Know You Care For Him As Much As I Do,” *LiveJournal*, January 8, 2010, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://bookshop.livejournal.com/1017712.html>.

¹⁸ Stephen Whittle, “Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender?” in *Queer Theory*, eds. Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 117. Although the concept of genderfucking is often linked to the transgender community, a self-identified transgender or genderqueer person should never be assumed to be “fucking with” gender for transgressive purposes.

¹⁹ Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian, “Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fan Fiction,” in *Internet Fictions*, eds. Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Anton Kirchhofer, and Sirpa Leppänen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 106.

and Alexis Lothian in their essay “Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fan Fiction,” *any* type of genderfuck fan fiction ultimately serves to “highlight multidimensional intersections of sex, gender, desire, and embodiment.”²⁰ Through genderfucking, fans literally rewrite familiar characters in different bodies (with different parts) and they do so for a variety of reasons ranging from the “spurious and voyeuristic” to the “political and subversive.”²¹ It is this latter purpose that I wish to focus on in this thesis – the political and subversive motivations behind these queer fan works. Whether they are genderfucking mainstream texts or queering fandom *itself*, I wish to explore the different ways queer fans take an active role in protecting and maintaining the inclusive nature of their online communities. Through an examination of two distinct genderfuck sub-genres – *genderswap* and *transfic* – I will show how both intentionally *and* unintentionally politicized fan fiction can qualify as fan activism.

Genderswap, a genre originating in online fandom during the early 1990s, has always been the traditional and most popular type of genderfuck fan fiction, with *transfic* (“transgender fan fiction”) not emerging as a distinct genre until almost two decades later in 2008. Like the overarching genderfuck genre, both of these sub-genres present narratives that undermine traditional notions of gender: *genderswap* fics feature *cisgender*²² characters whose biological

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² When a person’s gender identity matches or aligns with the biological sex assigned to them at birth, this is referred to as a *cisgender* identity: a woman who was born with female sex organs is cisgender. When a person’s gender identity does not align with the biological sex assigned to them at birth, this is referred to as a *transgender* identity: a woman who was born with male sex organs is transgender.

sex is “switched”²³ during the story and transfics feature characters who explicitly identify as *transgender*²⁴ (i.e. no “swap” takes place, except when part of a premeditated sex or gender transition). Where they differ is in their specific use of established fan tropes and narrative conventions. Genderswap focuses on a character’s coming to terms with the more superficial physiological changes that accompany a sudden and often unwanted change of biological sex, such as learning how to groom new types of body hair. Transfic addresses more of the psychological realisms and materialities that pertain to characters that explicitly self-identify as transgender (regardless of whether or not they undergo a sex or gender transition in the actual plot), such as feelings of being trapped in the “wrong body.” As such, I feel that a distinction can, and should, be made between these two types of genderfuck fics. Where traditional genderswap is a more subtle form of fan resistance (it genderfucks the cisgender bias in popular texts), transfic is more overt and intentional in its activist imperative – to critique the genderswap genre *itself*.

In this thesis, I wish to explore the political potential of transfic as an *intentional* form of fan activism. Transfic not only goes *beyond* the act of genderfucking in its scathing critique of the transphobic tropes commonly used in genderswap fics, it also strives to present a more inclusive and nuanced portrait of transgender identities and experiences in fandom. Furthermore,

²³ The word “switched” is in quotes because I do not wish to imply or reinforce the binary model of gender as either/or.

²⁴ For the purposes of my discussion, *transgender* refers to an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression does not align with the biological sex assigned to them at birth. This may include (but is not limited to): transsexuals, genderqueer, cross-dressers, drag queens/kings, androgynous, intersex, etc.

many transfic authors write elements of contemporary queer theory, transgender studies, and current LGBT political struggles into their fics. Whether or not fans deliberately incorporate these academic theories to spark discussion and debate (and it is clear that many of them do), the very idea that academic discourse frequently appears in transfic is reason enough to explore their wider implications.

Moving beyond the stories themselves, examining the *fannish*²⁵ discourses and tensions that encircle the genderswap and transfic genres can illustrate how intentional acts of fan resistance can effect widespread changes in how specific (trans)gender identities are portrayed, explored, discussed, and understood in fandom. These acts take place in the comment sections and other posts on online fan fiction sites like *LiveJournal*, *Dreamwidth*, and *FanFiction*. Fans not only utilize these sites to expose, critique, and counteract transphobia in the genderswap genre, but as pedagogical spaces to educate and enlighten other fans about transgender identities and experiences. According to Busse and Lothian, “micropolitical interventions take place in even the most hedonistic sex scenes [...]. And what puts them there in fan fiction is their communal context: the fact that the writing is never spoken to a vacuum but engages in a constant process of revising and transforming the fictional and nonfictional world.”²⁶ To me, this process of negotiation in fandom qualifies as a measurable form of “civic engagement and political participation” that Jenkins upholds in his definition of fan activism. Moreover, the work that queer fans do in these online spaces mirrors the work LGBT scholars do in academic

²⁵ *Fannish* means relating to or being characteristic of fans or fandom.

²⁶ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 124.

institutions. But where academic theories are often confined to the ivory tower, the aforementioned fannish discourses are *affective*, *articulate*, and *accessible* to anyone with an Internet connection.

To help contextualize these discourses, I will refer to two Harry Potter genderfuck fics by a fan author named Rotaryphones: the genderswap fic *Being Liquid* (2008) and the transfic *The Relative Truth* (2009). Both of these fics were written by Rotaryphones for the annual online fan fiction festival entitled “Queer Fest.”²⁷ Apart from my own personal interest, I chose to focus on the Harry Potter fandom for two main reasons: it is not only indisputably the largest and most popular fan community in the world, but the fantastical world created by J. K. Rowling also lends itself particularly well to queer readings.²⁸ As for the fan fiction itself, I chose to analyze two fics by the same author because not only are these fics particularly well-written and enjoyable to read, but they also exemplify some of the tensions between the genderswap and transfic genres. I do not wish to suggest that Rotaryphones’ two fics act as proof in themselves of a larger shift in representation occurring in fandom; instead, I will use them as examples of how these two distinct genres could ideally present and address queer experiences without reading as didactic. These two particular fics also illustrate some of the discursive tensions that exist within contemporary queer studies – between queer theory and transgender studies – which reinforces my point that fan work can often mirror academic discourse.

²⁷ “Queer Fest” will be discussed in more detail in my conclusion.

²⁸ Although this thesis only discusses Harry Potter fan fiction, the ideas presented about the larger genderfuck genre and fan behaviours could also be applied to other fandoms.

In Chapter One, I will discuss the paradoxical position genderswap fan fiction occupies in fandom. While the genderswap genre *appears* to undermine heteronormativity through genderfucking, it almost always ends up reaffirming essentialist and troublesome assumptions about transgender identities through the use of problematic fan tropes. As expected, many transgender fans have used online forums to express their distain for traditional genderswap fan fiction. I will use Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid* to highlight the tensions encircling the genderswap genre. Furthermore, I will mirror these tensions by illustrating how Rotaryphones also writes progressive tenets of queer theory into the narrative, including Judith Butler's performative model of gender. Fics like *Being Liquid* can suggest that an impulse does exist in genderswap fan communities to address a range of queer experiences (including transgender ones), however the incapacity of the genderswap genre to account for these more complex iterations of gender will contextualize the emergence of the transfic genre.

In Chapter Two, I will demonstrate how fannish discourse surrounding genderswap fan fiction has led to the establishment of transfic as a distinct genre. Transfic is a more allegorical or utopian genre of genderfuck fan fiction that explicitly presents nuanced and complex psychological and physiological realisms that strive to account for a full-range of transgender experiences. I will use Rotaryphones' transfic *The Relative Truth* to illustrate this more nuanced approach to genderfucking by featuring the lived experiences and realities of transgender people. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how *The Relative Truth* also mirrors contemporary academic interventions in foundational queer theory by transgender studies scholars Viviane Namaste, Jay Prosser, and Jack Halberstam.

Literature Review – Fan Studies, Queer Theory, and Transgender Studies

Fan scholars Hellekson and Busse assert that the mechanism of fandom relies on a “multiplicity of voices” to operate.²⁹ In the interest of preserving a multiplicity of voices in my own discussion, I will be carving out my own queer methodology that not only makes connections between the disciplines of fan studies, queer theory, and transgender studies, but between the work that fans do in online communities and the work that theorists do in academic institutions. In doing so, I hope to preserve a focus on “dialogue, community, and intertextuality,” characteristics both fandom and academia rely on.³⁰ A brief overview of some of the relevant debates in the disciplines of fan studies, queer theory, and transgender studies will help provide context to my exploration of how genderfuck fan fiction can function as fan activism.

Fan Studies

The relatively young discipline of fan studies provides a crucial starting point for my discussion of fandom and, more specifically, how queer fan fiction operates as “a mode of textual commentary.”³¹ One of the most noteworthy contributors to this field is the self-proclaimed *acafan* (“academic and fan”) Henry Jenkins, whose widely influential *Textual Poachers* (1992) is cited as a foundational fan studies text. As mentioned in my introduction,

²⁹ Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 202.

Jenkins conceives of fandom as an “alternative social community” that rejects traditional top-down media hierarchies in favour of a more collaborative and participatory model of textual production.³² He contends that it is the marginal status of fan communities that gives them agency to reappropriate or “poach” popular texts for a variety of purposes. For Jenkins, queer fan fiction most vividly illustrates “the political implications of textual poaching” because of the way fan writers challenge the heteronormative bias by rewriting (and, hence, reclaiming) popular texts as their own.³³

Jenkins’ contemporary research further explores the subversive potential of fandom through his work on fan activism. In a 2012 article entitled “‘Cultural Acupuncture:’ Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance,” Jenkins argues that through participating in fandom, fans acquire transferable skills that can be strategically employed to effect political change. An example of fan activism according to Jenkins would be the grassroots campaign initiated by the Harry Potter Alliance called “Make It Better: The Bullying Horcrux,” the mandate of which was to promote tolerance of LGBTQ youth and fight for equal marriage rights in Rhode Island, US. As mentioned in my introduction, Jenkins’ definition “pushes beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance” and, instead, foregrounds a more tactical “in the streets” model of fan activism.³⁴ In my first chapter, I will explore how Jenkins’ definition of fan activism can apply to the genderfuck genre; namely, the ways in which genderfuck fics can undermine heteronormative

³² Ibid., 254.

³³ Ibid., 221.

³⁴ Jenkins, “Cultural Acupuncture,” [1.9].

representations of gender and sexuality in popular texts. In my second chapter, I will critique Jenkins' notion of fan activism in my discussion of how genderfuck fan fiction aligns with and diverges from this strategy of resistance.

In addition to Jenkins, I will draw on fan scholar Abigail Derecho and her essay "Archontic Literature: A Definition, A History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction" in my discussion of how writing fan fiction constitutes an inherent form of resistance to the (heteronormative) mainstream. In her essay, Derecho argues that instead of viewing fan fiction as "derivative" or "appropriative" texts (hierarchies that Jenkins' "poaching" model implies), these texts should be classified as a form of "archontic literature." The archontic literature model, according to Derecho (borrowing from Jacques Derrida), conceives of texts as limitless archives:

Archontic texts are not delimited properties with definite borders that can be transgressed. So all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather, they only add to that text's archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it.³⁵

This focus on the limitlessness of texts falls in line with Hellekson and Busse's assertion that fanfics are *open texts* and *works in progress*. The fluid nature of these archontic texts, Derecho argues, is what qualifies fan fiction as an inherently "resistant artistic practice" that is "philosophically opposed to hierarchy, property, and the dominance of one variant of a series over another variant."³⁶ Fan fiction as archontic text, in other words, holds intrinsic political potential because of its intertextual nature. Archontic literature is not a new concept, Derecho

³⁵ Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," in Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71, 77.

maintains, and in her essay she constructs a history of archontic writing that emphasizes the way it has been used as “a tool of social criticism” and “a medium of political and social protest” in the hands of what John Fiske (1992) calls “the culture of the subordinate.”³⁷ Much like postcolonial or feminist literature, the archontic model allows fan fiction to be included in a larger heritage of socially-conscious writing.

Fan fiction enacts its political potential on multiple levels – from copyright violations to interrogations of the gender binary – which allows for Derecho’s claim that “even the most socially conventional fan fiction is an act of defiance.”³⁸ Viewing any and all types of fan fiction as an inherently disruptive practice provides a starting point for my exploration of more overtly and intentionally political genres of fan fiction such as genderfuck. In my first chapter, I will use the archontic model to illustrate how the genre of genderswap fan fiction not only constitutes an inherently resistant model of textual interpretation through its critique of the gender binary in the Harry Potter series, but how queer fan writers explicitly enact this agency by inserting theoretical elements from contemporary queer studies into their fics. And although I will not directly refer to Derecho’s work in my second chapter, it should be understood that her archontic model is implicit in my discussion of the transfic genre, namely, the political potential of this resistant artistic practice in the hands of marginalized groups such as the transgender community.

Finally, an essay by fan scholars Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian entitled “Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fan Fiction”

³⁷ Ibid., 69, 67, 66. For example, Euripides’ 5th century BCE politically-motivated retelling of the ancient Greek myth *Medea* qualifies as an archontic text because of its scathing critique of patriarchy.

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

will provide an essential starting point for an exploration of the political potential of genderfuck fan fiction. In this essay, they discuss the intersection between online fan communities and queer politics through a survey of several different genderfuck fics based on the *Stargate: Atlantis* television series (2004-2009). Busse and Lothian stress that each genderfuck story arises from a fan writer's attempt to balance two sets of demands: the desire to rely on popular, albeit problematic, genderswap tropes (e.g. when characters "take a trip through heterosexuality to arrive at a gay love story") and the responsibility to provide an inclusive representation of queer identities and experiences (e.g. psychological realisms, discrimination and transphobia).³⁹ According to Busse and Lothian, stories arising from these complex negotiations "provide an excellent location to begin exploring the political potential of communal affective expressions within this particular community of amateur online writing."⁴⁰ In my first chapter, I will illustrate how these negotiations operate in fandom through a close reading of how the genderswap fic *Being Liquid* both undermines *and* reaffirms heteronormative conceptions of gender. In my second chapter, I will demonstrate the political potential of these negotiations (and, hence, pick up where Busse and Lothian leave off) by exploring how online communities critique and respond positively to transphobia within fandom itself. More specifically, the newly emerging genre of transfic has succeeded in the opening up of alternative spaces for the circulation of fics that reflect more inclusive depictions of what Busse and Lothian call transgender "realisms" and "materialities" – "the multiple realities of transpeople's lives, from potential psychological

³⁹ Busse and Lothian, "Bending Gender," 113, 124.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

turmoils to the mechanics of sex reassignment surgery.”⁴¹ Although Busse and Lothian do not distinguish between these specific terms, in my view, “transgender realisms” pertains to the “real world concerns” of transgender individuals (such as transphobia and genderbashing, access to quality healthcare, employment discrimination, attaining appropriate identity documents, etc.), whereas “transgender materialities” refers to more intimate “lived experiences” (such as feelings of gender dysphoria, intricacies of sex reassignment surgery, the physical and psychological effects of a gender transition, etc.).

Queer Theory and Popular Culture

Before delving into the relationship between queer theory and popular culture it is, first and foremost, important to note that any and all queer discourses are closely linked to and informed by activist imperatives. We can examine this relationship by simply looking at how the contemporary iteration of the term “queer” emerged concurrently from two distinct, albeit interconnected, discursive bodies during the 1990s. On the one hand, LGBT activist groups such as Queer Nation and OutRage reclaimed queer as a “positive form of self-identification” and deployed it as an umbrella term to include individuals who self-identified as at odds with sex and gender norms.⁴² At the same time, queer also arose as discourse in feminist and LGBT academic circles through the development of a “queer theory” rooted heavily in poststructuralist notions of deconstruction and based on previous works by the likes of Jacques Derrida and Michel

⁴¹ Ibid., 121.

⁴² Nikki Sullivan, “Queer,” in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, ed. Mark Bevir (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010), 1131.

Foucault. In other words, where queer theory is concerned with contesting heteronormative ideology through the deconstruction of fixed identities and binary logic (gay/straight, male/female), queer activism upholds these identity categories as essential to the fight for liberation. Despite their differences, both queer theory and queer activism share a broad “political commitment to queer – that is to challenge and to undermine – heteronormative ideas and structures.”⁴³ As we can imagine, then, there is no singular concept of queer, only a plurality of discourses that interact, negotiate, and clash with one another. As such, the use of queer as a universal and overarching signifier has always been (and will always be) complex.

The relationship between queer theory and popular culture is, according to critical theorist Nikki Sullivan, “both political and cultural.”⁴⁴ We can use fan activities as an illustration of this relationship: the (re)reading and (re)writing strategies fans employ while queering popular texts are *political* insofar as they “seek to expose and problematise the means by which sexuality is textually constituted in relation to dominant notions of gender” and *cultural* insofar as they “(in)form our understandings and experiences of sexuality and subjectivity.”⁴⁵ In my thesis, I wish to mirror this two-fold relationship. In my first chapter, I wish to speak up for the *political* benefits of queering popular texts through an analysis of the genderswap genre. In my second chapter, I will explore the ways in which queering has a *cultural* impact through a survey of the transfic genre. Conceiving of writing and reading genderfuck fan fiction as an inherently political

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 189.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 190.

fan activity not only aligns with Derecho's concept of archontic literature (as outlined earlier), but it is also supported by two different approaches to queering popular culture: Alexander Doty's queer reading strategy and Nikki Sullivan's concept of guerrilla tactics.

LGBT film and media scholar Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* provides an important starting point for my discussion of queer fan fiction. Doty suggests that because popular texts are always already bound-up with a heteronormative bias, we cannot rely on a universal audience and reception theory in order to critique or evaluate these texts. Instead, Doty proposes a reception strategy founded on the use of queer as a *verb* ("to queer"). To Doty, a strategy of reading things queerly allows for a more multifaceted approach to popular texts, one that not only acknowledges the heteronormative bias, but persistently calls into question why queerness is automatically pushed to the margins. In other words, Doty is interested in bringing marginalized "queer moments"⁴⁶ to life precisely to disrupt and critique their relegation as subtext:

Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.⁴⁷

This strategy of recognizing (and reclaiming) queer moments in popular texts asserts that queer readings and interpretations should not be automatically cast as subordinate to straight (or

⁴⁶ Ibid., 191. According to Sullivan, Doty's "queer moments" are "moments of narrative disruption which destabilize heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic."

⁴⁷ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 16.

normative) ones – they should stand alongside one another.⁴⁸ Queering popular texts problematizes and resists the very idea of a normative reading or interpretation, a concept that heteronormative ideology depends on.

Doty’s queering model is important to my discussion because this strategy is explicitly enacted through genderfuck fan fiction: by writing presumably cisgender characters as transgender, fan authors quite literally bring to life the queer moments of a popular text that were formerly perceived as subtext. To me, genderfuck fan fiction “speed[s] the process of removing mass culture queerness from the shadowy realm of connotation”⁴⁹ and, thus, constitutes an important form of fan resistance. However, Doty’s strategy does not fully account for the possibility that fans can go *beyond* reading queerly and actually effect fandom-wide change through genderfucking. Nikki Sullivan’s complementary approach to queering popular culture, the concept of guerrilla tactics, can help fill in the gap between these more ideological forms of queering and the more tangible ways that queering can function as activism.

In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan’s *guerrilla tactics* approach focuses on the “queer potential” of multiple and heterogeneous acts of resistance amounting to a larger ideological shift.⁵⁰ More specifically, this approach involves “critically engaging with cultural artefacts in order to explore the ways in which meaning and identity is (inter)textually

⁴⁸ Alexander Doty, “Queer Theory” in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151.

⁴⁹ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xi.

⁵⁰ Sullivan, *Critical Introduction*, 200.

(re)produced.”⁵¹ Fanfics are examples of such cultural artefacts, yet Sullivan’s approach to queering does not limit analyses solely to existing texts. Instead, Sullivan contends that the efficacy of guerrilla tactics most often relies on the “explicit production of alternative images” (or, in the case of fan fiction, alternative narratives).⁵² Unlike Henry Jenkins’ model of fan activism, Sullivan’s approach both acknowledges and attempts to harness so-called “abstract notions of cultural resistance.”⁵³ In other words, “rather than presuming that it is possible to entirely destroy heteronormativity, or to exist somehow outside of it,” the concept of guerrilla tactics offers a “deconstructive account of the queering of popular culture in which any strategy will necessarily produce heterogeneous and unpredictable effects.”⁵⁴

In Chapter One, both Doty’s and Sullivan’s strategies for queering popular culture can help illustrate the queer potential of genderfuck fan fiction. Both genderswap and transfic enact Doty’s queer reading strategy by genderfucking popular characters. Not only does this call attention to the heteronormative bias in J. K. Rowling’s source text, but it also contributes to an overall fan resistance to this bias. In this way, the genderfuck genre – with its limitless number of fics – constitutes “a plurality of heterogeneous and localized practices, the effects of which will never be entirely predictable in advance.”⁵⁵ Writing even *one* genderfuck fic counts as a heterogeneous moment of resistance, whether intentional or not.

⁵¹ Ibid., 190.

⁵² Ibid., 204.

⁵³ Jenkins, “Cultural Acupuncture,” [1.9].

⁵⁴ Sullivan, *Critical Introduction*, 202.

⁵⁵ Sullivan, “Queer,” 1132.

Queer Theory and Transgender Studies

Although the queer strategies of Doty and Sullivan will provide much of the theoretical backbone for my positioning of genderfuck fan fiction as fan activism, I will also engage with queer and transgender theories to help illustrate the more overt ways fans take action. I will focus mainly on two scholars – queer theorist Judith Butler and transgender studies scholar Jay Prosser – and I will do so for two reasons. First, many fan writers (including Rotaryphones) actually incorporate Butler and Prosser’s work into their fics, which allows for a unique mirroring of academic discourse in fandom. Second, Butler and Prosser are both foundational scholars in their respective disciplines. And an attempt to map out the ways in which transgender studies represents an intervention in foundational queer theory can help provide context for my discussion of how transfic’s intervention in the genderswap genre reflects a shift in fandom from a more theoretical to an activist approach to queering popular texts.

One of queer theory’s foundational texts is Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which gender is put forth as *performative* – a social construction that does not reflect any sort of inner gender(ed) essence. Before getting into the intricacies of Butler’s theory, it is important to emphasize that heteronormative ideology relies on an *expressive model of gender*, one in which our “outer” gender expression is reflective of an assumed “inner” gender(ed) essence. This gender(ed) essence, in turn, is expected to align with our biological sex to constitute a cisgender identity: a person with female sex organs is “naturally” expected to identify as a member of the female gender. This frequent conflation of gender and sex as mutually dependent is *false* and

reflects a discursively maintained cisgender bias. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler refutes the expressive model of gender and instead proposes a *performative model of gender*. For Butler, gender is performative in that it amounts to “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”⁵⁶ In short, gender is not an innate drive; rather, a social construct disguised as such. To Butler, gender is “a norm that can never be fully internalized” because an original or ideal gender does not exist.⁵⁷ This model rejects the existence of an internal gender(ed) essence, instead contending that gender is naturalized as such through the repetition of a series of external performances over time. Butler cites the figure of the drag queen as illustrative of how a parody of gender roles implicitly reveals gender as “an imitation without an origin.”⁵⁸ In other words, it is the very idea of drag performance that allows for a critique of the expressive model and for the possibility of non-binary iterations of gender. Since drag is a form of genderfucking, I will extrapolate from Butler’s claim that any deliberate attempt to expose or subvert the gender binary can also potentially reveal the parodic nature of gender. As such, genderfuck fan fiction can work to expose heteronormative representations of gender in popular texts just as Butler’s theoretical invocation of drag can undermine the expressive model of gender in academic discourse.

While queer theory’s theoretical imperative is valuable in thinking about the ways in which gender and sexual norms are constructed and maintained in a patriarchal society, its

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Tenth Anniversary Edition)* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

fundamental flaw, according to transgender studies scholar Viviane Namaste, is that it “begins its analysis with little thought of the individuals designated as the objects of study.”⁵⁹ In other words, queer theory does not account for the lived realities of many LGBT (and, in particular, transgender) individuals. For instance, although Butler’s performative model of gender is a groundbreaking way to think about queer gender, Namaste accuses this model of reinforcing the same problematic categories it strives to dismantle. To Namaste, Butler’s invocation of drag as *the* example that exposes gender as social construction reduces transgender identities to mere metaphors that reflect an “uncritical miming of the hegemonic [sex/gender system].”⁶⁰ In short, a drag queen performing gender on a stage is not the same as a transgender person “performing” gender in daily life. To Namaste, Butler offers a representationalist account of gender; one in which the transgender body *as theory* stands in for all sex and gender relations while the transgender body *as lived and breathed* is ignored. In addition to Namaste, transgender studies scholars Jay Prosser and Jack Halberstam are also wary of “the subsumption of trans into a largely queer paradigm.”⁶¹ They caution that a shared theoretical framework has potential ramifications, namely the “erasure of the experiences of trans people for whom the term “queer” in its entire theoretical/political presumptions seems inapplicable.”⁶² This erasure of transgender

⁵⁹ Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹ Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry, “Introduction,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

materialities in foundational queer theory is what eventually led to the emergence of transgender studies.

Transgender studies, then, reflects an activist intervention in queer discourse – one that radically *unqueers*. At the most basic level, it does so through a recognition that many transgender individuals simply do not *want* to identify as queer. This intervention is valuable because it helps to legitimize (at least in academic discourse) the transgender subject *as* transgender. As evidenced by the milestone publication of *The Transgender Studies Reader* in 2006, concerted efforts have been undertaken by scholars like Namaste, Prosser, and Halberstam to assert transgender materialities as the defining feature of transgender studies. Unlike queer theory, this approach begins its study, first and foremost, with the recognition of transgender individuals as “flesh and blood human beings with access to experiences of ‘transness’ and transphobic oppression” and can be best described as “the coming-to-voice of (some) trans people who have long been the researched objects of sexology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and (non-trans) feminist theory.”⁶³ In short, Prosser insists that transgender studies began when “transgender subjects began to speak for themselves.”⁶⁴

Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins* (1998), a foundational text in transgender studies, places an emphasis on transgender materialities and autobiographies (or, “body narratives”) through his critique of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. He, like Namaste, argues that Butler’s performative model

⁶³ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁴ Jay Prosser, “Transgender,” in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, eds. Andy Medhurst and Sally R. Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), 317.

of gender (and the use of a drag queen to illustrate it) does not account for the lived experiences of transgender individuals:

What gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one) – in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body.⁶⁵

Instead of accepting Butler's notion of gender as socially constructed, Prosser emphasizes the materiality of the body (with all of its feelings and sensations) as the generative ground for (trans)gender subjectivity: "The image of wrong embodiment describes most effectively the experience of pretransition (dis)embodiment: the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and subjectively experienced."⁶⁶ In short, where Butler uses a transgender subject to *visually* illustrate gender through performativity ("girls who *look like* boys and boys who *look like* girls"), Prosser highlights corporeal interiority, the "*feeling* of being sexed or gendered."⁶⁷

In addition to body narratives, Prosser also critiques how foundational queer theories have "put transgender to crucial theoretical and political use: to challenge the naturalization of heterosexuality and gender."⁶⁸ More specifically, Prosser critiques Butler's implication in *Gender*

⁶⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 32. In *Second Skins*, Prosser uses the term "transsexual" which, based on the recent establishment of a more inclusive umbrella term, should be thought of as "transgender."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43. Where Butler enters into the body through debates about meaning, language, and representation (semiotics), Prosser's framework is more biologically grounded and experiential (phenomenology).

⁶⁸ Prosser, "Transgender," 312.

Trouble that “transgender is queer is subversive.”⁶⁹ To Prosser, Butler’s idealistic view that the transgender body “serves as heterosexual gender’s subversive foil”⁷⁰ does not acknowledge that transgender individuals often *wish* to classify themselves into firm gender identities such as male or female. In effect, Prosser actually upholds the importance of the gender binary as part of a transgender individual’s feeling of rightful or wrongful embodiment: “In transsexuality sex *returns*, the queer repressed, to unsettle [Butler’s] theory of gender performativity.”⁷¹ This is where Prosser’s critique most pointedly departs from Butler’s theory. Where Butler attributes an inherently transgressive quality to transgender identities, Prosser refutes this assumption and contends that “transgender subjectivity is not inevitably queer” and “not every gender-crossing is queerly subversive.”⁷²

Jack Halberstam is also a highly influential scholar in the discipline of transgender studies. In the 1998 book *Female Masculinity*, he investigates public spaces in which the strict male/female gender binary is highly codified and policed (e.g. bathrooms, changing rooms, (some) gay bars). These spaces, he argues, are not constructed by accident – they reflect a “violent enforcement of our current gender system.”⁷³ More specifically, Halberstam highlights “the bathroom problem,” the division of public bathrooms by gender, as a prime example of one of these highly policed public spaces. In choosing a public bathroom, not only are transgender

⁶⁹ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31, 32.

⁷³ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). 25. Despite publishing *Female Masculinity* under the name “Judith,” Halberstam goes by the preferred name “Jack.”

people (and many other queer individuals) confronted by an institutionalized message that they do not belong (to gender as either/or) but are policed and reprimanded (by other bathroom patrons, security guards, etc.) for entering these spaces without conforming to society's expectation of what male or female gender "looks like." This "violent enforcement" of the gender binary in public spaces reveals the institutionally sanctioned discrimination against transgender individuals. As such, the issue of "passing" as either male or female in these highly contentious spaces often takes on heightened importance.

In my second chapter, I will show how these discursive tensions between queer theory and transgender studies parallel fan tensions surrounding the genderswap and transfic genres. But in addition to this more broad mapping these disciplines, I will also use the aforementioned theories by Butler and Prosser (and, to a lesser extent, Halberstam) in my close analyses of Rotaryphones' fan fiction. In my first chapter, I will use Teddy Lupin's character from *Being Liquid* as a stand in for Butler's figure of the drag queen and, in doing so, illustrate how Rotaryphones has intricately written Butler's theory of performativity into her fic. Like many other fans, Rotaryphones' inclusion of academic theory in *Being Liquid* demonstrates one of the ways fans actively strive to present complex iterations of queer identities in genderswap fan fiction. In my second chapter, I will show how the tropes, narrative, and characterization in *The Relative Truth* reflect transgender critiques of queer theory by Prosser and Halberstam. In doing so, I wish to make a claim for transfic as a compelling form of fan activism that has effectively carved out space in genderfuck fandom for nuanced and intricate representations of transgender realisms and materialities.

Chapter One – Queering Popular Texts: Genderswap Fan Fiction

I believe that fanfiction, all fanfiction, is transgressive, political, subversive, transformative, *whether or not any of us want it to be*. And I feel every single day that the best way any of us can combat a universe full of problems is to keep writing it.
~ Bookshop, *LiveJournal*

The majority of fans (and fan scholars) agree that writing fan fiction is an act that fundamentally relies on a source text as the basis for its many transformations. Fan authors, in other words, expand on a text's *canon* – what “actually” happened in the original source material – in their own collective *fanon* – building stories upon other stories, filling in the gaps, and transforming subtext into text.⁷⁴ This model of fan interpretation is inextricably linked to foundational theories of fan culture, with the godfather of fan studies Henry Jenkins positioning fans as “poachers” of so-called “original” content in his influential book *Textual Poachers* (1992). However, this idea that original authors *create* while fan authors *poach* implies a textual hierarchy that privileges the original version – the authoritative canon – over all other interpretations. More recent models of fan culture, including Abigail Derecho's concept of archontic literature and Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's emphasis on texts as *works in progress*, position fan fiction not as derivative or appropriative, but as a practice that fundamentally *opens up possibilities*. Fan fiction, according to these scholars, offers a more intersectional approach to textual interpretation by allowing for the proliferation of an infinite number of overlapping readings. By extension, fan fiction as *open text* legitimizes readings that deviate from the authoritative version of a text, such as queer readings, and uphold each

⁷⁴ *Canon* is “the events presented in the media sources that provide the universe, setting, and characters” upon which fan texts are based on. It is distinct from *fanon*, “the events created by the fan community.” Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, 9.

subsequent version as one of many possible interpretations that contribute to the source text's larger archive.

In theory, this intersectional approach to textual interpretation would allow for queer readings of a popular text, such as ones presented in queer Harry Potter fan fiction, to stand alongside of (and not subordinate to) straight readings.⁷⁵ In reality, the “spell of heterocentrism” that pervades the arena of popular culture hinders this more inclusive approach to reading:

In the context of heterocentrist (homophobic, sexist) culture, close reading often becomes a social and political strategy: perhaps through overwhelming details and examples we can make what is invisible to so many visible and what is denied possible. [...] For some reason, queer and nonheterocentrist interpretations of things are never “just another way to see things” for most people, but something akin to delusional experiences, no matter how many examples you provide.⁷⁶

As we can see, Alexander Doty's queer reading strategy aligns with fan author Bookshop's assertion that queer fan fiction *must* be viewed as “transgressive, political, subversive, transformative, *whether or not any of us want it to be.*”⁷⁷ In other words, it is precisely this compulsory privileging of a straight reading as the most natural textual interpretation and, by extension, the automatic relegation of queerness to the margins that gives queer fan fiction its political agency.

Contemporary research in fan studies has also begun to assess the political potential of fan fiction, especially in the hands of marginalized communities. Speaking more generally, Derecho's categorization of *all* fan fiction as archontic literature – a model that conceives of

⁷⁵ Doty, “Queer Theory,” 151.

⁷⁶ Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 52, 55-56.

⁷⁷ Bookshop, “I Know You Care.”

texts as limitless archives and part of a larger heritage of socially-conscious writing – allows for fan writing to be viewed as an inherently political activity, regardless of whether this resistance is intentional or not. More specifically, Doty’s strategy of queering straight readings of popular texts in order to dismantle their compulsory heteronormative slant is explicitly enacted through (re)writing and (re)reading queer fan fiction.

In addition to academic discourse, fannish discourse (in the form of online discussions and debates called *meta*, which will be explored further in Chapter Two) also attests to the political potential of fan writing. Bookshop’s assertion that all fan fiction can be politically subversive suggests that many fans are deeply invested in what is at stake within their own writing communities. Meta-observations like Bookshop’s, in essence, help to reveal the shared desire of fans (including queer fans like myself) to rectify inequalities within an imbalanced system of production and consumption – to “keep writing” for subversive purposes, whether explicitly or inadvertently so.⁷⁸ Making a case for the unique and complex ways that fans work to “combat a universe full of problems,” as Bookshop claims, can help situate fan fiction within a larger heritage of socially-conscious writing.

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring how genderswap fan fiction (an offshoot of the larger genderfuck genre) functions as an inherently politicized fan activity. Not only does genderswap fan fiction qualify as a “resistant artistic practice” as specified in Derecho’s archontic literature model, but reading and writing these queered texts also constitutes an attack on the heteronormative bias that pervades popular culture. More specifically, genderswap fan

⁷⁸ Ibid.

fiction enacts Doty's queer reading strategy by literally genderfucking (that is, intentionally disrupting static notions of gender) characters automatically established as and assumed to be cisgender in popular texts. In addition, the production of these alternative narratives qualifies as a heterogeneous strategy of resistance according to Nikki Sullivan's concept of guerrilla tactics. In enacting these queer political strategies, genderswap fics generate a two-fold effect: they call attention to the overwhelming cisgender bias of the source text and, more importantly, they counteract this bias through genderfucking. I wish to explore the queer potential of genderswap fan fiction, whether intentionally subversive or not, as a strategy of resistance to the cisgender bias that prevents a more multifaceted understanding of popular texts like Harry Potter.

In the pages that follow, I will briefly outline the history and fan tropes that have come to characterize (and plague) the genderswap genre. Following this overview, I will do a close reading of a Harry Potter genderswap fic entitled *Being Liquid* by fan author Rotaryphones. In this close analysis I will show how *Being Liquid* presents a positive and progressive representation of gender and sexuality, which marks a radical departure from the stereotypical portrayal of gender traditionally found in genderswap fan fiction. I will highlight this sophisticated presentation of gender by emphasizing several tenets of queer theory that are strategically embedded within this fic, more specifically, how *Being Liquid* illustrates Judith Butler's performative model of gender. Finally, following this close analysis, I will re-read *Being Liquid*, this time using Jay Prosser's transgender critique of Butler in *Second Skins*, to point out how even this ostensibly progressive story (and, by extension, the larger genre of genderswap) can reaffirm essentialist and problematic assumptions about transgender identities. This in-depth

critique of genderswap fan fiction (via *Being Liquid*) will contextualize the emergence of the transfic genre (discussed in Chapter Two) as a response to these inadequacies. Providing this context is a necessary step, I contend, to understanding the larger mechanism of fandom – itself a *work in progress* that constantly shifts, adapts, and responds to imbalances – and the political potential of such an interactive community, both within fandom and beyond.

Genderswap Fan Fiction: A Troublesome Genre

Genderswap fan fiction, by definition, features characters whose biological sex is suddenly “switched” during the story, usually by magical or technological means. *Genderswap* is the most traditional and popular genre within the overarching category of genderfuck fan fiction.⁷⁹ The traditional genderswap genre originated in the early 1990s at a time when queer fan fiction surged in popularity due to its transition from print-based zines to online.⁸⁰ Traditional genderswap fics usually feature the actual “swap” of sex as a major element of the plot – when a cisgender character transitions to a transgender character – and often end with a restoration of the character’s original sex. In these fics, characters must quickly adapt to the new biological sex thrust upon them and, as such, issues of gender identification and embodiment are often brought into the story, albeit superficially.

⁷⁹ Although there is a variation on the genderswap genre (called “Always Been a Girl”) in which a change in gender is *not* explicitly motivated by a desire to queer the source text, in this thesis I am interested the traditional genderswap genre, which features more overtly queer iterations of gender.

⁸⁰ One of the most notable early genderswap stories is Ruth Gifford’s *My Fair Jeanne* (1995), a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fic in which Jean-Luc Picard is transformed into a woman by the alien trickster known as “Q.”

For instance, one of the most popular genderswap tropes is to show newly swapped male-to-female (MTF) characters learning how to cope with “female issues” such as how to properly shave their legs without cutting themselves or how to walk properly in high-heeled shoes. Two of the most popular genderswap fics, according to *Fanlore*, feature these superficial gender issues. In “And Now For Something Completely Different” (2003), in which Harry Potter “wakes up as a girl,” he takes great pleasure in having his eyebrows “fixed” and writing “cutesy little declarations with a pink inkwell and sparkles” in his diary.⁸¹ Similarly, in “Seven Things That Didn’t Happen on Valentine’s Day at Hogwarts, Or Maybe They Did” (2004), a genderswapped (MTF) Sirius Black is charged with perfecting the proper way to walk (“There was a new sway in her steps, hard-earned through trial and error, an exaggeration of the round dip and slide with which girls walked always”), dealing with menstrual cramps (“I’m having a period. Bleeding like some sort of stuck pig.”), and, most notably, to “figure out the great and terrifying secrets of peeing while seated.”⁸² Considering that these examples are *typical* presentations of gender in genderswap fan fiction, it should not come as a surprise that the genre is often criticized by transgender (and other) fans for “focusing on stereotypes of perceived gender differences and for having characters immediately adopt a conservative gender performance without question.”⁸³

⁸¹ Silvia Kundera, “And Now For Something Completely Different,” *FanFiction*, February 19, 2003, accessed February 16, 2014, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1241778/1/>.

⁸² Rageprufrock, “Seven Things That Didn’t Happen on Valentine’s Day at Hogwarts, Or Maybe They Did,” *Archive of Our Own*, February 13, 2004, accessed February 16, 2014, https://archiveofourown.org/works/45788?view_adult=true. Fun fact: In this fic, they refer to Sirius’ gender transition as a “genderswitch.”

⁸³ “Genderswap,” *Fanlore*, Organization for Transformative Works, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Genderswap>.

An example of these fan critiques can be seen in a *meta* post entitled “Five+ Ways Being Transgender in Fandom Really Sucks, and Why I Stick With It Anyway” by fan Iambic Kilometer. Iambic takes issue with the fact that, in many fics, the acquisition of a new biological sex induces an eager desire for characters to immediately start experimenting sexually with their new body parts, both alone and with partners. According to Iambic, genderswap fan fiction does not account for how transgender people deal with issues that accompany sex and gender transitions, such as gender dysphoria, the use of proper gender pronouns, and the mechanics of sexual activity after sex reassignment surgery:

Too often I will see the author switch into new pronouns to match the new body, or depict the character enthusiastically “trying out” their new body, often sexually. I can tell you for sure, suddenly having the wrong body means CRAZY issues. I can’t even look at myself undressed. A new body means learning to use it, first of all, and then all the dysphoria that comes with it, and one thing it isn’t going to do is turn its owner on.⁸⁴

When repeatedly presented through popular fictional characters in genderswap fics, these problematic fan tropes can lead to troublesome assumptions about *nonfictional* transgender individuals. To even further illustrate how these problematic assumptions can be naturalized in genderfuck fandom, Iambic also points out that even the genre label of genderswap is *itself* a misnomer. The genre, as Iambic and others insist, should really be called *sexswap* because in these fics it is usually the biological sex that is switched, with the gender automatically following suit: “If a character has suddenly switched bodies, you do NOT switch pronouns. They haven’t

⁸⁴ Iambickilometer, “Five+ Ways Being Transgender in Fandom Really Sucks, and Why I Stick With It Anyway,” *Dreamwidth*, April 7, 2010, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://iambickilometer.dreamwidth.org/159858.html>.

switched genders. If a character is transgendered, you refer to them by their gender pronoun, not their sex pronoun.”⁸⁵

While the majority of traditional genderswap fics recycle the problematic fan tropes mentioned above, I am interested in exploring a more recent trend in genderswap fan fiction – one in which writers are being more nuanced in their depiction of gender and sexuality. According to Busse and Lothian, these more nuanced forms of fan fiction arise from complex negotiations between two sets of demands: fannish desire to “revel in comforting tropes” that have already been established in genderswap fan writing communities (such as dealing with superficial “female issues” as outlined above) and activist imperatives to meet the “real world concerns” of the transgender subjects depicted in these fics.⁸⁶

Being Liquid by Rotaryphones

Being Liquid is a perfect example of a more nuanced fic that has arisen from these complex fan negotiations. This genderswap fic focuses on the life of a minor character from the Harry Potter series, Teddy Lupin. Teddy first appears in canon in the final book of J. K. Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, as the son of the Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, both of whom have been recently killed in the Battle of Hogwarts. Teddy, like his late mother, is a human Metamorphmagus, a wizard who can change any aspect of their physical appearance at will. In the epilogue of Rowling’s *Deathly Hallows*, which takes place

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 124.

nineteen years after the Battle of Hogwarts, Teddy is seen kissing Victoire Weasley, daughter of Bill Weasley (Ron Weasley's older brother) and his wife Fleur Delacour. Based on this brief interaction in canon, Teddy and Victoire have subsequently become a very popular romantic pairing in Harry Potter fandom.

The versions of Teddy Lupin and Victoire Weasley in *Being Liquid* differ greatly from their characterizations in the original canon. *Being Liquid* chronicles Teddy's life as a young adult Metamorphmagus, who has always identified as a cisgender and heterosexual male. Victoire, his best friend, identifies as a cisgender and lesbian female. At the beginning of the story, Teddy is implored by several of Victoire's friends to demonstrate his unique shapeshifting abilities through various trivial physical alterations such as changing his hair colour or tripling the size of his ears. However, as Teddy develops a romantic attraction to lesbian-identified Victoire, he begins using his magical abilities to make more drastic biological changes – to become female. During the course of the narrative Teddy shifts back and forth between sexes and genders several times, each shift exploring various issues that come with such transitions. *Being Liquid* explores Teddy and Victoire's budding romantic relationship, with Teddy navigating through not only societal prejudices to his gender fluidity, but his own emotional and psychological confusion about his gender and sexuality.

I chose to do a close reading of this particular story because of its paradoxical position: it both conforms to and resists easy classification as genderswap fan fiction. On one hand, *Being Liquid's* characterization of Teddy as an open-minded gender fluid individual and its narrative focus on the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of a sex and gender transition reflects

a more nuanced exploration of gender identity and embodiment than is traditionally found in the genderswap genre. This fic goes *beyond* most traditional genderswap fics in its positive representation of Teddy's transition as not something dealt with *after the fact* (as in, quickly learning to shave one's legs), but as a process that is premeditated, continuous, and material. On the other hand, this fic also makes use of several typical genderswap tropes that negate or trivialize transgender experiences.⁸⁷ In other words, it simultaneously undermines *and* reaffirms heteronormative ideology. Doing a more scholarly reading of *Being Liquid* also highlights its contentious position. While this fic reflects many progressive tenets of queer theory as put forth by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, it simultaneously exemplifies transgender critiques of these theories as represented by Prosser in *Second Skins*. To highlight this paradoxical position, I will perform two readings of Rotaryphones' fic. First, I will read *Being Liquid* as a progressive queer text using Butler's performative model of gender. In doing so, I will show that Teddy's sex and gender fluidity offers a positive model of gender and sexuality, one which pushes against heteronormative ideology. Then, I will re-read *Being Liquid* as a problematic queer text using Prosser's discussion of transsexual subjectivity (and his critique of Butler's model). This critique will show how Teddy's sex and gender fluidity not only works to *reaffirm* essentialist notions of gender but also glosses over the physical and psychological realisms of *nonfictional* transgender bodies in transition.

⁸⁷ Although *Being Liquid*'s presentation of Teddy might be considered as transgender or genderqueer to many readers, the story does not explicitly identify him as such, which denies readers the ability to pigeonhole Teddy's gender or sexuality as a fixed category or label. This *and* the fact that transgender issues are not *explicitly* addressed is what makes it difficult to classify this story as transfic.

Reading Being Liquid as Progressive Queer Text

In this section, I wish to discuss *Being Liquid* as a progressive queer text. Through its depiction of gender as fluid rather than fixed (and, in turn, its iteration of Butler's performative model of gender), Rotaryphones' fic hints at the possibility of resistance to heteronormative presentations of gender and sexuality. *Being Liquid* resists on several different levels. First, its very status as one of the many textual versions that depict the Teddy/Victoire pairing (including J. K. Rowling's novel, David Yates' film, etc.) subverts the idea that a single authoritative version of their pairing exists. As such, *Being Liquid*, first and foremost, qualifies as "an act of defiance" according to Derecho's definition of archontic literature. Second, in portraying Teddy as gender fluid and Victoire as lesbian (and in a relationship with each other, no less) Rotaryphones' fic critiques the heteronormative bias in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series by casting aside the characters' former straight identities. (Re)writing Teddy and Victoire as queer not only reclaims perceived subtextual "queer moments" through Doty's reading strategy but it also reflects Sullivan's concept of a "heterogeneous moment" that contributes to an overall resistance of heteronormative ideology in popular culture. Finally, in making things queer, *Being Liquid* functions, whether intentionally or not, as fan activism. The idea that Rotaryphones explicitly wrote Butler's performative model of gender into this fic indicates the ways in which many fans have expressed a similar desire to present more nuanced iterations of gender that account for a wider range of queer experiences.⁸⁸ In short, genderswap fan fiction does not prove

⁸⁸ I have read enough genderswap fan fiction (and its respective comments sections, etc.) to know that many fans *do* intentionally incorporate these sorts of complexities into their fics. So, while Rotaryphones' specific use of queer theory isn't proof *in itself* that this wider fan impulse exists, *Being Liquid* can act as representative of *the ways in which* fans enact this activist impulse.

that *all* fans are writing it for political purposes. Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid* does, however, through its self-conscious iteration of queer theory, prove that not all fans are writing *apolitically*.

First and foremost, in *Being Liquid*, Teddy's magical Metamorphmagus abilities to change shape at will can be viewed as a genderfuck performance akin to Butler's drag queen figure in *Gender Trouble*. The first display of Teddy's gender performance begins as a party trick when he finds himself to be the only male patron at the local lesbian bar. After Victoire tells her friends (all of whom identify as lesbian) about Teddy's shapeshifting ability, they playfully challenge him to appear as female so he'll feel less conspicuous. He happily obliges and transforms the upper-half of his body to please the onlookers:

He adds just enough fullness to his lips, smoothes out his jaw line, lengthens his hair and lashes. Then, as a final touch, he slims his waist, widens his hips, and grows a pair of small, round breasts. By the looks on everyone's faces, he's fairly successful.⁸⁹

Here, Teddy's genderfuck performance calls attention to Butler's idea that gender can be malleable not fixed: while retaining his male sex organs, he transforms the upper-half of his body to be anatomically female. The initial motivations behind Teddy's first gender metamorphosis are rather flippant. However, later that night in front of the mirror he morphs to become partially female again, remarking that his reflection "looks like another version of himself."⁹⁰ It is here that Teddy's ability to change shape takes on greater significance in the story – he begins

⁸⁹ Rotaryphones, "Being Liquid," *LiveJournal*, April 25, 2008, <http://lgbtfest.livejournal.com/17185.html>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

wanting to inhabit a female body *in addition* to his male one. In other words, Teddy's "being liquid" as a shapeshifter parallels his growing desire for sex and gender fluidity.

Butler's performative model of gender is emphasized during Teddy's next public transformation. At Victoire's birthday party, her friends implore him to morph his body to female once again. This time his transition to female is premeditated and even more impressive because he has been astutely observing many women's behaviour in public:

Teddy has a habit of studying people, and lately he's been thinking a lot about gender, so this time around he puts some of his observations to use. He adjusts his posture; he corrects his mannerisms. Everyone's impressed, and Teddy eases into the role.⁹¹

Teddy's enactment of behaviour coded as female falls in line with Butler's assertion that gender is constituted through a repetitive series of performances – his ability to play the role of female hinges on his prior observations of seemingly natural performances of gender. Here, Teddy again represents Butler's figure of the drag queen as his imitation of the female gender reveals gender as "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis."⁹² To both Butler and Teddy, gender is a *learned behaviour*.

In yet another iteration of Butler's theory, *Being Liquid* presents Teddy's fluid identity as constituting an automatic subversion of the gender binary. Teddy remarks that he often "feels sorry for solid people and their stifling, unchanging bodies, their restrictive masks" and that "the idea of being a full-time bird [woman] is as unappealing as being a full-time bloke [man]."⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178.

⁹³ Rotaryphones, "Being Liquid."

Here, “solid people” refers to both being a non-shapeshifter *and* cisgender, whereas “being liquid” describes Teddy’s Metamorphmagus *and* transgender identities. And although he does not explicitly state that being transgender is more liberating (and less oppressive) than being cisgender, the invocation of “full-time” here implicitly privileges the ability to switch sex and gender at will over being firmly rooted in one or the other. In addition, in a coming out conversation between him and Harry Potter (his godfather), Teddy’s status as in-between is more explicitly presented as an ideal or utopian outlook on gender:

“It’s not role play,” Teddy says. [...] “I know it sounds messed up but... it’s just part of me. It’s still me. Just... a different part.”

“So you want to be a woman,” says Harry, trying his best to hide his discomfort.

“No. I don’t want to be a witch *or* a wizard. Or... no, that’s not right. I don’t want to be *just* a witch or a wizard. I need to be somewhere in between.”

“But... why?”

Teddy shrugs. He doubts there’s a way to describe the feeling of creating your own identity, of embracing every part of yourself regardless of social convention, of expressing who you are externally at any given moment [...] Not unless you’ve experienced that freedom for yourself.⁹⁴

Teddy’s desire to live in the in-between, to fly in the face of social convention and criticism, reflects a positive notion of identification as something that can be created from within and exist outside of the external imposition of a gender binary. Teddy’s freedom to shift between male and female relates to Butler’s intimation in *Gender Trouble* that transgender identities possess an inherently subversive power to undermine the gender binary. In Butler’s terms, Teddy’s “perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization” and “deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities.”⁹⁵ His ability as a Metaphorhmagus to slide between genders offers a sort of queer utopia where bodies are free, biology is in flux, and strict classifications of gender as either/or are dismantled.

The most obvious invocation of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* occurs near the end of *Being Liquid*. When Teddy discusses his new outlook on gender with his friend Claire, Rotaryphones inserts a direct nod to feminist and queer theory (and perhaps even to Butler herself):

“People shouldn’t take gender so seriously...it’s all *learned behavior* anyway. Remind me to lend you some of my muggle books.”

Teddy is amused by Claire’s insistence that there isn’t any difference between the sexes whatsoever. If it were true, he’d have no reason to want to be both. But he thinks he understands what she’s getting at; he taught himself to be female, just as Claire and Miranda and Victoire have been taught since birth. “You’re just trying to turn me into one of your *muggle feminists*.”⁹⁶

This explicit reference to “muggle feminists” provides fairly convincing evidence that Rotaryphones has some prior knowledge of feminist and queer theory and has deliberately written it into her fic. Even the simple reference to gender as “learned behavior” unmistakably hearkens back to specific language used by Butler in *Gender Trouble*. This intention was also confirmed to me in a message I received from Rotaryphones: “[writing *Being Liquid*] gave me a good excuse to get my queer activist hat on.”⁹⁷ The inclusion of Butler’s theory is no accident – it is a deliberate attempt by Rotaryphones to make reference to the world around us and to signal to us that something bigger is happening in this fic.

⁹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 176.

⁹⁶ Rotaryphones, “Being Liquid” (emphasis added).

⁹⁷ Rotaryphones, email message to author, December 24, 2013.

As we have seen, *Being Liquid* offers a fan-driven critique of the gender binary through Teddy's characterization as gender fluid. This critique aligns with Butler's theoretical interrogation of heteronormative models of gender that, over time, have come to operate as norms. According to Hellekson and Busse, "the act of performing fandom parallels the act of performing academia. Both rely on dialogue, community, and intertextuality."⁹⁸ Indeed, it is this parallel fan and academic critique of heteronormativity that prompts me to return to my earlier question of how genderswap fan fiction can function as fan activism. How does Rotaryphones' deliberate effort to invoke queer theory in her fic contribute to a queer resistance of heteronormative ideology and, perhaps more importantly, how can we measure its effect? Sullivan's model of guerrilla tactics can offer insight into this question. She suggests that "rather than presuming that it is possible to entirely destroy heteronormativity, or to exist somehow outside of it," guerrilla tactics such as writing genderswap fan fiction can function as a "deconstructive account of the queering of popular culture in which any strategy will necessarily produce heterogeneous and unpredictable effects."⁹⁹ We, as readers, can never be sure of any other fan author's intentions (unless we ask). And, even so, "intentional forms of subversion will always be open to multiple meanings, to being (re)read/(re)written."¹⁰⁰ But regardless of intention, we, as readers, *do* have agency to (re)appropriate or poach these queer texts for our

⁹⁸ Hellekson and Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities*, 25.

⁹⁹ Sullivan, *Critical Introduction*, 202.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

own political purposes. *We* can intentionally utilize this genderswap fic to start conversations that change peoples' minds about queer gender and sexuality.

Re-reading Being Liquid as Problematic Queer Text

As seen in my preliminary reading of *Being Liquid*, genderswap fan fiction can “fuck with” static notions of gender. Moreover, it is clear that some fan authors (including Rotaryphones) write feminist or queer theoretical concepts into their fan fiction. In this sense, *Being Liquid* (and by extension the genderswap genre) can function as a progressive queer text. However, as mentioned, the vast majority of genderswap fics are also plagued by problematic fan tropes that focus on superficial gender differences and, by extension, trivialize the physical, emotional, and psychological issues that come with a sudden change of sex. A critical *re-reading* of *Being Liquid* can reveal the ways in which genderswap fan fiction can actually work to reaffirm the heteronormative bias in fandom itself. It will also help to contextualize why so many transgender fans (like Iambic Kilometer) often criticize the genderswap genre. This time, I will use Prosser’s critique of the performative model of gender to frame my close analysis. Prosser’s transgender intervention in Butler’s queer theory mirrors the ways in which transgender fans intervene in the genderswap genre; namely, through an assertion of the transgender voices that are lacking in these queer narratives.

To recall, in *Second Skins* Prosser presents a critique of *Gender Trouble*, arguing that Butler’s theory of gender performativity does not account for the lived experiences of transgender individuals. In particular, Prosser takes issue with Butler’s strategic use of a

transgender subject (a drag queen) in order to demonstrate that gender is visually constituted through performativity and not based on an inner gender(ed) essence. Conversely, Prosser argues that gender *is* an internal essence and he highlights a *feeling* of gender dysphoria as generative ground for transgender subjectivity. In other words, Prosser (and other transgender scholars) accuses Butler's model of reinforcing the same problematic gender hierarchies it strives to dismantle.

Much like Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Rotaryphones' seemingly progressive fan fiction *Being Liquid* relies on several genderswap fan tropes that naturalize troublesome assumptions about gender. As mentioned earlier, one of the most common of these tropes is having formerly male characters learn how to shave their legs after becoming female. *Being Liquid* presents similar tropes during a conversation between Teddy and Victoire in which they discuss his new female identity:

Mostly they talk about what it's like to be a woman. What's different, what's the same. How he enjoys walking with his hips, but can't do it in heels. How he'd much rather have his tits without a bra. How he has a hard time remembering not to laugh too loud. He explains that he prefers eyeliner to lipstick, but won't go anywhere near foundation.¹⁰¹

This discussion of "what it's like to be a woman" limits the experience of Teddy's transition to surface-level changes such as the difficulty of walking in heels, going "bra-less," and ranking different types of cosmetics. Popular fan tropes such as these, while alluding to Butler's idea that gender is constituted through a series of performative moments, ultimately end up reducing the female gender to mere superficial attributes. Already we can see that while *Being Liquid* does

¹⁰¹ Rotaryphones, "Being Liquid."

represent a more sophisticated exploration of gender than the average genderswap fic, it is still plagued by the problematic tropes that have been established and maintained in fandom for decades.

In addition to this stereotypical depiction of the female gender, *Being Liquid* also trivializes and negates transgender materialities. Earlier, I presented an excerpt from this fic showing how Teddy's first transition to female is performed at a lesbian bar. First and foremost, the very location of this gender transition (at a bar) falls in line with typical genderswap tropes, in which alcohol often provides a catalyst for queer experimentation. In addition, the excerpt indicates that Teddy's transition is met with approval: "By the looks on everyone's faces, he's fairly successful."¹⁰² The idea that Teddy is "fairly successful" at performing female gender corresponds to Butler's assumption that it is these external expressions that constitute gender, which denies the possibility that an inner gender(ed) essence exists. This assumption is troubling to Prosser, who contends that "the transsexual doesn't necessarily *look* differently gendered but by definition *feels* differently gendered from her or his birth-assigned sex."¹⁰³ Here, *Being Liquid* functions akin to Butler's *Gender Trouble* – it glosses over the possibility that a feeling of gender dysphoria can provide the generative ground for transgender subjectivity.

As indicated by the above excerpt, *Being Liquid* frequently privileges "looking the part" of gender. In addition to dismissing the experience of gender as an internal feeling, this also invokes the troubling concept of "passing," which implies that transgender people can only be

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 43.

legitimized through successfully achieving an “ideal” presentation of one gender or the other. Teddy’s immediate and successful passing as a female glosses over the real threat of discrimination and violence that transgender people often face when attempting to pass in highly gendered spaces (such as public bathrooms). The tension in *Being Liquid* is that it presents a queer utopia where transgender individuals like Teddy can freely test out their gender fluidity; however, this utopia excludes the real world consequences that transgender people experience in a heteronormative society like ours.

Another example of how *Being Liquid* negates the lived experiences of transgender individuals is through the depiction of Teddy’s gender transitions as nonchalant: “It’s a natural, easy transition by now. It’s liquid, just like the rest of him.”¹⁰⁴ Buying his first set of female clothes represents Teddy’s recognition that his transitions have become an integral part of his fluid identity:

[H]e knows it’s no longer a game. It’s become a form of stress relief to discard his masculinity on occasion like a burdensome winter cloak. Sometimes he can hardly concentrate at work, he’s so anxious to change bodies, and when he does it’s liberating. Other days, being female is far too restrictive, and he’s just as happy being a bloke.¹⁰⁵

Teddy’s fictional ability to cast off his male body “like a burdensome winter cloak” is not a luxury afforded to nonfictional transgender individuals. In reality, if a transgender person feels like their biological sex is “far too restrictive,” they may choose to alter their body through sex reassignment surgery, a process that requires an unwavering level of commitment that *Being*

¹⁰⁴ Rotaryphones, “Being Liquid.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Liquid does not acknowledge. Also, Teddy's reference to gender transitions as a form of "stress relief" presents a superficial account of how psychological issues like gender dysphoria or the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body affect transgender individuals. The characterization of Teddy as being able to slide back and forth between genders at will, like Butler's metaphorical drag queen, "demotes gender from narrative to performative" and effectively negates the possibility that transgender individuals *do* rely on "the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and subjectively experienced."¹⁰⁶

In a final example of how *Being Liquid* presents a problematic view of gender, we must recall an excerpt from my preliminary reading. Earlier, I discussed how Rotaryphones privileges Teddy's fluid (trans)gender identity over cisgender identity: "Sometimes [Teddy] feels sorry for solid people and their stifling, unchanging bodies, their restrictive masks."¹⁰⁷ In theory, this does offer a progressive alternative to heteronormative ideology by heralding transgender identities as automatic subversions of the gender binary. In reality, however, this privileging of fluidity over fixity ultimately reinforces the very gender hierarchies that Rotaryphones' characterization of Teddy strives to dismantle. Much like the critique of Butler's implication that "transgender is queer is subversive,"¹⁰⁸ the idea that Teddy's ability to change his sex and gender at will makes him somehow less restricted by his gender than "solid people" creates another binary system in which transgender implies liberation and cisgender implies oppression. Furthermore, this

¹⁰⁶ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 29, 69.

¹⁰⁷ Rotaryphones, "Being Liquid."

¹⁰⁸ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 29.

implication does not account for the possibility that many transgender people *wish* to be firmly rooted in a particular gender: “there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be*.”¹⁰⁹ Even more importantly, the presentation of Teddy’s fluidity as a symbol of freedom and unrestricted biology does not account for the experiences real transgender individuals feel when coming to terms with their own sex and/or gender transitions. As expressed earlier by fan Iambic Kilometer, the dysphoria that accompanies such an immense physical, emotional, and psychological transition would unlikely be described as subversive by a transgender person. The implication that Teddy’s fluid identity is inherently transgressive presents a utopian view of transgender identities and bodies that, while progressive in theory, ultimately precludes more complex iterations of gender, including those that address the lived challenges of these queer identities.

Being Liquid’s Paradoxical Position

Reading and re-reading *Being Liquid* can help to indicate how genderswap fics that present more complex iterations of gender often fall into a rather paradoxical position. While, on the surface, these fics attempt to address some of the essentialist views of gender that dominate popular texts, they often also end up reaffirming many of these problematic and troublesome assumptions. The final line in *Being Liquid* offers a metaphor for its paradoxical position within the genderswap genre. While lying in bed with Victoire, Teddy decides that “he’s grateful for

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 32.

being liquid. But he's also happy to have something solid sleeping next to him."¹¹⁰ While I, as a queer acafan, am also grateful that *Being Liquid* offers such a fluid account of gender, I am also wary of the more solid iterations of heteronormativity that lie quietly in the margins.

The paradoxical position of *Being Liquid* highlights the types of complex fan negotiations that take place when writing genderfuck fan fiction: between a fan desire to “revel in comforting tropes” and an activist imperative to address “real world concerns.”¹¹¹ But just how much responsibility do fan authors like Rotaryphones actually have (or, *should* they have) when it comes to writing fan fiction? With derogatory labels like *issuefic* often attached to stories that carry an obvious morally prescriptive message, it can be a challenge for writers to integrate complex social issues into their fics without seeming preachy or didactic. To me, fans are not ultimately responsible for ensuring their fics present a comprehensive account of gender and sexuality (or how would they have time for an actual plot?). However, I also believe that queer fans *do* have this prerogative and should strive to represent more nuanced iterations of queerness in their stories. After all, online fan fiction is sometimes the *only* space where the specificities and intricacies of non-mainstream queer identities are represented. This is precisely why fics like *Being Liquid* are important, despite their flaws.

If we take *Being Liquid* to be an indication that a fan impulse *does* exist to present more nuanced iterations of queer and (trans)gender identities in genderswap fan fiction, then we can begin to examine the ways in which this activist impulse has political potential to effect

¹¹⁰ Rotaryphones, “Being Liquid.”

¹¹¹ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 124.

widespread changes in fandom. The problem is, the traditional genderswap genre just isn't equipped for these complex discussions (because of its established generic conventions and problematic fan tropes). But precisely *because* of the inadequacies of genderswap, there emerged a collective need for a new and more specific genre that *could* explicitly address these issues. Fics such as Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid* that strive to present complex iterations of gender, effectively bridge the gap between the traditional genderswap genre and the newly emerging genre of transfic. Transfic is all about striving to convey nuance, complexity, and specificity through its tropes, characters, and narratives that account for a full-range of transgender experiences. And it does so without compromising the more "spurious and voyeuristic" motivations behind writing genderswap fan fiction.¹¹² In Chapter Two, I will explore precisely how these tensions within the genderswap genre paved the way for transfic.

¹¹² Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid* is *almost* successful in dealing with both of these sets of demands (but it's still pretty good). In other words, Rotaryphones' fic reflects an ideal example of how the gap can be bridged between traditional genderswap and transfic.

Chapter Two – Beyond Queering: Transfic Fan Fiction

You know what I want to see in source material? I want to see someone transgendered save the world, and pass while doing it. I want to see the guy win the transgirl. I want the genderqueer person in a position of power, kicking ass, taking names. [...] Right now, that's not happening. But it can start in fandom, and I'm not going to give up looking for it.
 ~ Iambic Kilometer, *Dreamwidth*

In Chapter One, I discussed how certain types of genderswap fan fiction demonstrates that many fans are politically invested in the welfare of their own communities. Genderswap not only enacts Alexander Doty and Nikki Sullivan's strategies for queering popular culture, it can go *beyond* these strategies when fan authors intentionally write complex iterations of gender (that are often bolstered by academic theories) into their fics. However, the genderswap genre is not necessarily equipped to handle the presentation of more nuanced queer and transgender identities. As we saw with Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid*, the genderswap genre, on the surface, undermines heteronormativity through genderfucking popular characters like Teddy Lupin; however, it ultimately ends up reaffirming troublesome assumptions about transgender individuals through the use of problematic fan tropes. The paradoxical nature of genderswap fics like *Being Liquid* – ones that strive to address complex queer identities but also rely on problematic tropes – provides a starting point, according to Busse and Lothian, for exploring the activist impulse of these genderswap fan writers. To examine the ways in which fans enact their political agency in order to effect widespread changes in fandom, an alternative genre of genderfuck fan fiction must be considered: transfic.

Transfic (“transgender fan fiction”) refers to stories about transgender characters that explicitly identify *as* transgender. Like all fan fiction, transfics “poach” characters and settings from existing popular texts (such as Harry Potter) and (re)write them as their own. As such, transfics can either be based on actual transgender characters in existing texts (although this is rare due to the lack of representation in mainstream media) or involve (re)writing popular cisgender characters as transgender. Like traditional genderswap, transfic falls under the umbrella of genderfuck fan fiction because it depicts characters that “fuck with” fixed sex or gender binaries. But transfic marks a departure from genderswap in its *intention*. With transfic, the imperative switches from a more playful “fucking with” gender (popular in genderswap fics) to a deliberate depiction of transgender identities as pointedly non-queer and non-fucked with. Unlike traditional genderswap, transfics are characterized by their presentation of sex and/or gender transitions not as accident, fad, or catalyst for queer sexual experimentation, but as premeditated choice. In short, transfics are stories about transgender characters who self-identify as transgender.

Transfic is a relatively new genre: the first known story to use the transfic label was *Changes*, a Star Wars fan fiction published online by Jane Sehrn-Ta in 2004.¹¹³ Since then, the transfic genre has come to represent a nuanced and progressive form of genderfuck fan fiction; one that explicitly addresses the “real world concerns” that pertain to transgender individuals.¹¹⁴ According to Busse and Lothian, every fanfic arises from these types of “intricate negotiations

¹¹³ “Transfic,” *Fanlore*, Organization for Transformative Works, October 2, 2008, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Transfic>.

¹¹⁴ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 124.

between fannish textual and activist cultural demands” and “fans vocally express their displeasure if a story has failed to fulfill both.”¹¹⁵ The creation of the transfic tag in 2004 (and its subsequent establishment as a genre in 2008) is an even larger manifestation of how these complex negotiations can effect widespread change in fandom: the emergence of transfic arose as a direct result of rampant fan frustration at the inadequacy of traditional genderswap to address transgender experiences.¹¹⁶ This fan-led imperative to pointedly tackle the “real world concerns” of their fictional subjects allows for these intricate narratives to be “intimately connected to queer and trans subcultural and activist discourses:”

Just as transgender historians have sought to (re)claim transpeople’s histories or to write them in to contemporary realities [...], so have some slash fans looked to draw *transgender realisms* from the metaphoric uses of gender changes which appear in genderfuck fiction.¹¹⁷

Unlike traditional genderswap, transfic is a genre that pointedly addresses these transgender realisms and materialities, which, to recall, refers to “the multiple realities of transpeople’s lives, from potential psychological turmoils to the mechanics of sex reassignment surgery.”¹¹⁸ Transfics do not ignore, negate, or push these transgender materialities to the margins; they explicitly foreground them *as* narratives and, in doing so, highlight the complexities of living as transgender in a cisgender-biased world. Transfic, then, reflects a two-fold fan-led political

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 123-24.

¹¹⁶ “Transfic,” *Fanlore*. According to *Fanlore*, “the majority of authors [of transfic] are trans or genderqueer themselves, many of whom are dissatisfied with traditional genderswap.”

¹¹⁷ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 124, 123, 120 (emphasis added). According to this model, transfics could help indicate “the ways different discourse communities intersect, constructively and creatively contaminating one another” (123).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

intervention: it not only directly critiques the transphobic gender tropes presented in genderswap fan fiction, but it opens up a pedagogical space that encourages positive and progressive depictions of uniquely transgender experiences.¹¹⁹

In this chapter, I wish to explore how transfic constitutes a compelling form of fan activism. First, I will further explore the emergence of the transfic genre as an example of how marginalized fans can effect change within their own communities (and perhaps even beyond). By utilizing accessible online spaces such as *Dreamwidth* forums, *LiveJournal* comment sections, and fan-edited *Wikipedia* pages, fans were able to compile an archive of transfics, which ultimately aided in the eventual establishment of the transfic genre. In my discussion of transfic, I wish to pick up where Busse and Lothian leave off in their “Bending Gender” article, when they suggest that genderfuck fan fiction provides “an excellent location to begin exploring the political potential of communal affective expressions within this particular community of amateur online writing.”¹²⁰ To me, the link between transfic and fan activism becomes even clearer by examining how the relatively new discipline of transgender studies also reflects, in itself, an activist intervention in queer theory.

In my second section, I will analyze another story by fan author Rotaryphones, a transfic entitled *The Relative Truth* (2009). A close reading of *The Relative Truth* using the critiques of transgender studies scholars Prosser and Halberstam will demonstrate how transfic goes *beyond*

¹¹⁹ I am not claiming that *all* transfic reflects a political resistance to heteronormativity; rather, that the emergence of this category as a response to the inadequacies of genderswap gives it potential to be analyzed as such.

¹²⁰ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 123.

Doty's queer reading strategy. Transfic not only rewrites cisgender characters as transgender, but critiques and provides alternatives to the transphobic gender tropes that have come to characterize traditional genderswap fan fiction. These fan-driven narratives, thus, constitute a tactical resistance to not only the heteronormative bias in popular texts (Harry Potter), but to queered versions of these texts in fandom itself (Harry Potter genderswap fics). The imperative to write transgender materialities into these fics aligns with the wider project of transgender studies: both emphasize the importance of autobiographical narratives, which allow the transgender community to occupy their own unique space in fandom, academia, and beyond.

Transgender Fan Activism

In this section, I wish to discuss how queer fans use nonfictional online writing spaces (such as forums and comment sections) to engage in debates and commentaries on issues that pertain to fandom. These discussions (and the spaces in which they take place) are called *meta* and their content ranges from specific inquiries (e.g. the psychological motivations behind a character's actions in a certain fan text) to larger "rants" (e.g. the lack of representation of queer women of colour in popular texts). What concerns me in this thesis is how these interactive meta forums function as pedagogical spaces in which marginalized fans can express their concerns, frustrations, rants, and, most importantly, offer possible solutions to problems facing their online communities. In particular, I wish to explore how transgender fans have used these online meta forums to facilitate participatory interactions that have led to widespread change in queer fandom.

Through my survey of online meta forums I have noticed two major concerns facing transgender fans in fandom today: the lack of transgender figures in popular texts (which leaves fandom as the only legitimate space for the representation of gender-variant characters) and the subsequent misrepresentation of these transgender characters in genderswap fan fiction. The first of these two problems, the lack of transgender characters in popular media, is addressed in transgender fan Iambic Kilometer's meta post "Five+ Ways Being Transgender in Fandom Really Sucks, and Why I Stick With It Anyway." In the post, Iambic describes the frustration of waiting idly by for representations of transgender characters in popular texts. In the meantime, Iambic asserts that he (and presumably other transgender fans) must look to fan fiction for characters that even remotely resemble his own gender identity and experience. The problem is, according to Iambic, genderswap fan fiction is plagued by inaccurate representations of transgender identities:

I turn to fandom to look for transgendered characters. And there are fic out there in which characters are written as another gender, or as another sex. But far more common are fic with the misnomer "genderswap." Generally I see two kinds of "genderswap:" the sort in which a character is written as always having been a cisgendered member of the "opposite" sex, or the sort in which a character magically has their sex swapped. [...] Long story short, most "genderswap" [...] offends me hugely, and manages to avoid all the opportunities to bring trans issues into the mix.¹²¹

As Iambic indicates, the most common place to find transgender characters (or any queer play with gender) is in the genderswap genre, which (as outlined in Chapter 1) is deeply beleaguered by problematic tropes that more often than not preclude accurate (or any) representations of

¹²¹ Iambickilometer, "Five+ Ways."

transgender materialities. And Iambic is not alone in his condemnation of genderswap as a missed opportunity to “bring trans issues into the mix.” A meta post by dissatisfied fan Thepurpleswitch also criticizes genderswap fan fiction:

The thing is that “genderswap” as a genre is living the unexamined life right now. If I got the feeling that an author was writing with some mindfulness of what sex and gender actually *are* and *mean* (even if the author’s beliefs about those things are different from mine), I would be much less likely to stop reading their fic in disgust. It is the assumption of gender and sex binaries and that crazy gender = sex thing which drive me batshit insane.¹²²

These meta rants allude to an opportunity for the transfic genre to emerge as a positive alternative to genderswap, one which would allow for the opportunity to foreground transgender materialities. It is at this point that a fan named Kyuuketsukirui instigated two major changes to queer fandom that helped establish transfic as its own legitimate genre of fan fiction: he launched the “transfic” page as an independent entry on the *Fanlore* wiki¹²³ in October 2008 and he compiled the first multi-fandom transfic master list (or archive) on *LiveJournal* in February 2008. The launch of the transfic wiki page is significant, first and foremost, because it put forth a concrete definition of transfic: “a term used to denote fan fiction about transgender characters, usually characters who are not transgender/transsexual in canon.”¹²⁴ More than this definition, Kyuuketsukirui’s wiki page also established several other facts about transfic: it pinpointed the

¹²² Thepurpleswitch, “Put Your Hand Between an Aching Head and an Aching Wound,” *LiveJournal*, May 10, 2010, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://thepurpleswitch.livejournal.com/605450.html>.

¹²³ *Fanlore* is a fandom wiki devoted to “preserving the history of transformative fanworks and the fandoms from which they have arisen.” It, along with the fan website *Archive of Our Own*, is a major project of the *Organization of Transformative Works*, a nonprofit fan-run organization established in 2007. For more information visit: <http://transformativeworks.org>.

¹²⁴ “Transfic,” *Fanlore*.

earliest known transfic story (Jane Sehn-Ta's *Changes* from 2004), it positioned transfic as part of the larger genderfuck genre but as distinct from genderswap, and it suggested that transfic emerged as a result of transgender fans' dissatisfaction with traditional genderswap. In addition to the wiki page, Kyuuketsukirui's creation of the multi-fandom transfic master list on *LiveJournal* in February 2008 established the first known archive of these newly emerging transfics. Since its inception, the master list has been relocated across several media platforms,¹²⁵ but in one of the original archive posts on *Dreamwidth* in 2008 Kyuuketsukirui states the reasoning behind this transfic project:

I've seen a huge increase in the number of transfics this past year, so hopefully that's a new trend. (I'm certainly doing my best to ~~pester~~ encourage everyone I know to write more!) [...] I'd definitely like to get the word out about the list, not only to let people know they can link here if they write/read something, but to hopefully encourage more people to write trans characters if it's not something they've thought of before or if they considered it, but thought there wouldn't be an audience.¹²⁶

In its early stages, Kyuuketsukirui also allowed the master list to receive comments by other fans. In one comment, fan Juliandahling remarked on what the master list meant to them:

OHMYGOD. I am [...] so glad you are compiling this. I've spent the last couple days being super depressed about all the various offensive gender!swap [sic] [...] fics out there, and how much random transphobic crap there is in a lot of fanfiction these days, and then someone referred me here [...] and I feel way

¹²⁵ The transfic master list was originally founded on *LiveJournal* (February 2008: <http://kyuuketsukirui.livejournal.com/812985.html>), but over the next few years it was moved to *Dreamwidth* (February 2008: <http://torachan.dreamwidth.org/1211710.html>), then *Delicious* (May 2009: <https://delicious.com/transfic>), and finally *Pinboard* (May 2009; last updated in August 2012: <http://pinboard.in/u:transfic>). Now, Kyuuketsukirui directs transfic fans to use the tags on *Archive of Our Own* to search for transfics (<http://archiveofourown.org/tags/Trans/works>).

¹²⁶ Kyuuketsukirui, "Multi-Fandom Transfic Master List," *Dreamwidth*, February 3, 2008, accessed January 6, 2014. <http://torachan.dreamwidth.org/1211710.html>. On *Dreamwidth*, Kyuuketsukirui goes by the name Torachan.

better. You have no idea how nice it is to find writing that validates my experience.¹²⁷

Since the founding of the master list and its subsequent entry on the *Fanlore* wiki, the total number of transfics has been steadily increasing. In an email I received from Kyuuketsukirui he remarked, “When I started the list there were less than twenty fics on it (when I first started keeping a private list a year or two before that, there were less than ten), now there’s so many I completely gave up on the master list.”¹²⁸ Indeed, the increasing volume of transfics became so unwieldy that when Kyuuketsukirui relinquished the transfic project in August 2012 there was already an archive of 584 transfics. Now, he directs transfic fans to the “trans” tag on the fan-created site *Archive of Our Own*, which currently houses a total of 2420 transfics (as of April 14, 2014).¹²⁹ This growth is significant because even as recent as 2007, three years after the first purported transfic was written, the genre of transfic was still not well known, even among genderswap fans like Thepurpleswitch: “I’ve never ever seen a

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Kyuuketsukirui (under the name Torachan), email message to author, January 6, 2014.

¹²⁹ “Trans,” *Archive of Our Own*, Organization for Transformative Works, 2007, accessed February 23, 2014, <http://archiveofourown.org/tags/Trans/works>. It is an indisputable *fact* that there are vastly more transfics online. But collecting a more accurate set of statistics as evidence for this would be difficult, even impossible, due to the wide variety of social media platforms, websites, blogs, and listservs in which these fics are circulated and produced. A fic can disappear as quickly as it can appear. But to get an idea of how quickly the transfic archive is expanding on *Archive of Our Own*, we can look at my own statistics. On January 14, 2014 there were 1656 under the “trans” tag and on February 23, 2014 there were 1799. That amounts to an increase of 143 transfics in just over a month. Even more staggering is the fact that on April 14, 2014 the number increased to 2420, a further increase of 621 transfics in less than two months.

‘genderswap’ fic where Character A actually *wanted* to be female before the swap occurred. That might be kind of neat.”¹³⁰

As we have seen, fans like Kyuuketsukirui have been the ones to take initiative in their own communities by creating, maintaining, and sharing new genres like transfic. In my view, these fan activities push beyond “ideological” or “abstract” forms of resistance and, in doing so, qualify as the more measurable tactics of “civic engagement and political participation” that Jenkins upholds as key tenets of fan activism.¹³¹ More specifically, the fic *The Relative Truth* by Rotaryphones can be analyzed as a starting point for exploring how transfic reflects an activist intervention in queer fan fiction. Comparing Rotaryphones’ *Being Liquid* (a genderswap from 2008) and *The Relative Truth* (a transfic from 2009) not only helps visualize the emergence of transfic as a genre distinct from genderswap, but offers particular insight into how marginalized queer fans are able to express and respond to criticism within their own communities. Where the meta forum rants by fans like Thepurpleswitch and Iambic Kilometer signal the necessity for change, Rotaryphones’ fics can indicate the ways in which fans have enacted their political agency. Namely, through the opening up of a new space (the transfic genre) for the presentation of specifically transgender voices and experiences without compromising the fictional nature of these narratives.

¹³⁰ Thepurpleswitch, *LiveJournal* (emphasis added).

¹³¹ Jenkins, “Cultural Acupuncture,” [1.8].

The Relative Truth by Rotaryphones

The Relative Truth focuses on a major canonical character from the latter-half of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, Luna Lovegood. Luna first appeared in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* where she befriended Harry Potter and became an eager member of the anti-Voldemort resistance movement called Dumbledore's Army. "Loony" Luna is generally considered eccentric, intelligent, whimsical, and an independent thinker, whether through her odd fashion choices (Dirigible plum earrings and a necklace made of Butterbeer corks) or her belief in strange mythical creatures (the Crumple-Horned Snorkack and Nargles).¹³² In canon, Luna becomes close friends with fellow classmate Neville Longbottom, who is notoriously shy, sensitive, and lacking self-confidence. In fandom, Luna and Neville are a popular romantic pairing despite Rowling dispelling the possibility of a romance in canon. The pairing is so popular, in fact, that Luna and Neville *shippers* (from "relationshipippers," fans who strongly believe in a romantic relationship between two characters) have created their own fan community that celebrates this pairing (complete with rules, official flags, lingo, etc.).¹³³

Rotaryphones' transfic *The Relative Truth* is based on this popular pairing. In this fic, Luna was born and raised as a biological male (named Lucas) but has since transitioned to the female gender (although her biological sex remains male).¹³⁴ Although the story takes place at the height of the Second Wizarding War, when Dumbledore's Army is preparing to defend the

¹³² It was Luna's lifelong dream to pursue the mythical Crumple-Horned Snorkack, a creature she did not succeed in finding.

¹³³ This fan community is called "The Government Stole My Toad" and can be found here: <http://forums.fictionalley.org/park/showthread.php?s=f6ef2c9e63485faf03c067365292b135&threadid=131153>.

¹³⁴ Because Luna is MTF transgender, the correct pronoun to use is "she."

Hogwarts castle against Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters, the primary narrative focuses on Luna's life as a transgender woman.¹³⁵ The plot follows Luna as she begins dating Neville during their final year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Although they pass as a heterosexual cisgender couple, what Neville doesn't know is that Luna identifies as male-to-female (MTF) transgender. In the latter half of the narrative Luna comes out to Neville, who does not react favourably to the news, but all is resolved when he eventually comes to terms with her gender identity and loves her for who she is. They live happily ever after.

The Relative Truth as Fan Activism

In this section, I will make a case for *The Relative Truth* as a compelling form of fan activism – one that “pushes beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance.”¹³⁶ The subversive effect of this fic is two-fold. First, *The Relative Truth* undermines the cisgender bias of J. K. Rowling's series by portraying Luna as a transgender woman. Not only does this queer the character of Luna (from cisgender to transgender), but it also prompts a re-reading of the character in any subsequent versions of her character (David Yates' films, Warner Bros.' advertisements, online fan fiction, etc.).¹³⁷ But the second and more radical effect of *The Relative Truth* lies in its deliberate *unqueering* of Luna. Instead of using magic as a catalyst for queer sex or gender play (as is the case in the majority of genderswap fics), *The Relative Truth* emphasizes

¹³⁵ Rotaryphones also supplements the narrative with frequent flashbacks to help illustrate how Luna came to terms with her gender transition at different points of her life.

¹³⁶ Jenkins, “Cultural Acupuncture,” [1.9].

¹³⁷ For instance, after reading *The Relative Truth*, my re-reading and re-watching of various versions of Harry Potter changed as I questioned my own original assumption that Luna is cisgender.

Luna's *choice* to undergo a gender transition, focusing not on "dealing" or "coming to terms" with a new (unwanted) queer identity, but on *living* as her authentic self. Framing this fic as a story about an MTF transgender woman (and not, in the case of *Being Liquid*, about a man who magically discovers the pleasure in changing sexes and genders at will) is what immediately sets *The Relative Truth* apart from traditional genderswap. *The Relative Truth* explicitly addresses transgender experiences, including not only the physical and psychological issues that come with a sex or gender transition, but also the social stigmas attached to looking or feeling differently gendered (such as discrimination and transphobia).

This shift in representation – from genderswap and "fucking with" to transfic and "living with" sex and gender – reflects an activist intervention in fandom that parallels contemporary transgender critiques of foundational queer theory. Unlike traditional genderswap fics and Rotaryphones' *Being Liquid*, which assign an inherently transgressive or liberatory quality to gender-variant identities, transfic and *The Relative Truth* present transgender subjectivity as being firmly rooted in both the sexed body *and* the gender binary. Transfic, as implied above, reflects a more nuanced approach to the representation of transgender subjectivity in fandom; one that, like transgender studies, begins its analysis with transgender materialities. In my close analysis of Rotaryphones' *The Relative Truth*, I will discuss two specific transgender critiques. The first is Prosser's narrative model of gender from *Second Skins*. The second is Jack Halberstam's investigation of the institutional spaces in which the gender binary is codified and policed from *Female Masculinity*. Much like the way transgender studies can, according to Prosser, provide "a way to bridge academic theory and real lives as we transition into the next

millennium,”¹³⁸ transfic, too, can provide a way to bridge fictional narratives and transgender realities in fandom.

Much like the autobiographical impulse in transgender studies, *The Relative Truth* immediately sets the stage for an autobiographical telling of Luna’s story from a distinctly transgender perspective. This autobiographical theme first manifests itself in the narrative during a flashback conversation between a young Luna and her mother:

“Have you ever heard your father say that ‘truth is relative’?” her mother asked. [...] “Well, what he means is that what’s true for one person isn’t necessarily true for another. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Luna nodded. She knew exactly what it was like to know one kind of truth, while everyone around her knew another. Perhaps this was the moment she’d finally find the answer she’d been looking for. She could feel excitement bubbling inside of her as she asked, “How do you know something’s true, then?”

Her mother smiled. “That’s something you have to decide for yourself. It all depends on what you believe in and how you see the world. But you have to be careful, because some people think their truth is the best truth, and they’ll try to force it on you.”¹³⁹

Although this excerpt could be construed as general advice if it were found in any other fan fiction genre, the fact that this story has been pointedly labeled as transfic suggests that this discussion of truth as “something you have to decide for yourself” is a specific gesture to Luna’s transgender subject position. This is even further emphasized by the fact that Luna’s identity as a transgender woman is firmly embedded in the narrative style. The narration consistently uses her preferred name “Luna” and the pronoun “she,” even during flashbacks to her youth when she appeared as male. This is a marked departure from traditional genderswap fan fiction, in which

¹³⁸ Prosser, “Transgender,” 321.

¹³⁹ Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth,” *LiveJournal*, May 5, 2009, <http://lgbtfest.livejournal.com/84559.html>.

gender pronouns are habitually misused.¹⁴⁰ In setting up transgender subjectivity as “one kind of truth,” *The Relative Truth* rejects the authority of the cisgender bias and, instead, positions a self-identifying transgender subject at the centre of the narrative. This, and other examples, can begin to illustrate the specific ways that fans have helped shape the transfic genre as a space in which transgender characters can be more inclusively represented in fandom.

Rotaryphones’ framing of *The Relative Truth* from a uniquely transgender subject position also aligns with Prosser’s critique of *Gender Trouble*. According to Prosser, Butler’s theorization of the transgender subject “demotes gender from narrative to performative” and, in doing so, implies gender is constructed through a series of moments that are “repetitious, recursive, disordered, incessant, above all, unpredictable and necessarily incomplete.”¹⁴¹ In *Second Skins*, Prosser rejects Butler’s theory of gender performativity and, instead, suggests that a narrative model of gender can more accurately reflect transgender subjectivity by accounting for the fact that many transgender individuals do not wish to be viewed as “performing” their gender. In the narrative model of gender, the sexed body serves as starting point for a “narrative of becoming” a biological man or woman.¹⁴² Rotaryphones’ *The Relative Truth* takes up the narrative model of gender in one of its flashbacks to Luna’s childhood:

¹⁴⁰ As mentioned, transgender fans like Iambic Kilometer take issue with the frequent misuse of gender pronouns in genderswap fics: “If a character has suddenly switched bodies, you do NOT switch pronouns. They haven’t switched genders. If a character is transgendered, you refer to them by their gender pronoun, not their sex pronoun” (“Five+ Ways”).

¹⁴¹ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 29, 30.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

Luna had always known she was different, but she didn't always know why. The answer never came to her in a sudden childhood epiphany, or a single moment of realization. It was more of a gradual awareness over time.¹⁴³

Here, Rotaryphones is making an explicit reference to Luna's narrative of becoming a transgender woman. Luna's gender identity does not appear as a series of performative moments, rather, as a narrative – a “gradual awareness over time.” Later in the story, when she confesses to Neville that she is biologically male, there is another reference to Luna's narrative of becoming:

At this point, Luna just wanted the confession to be over with. She settled on the simplest explanation, even [if] it wasn't strictly true. “Well – I am a boy, Neville.”

Saying those words for the first time in her life had a strange effect on Luna. It was as though she had stepped out of her own skin, the skin she had worked so hard to feel comfortable in over the years.¹⁴⁴

This idea that Luna had “worked so hard” to feel at home in a body that did not biologically match her gender accounts for the possibility of gender as an internal feeling – something constituted from within – rather than constructed externally through a series of performances and other semiotic markers. This is a departure from Teddy's characterization in *Being Liquid*, whose transgender identity is first established by his outward experimentation with female gender attributes.

The Relative Truth further refutes the performative model of gender by suggesting that this model actually works to reaffirm rather than resist heteronormative assumptions about gender. In a flashback scene to her eighth birthday party, Luna (or Lucas, to her parents) asks about the difference between boys and girls:

¹⁴³ Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth.”

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

“But why are boys and girls different? Is it just because they have different bits?” This was all very uncomfortable to talk about with her parents, but Luna was trying hard to act just as mature as they were.

“No, dear,” her mother said with a tense smile. “There’s more to it than just that.”

“But I don’t get it,” Luna complained, quickly getting upset but trying not to show it. “Who gets to decide?”

Her mother’s smile faded, and she looked to Luna’s father to respond. “No one decides, Lucas,” he said with paternal authority. “It’s just the way you are.”¹⁴⁵

Here, Luna’s father figuratively embodies the heteronormative bias when he oppressively conflates Luna’s sex and gender. This enforcement of paternal authority dismisses the possibility of viewing gender as a narrative of becoming, an authority that Luna does not accept.

As implied in the above excerpts, in *The Relative Truth* Luna trusts and relies on her own intuitive feelings of sex and gender as generative ground for her MTF transition. In *Second Skins*, Prosser critiques Butler’s performative model for using the transgender subject to imply that gender is defined externally: “*Gender Trouble*’s theoretical economy of gender relies heavily on a notion of the body as that which can be seen, the body as visual surface.”¹⁴⁶ Instead, Prosser asserts that corporeal interiority, the “*feeling* of being sexed or gendered,”¹⁴⁷ plays a key role in how transgender subjectivity is constituted. In *The Relative Truth*, Luna’s transgender identity is also strongly rooted in her intuitive feeling that she is trapped in the “wrong body.” Here, Prosser’s insistence on the importance of the “materiality of the sexed body”¹⁴⁸ is exemplified in a particularly touching scene when Luna comes out as transgender to her father:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 43.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

“I’m not a boy.”

“What are you talking about? Why not?” said her father, seemingly at a loss for words.

“I don’t know. I’m just not.”

Her father continued to stare at her blankly, and she wondered what he saw. Surely if he loved her he would be able to tell who she really was, and that he had merely made a mistake for all these years. It was perfectly understandable – she was in the wrong body, after all.¹⁴⁹

Luna’s confident assertion that she is in the “wrong body” echoes Prosser’s insistence that gender be defined not visually but *materially*: “being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality *feels* like.”¹⁵⁰ The ability to express this distinctive feeling of wrongful embodiment can, according to Prosser, help give transgender people agency to instigate a gender transition, access quality healthcare, apply for new identity documents, and most importantly, assert their subject position *as* transgender. This portrayal of Luna marks a radical departure from the transgender character presented in *Being Liquid*, in which Teddy not only wishes to identify outside of the gender binary for subversive purposes, but also has the *ability* to change his sex and gender at will.

In addition to this emphasis on transgender subjectivity and embodiment, *The Relative Truth* also reflects critically on institutional spaces within the narrative; spaces through which transgender individuals like Luna must successfully navigate. In this fic, Luna’s sense of belonging to the female gender (despite being biologically male) directly correlates to her feelings of belonging (or not) in public spaces within the Hogwarts castle. Upon her arrival at Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat placed her in Ravenclaw house, where intelligence, wit, and wisdom

¹⁴⁹ Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth.”

¹⁵⁰ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 69 (emphasis added).

are highly valued traits. During a narrative flashback, it becomes evident that some of the older Ravenclaw students did not think Luna belonged in their house (for reasons unknown) and, therefore, subjected her to bullying.¹⁵¹ Despite being harassed, Luna remained confident that Ravenclaw was, indeed, her rightful place: “Luna knew perfectly well where she belonged; it was just that no one else agreed with her.”¹⁵² This not only calls attention to the difficulty Luna faces in finding a safe space for herself within the castle, but is also an explicit reference to her transgender identity: Luna knows she belongs in a female body despite being born a biological male.

This reference to a hostile public space within the Hogwarts castle evokes Jack Halberstam’s discussion of “the bathroom problem” in *Female Masculinity* (1998). To recall, Halberstam describes how the division of public bathrooms by gender not only represents an institutional space in which gender is highly codified and policed, but that these spaces can be extremely dangerous for transgender people. According to Halberstam, the bathroom problem “severely limits [transgender peoples’] ability to circulate in public spaces and actually brings them into contact with physical violence as a result of having violated a cardinal rule of gender: one must be readable at a glance.”¹⁵³

Much like public bathrooms in Muggle society, the wizarding world, too, has highly codified spaces in which gender is constantly policed. In J. K. Rowling’s series, as Acascias

¹⁵¹ Rotaryphones does not explicitly indicate the reasoning behind Luna’s bullying, but in the context of *The Relative Truth* transphobia can be safely assumed as the primary cause.

¹⁵² Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth.”

¹⁵³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 23.

Riphouse points out in his book *The Harry Potter Companion*, the female dormitories at Hogwarts are regulated by magic: “If an uninvited boy get[s] to the 6th step of the girls’ dorm staircase, it sets off an alarm, a long loud Klaxon-type wail. The steps shift into a giant slide and the offending party is sent back to the common room, chastened but unharmed.”¹⁵⁴ In *The Relative Truth*, Rotaryphones offers a critique of the highly gendered public spaces inside the Hogwarts castle in what I call, borrowing from Halberstam, “the dorm room problem.” The first time we encounter Luna in this fic is when Neville stumbles upon her sleeping, not in her dormitory, but in the magical Room of Requirement. During the subsequent conversation with Neville, Luna reveals that she has been recently unable to sleep in her female dormitory. Neville assumes she has been mistakenly locked out, but Luna quickly corrects him: “It’s more that my dorm has decided it doesn’t like me anymore.”¹⁵⁵ Later in the story, Neville’s curious inquiry as to why Luna is still unable to enter her dormitory provides a catalyst for her coming out as transgender.¹⁵⁶ Luna confesses:

“Dumbledore used to place an Exception Charm on the girls’ dorms for me so I could sleep there,” she explained. “The most recent charm wore off about halfway through the term. So that’s why I can’t sleep there anymore. The castle still thinks I’m a boy.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Acascias Riphouse, *The Harry Potter Companion* (College Station: Virtualbookworm Publishing, 2003), 125.

¹⁵⁵ Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth.”

¹⁵⁶ At first, Luna deflects the question by humourously responding, “I told my roommates that my bed had a nargle infestation.”

¹⁵⁷ Rotaryphones, “The Relative Truth.”

Much like in canon, Rotaryphones' version of Hogwarts uses magic to police the dormitories. Even though Luna is "readable at a glance" and, therefore, has the ability to outwardly "pass" as female, the Exception Charm cast upon the dormitories reflects another problematic view of gender as being biologically determined. Despite the fact that Luna both identifies and expresses as female, here, gender is policed by (magical) force.¹⁵⁸ By calling attention to Luna's "dorm room problem," Rotaryphones uses her fic to call attention to the issues many transgender people face on a daily basis when navigating through these highly codified public spaces. *The Relative Truth*, therefore, presents a more nuanced and multifaceted depiction of transgender subjectivity than *Being Liquid*. While I acknowledge that not *all* transfic reflects this more nuanced approach, the comparison of these two distinct genres of genderfuck fan fiction can help illustrate this particular activist trend in fandom.

Transgender Interventions in Fandom and Beyond

The emergence of the transfic genre reflects a fan-led activist intervention in traditional genderswap fan fiction. It is precisely through transfic stories such as *The Relative Truth* that transgender realisms and materialities are permitted as the primary narrative. And it is the context in which these fics are produced, circulated, and discussed that allows for the emergence of these politicized critiques. For me, these productive dialogues between fan readers and writers

¹⁵⁸ The policing of public spaces directly relates to the political backdrop of Rotaryphones' *The Relative Truth*, namely, the Second Wizarding War, in which Dumbledore's Army (founded by Harry, Hermione, and Ron) was preparing to defend Hogwarts against Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters. Before his death, Professor Dumbledore was the only one who knew about Luna's transgender identity, which meant that through magic he was able to procure a safe space for her to sleep. With the death of Dumbledore and the proliferation of Voldemort's Death Eaters, the only (known) queer space inside Hogwarts has vanished.

open up queer pedagogical spaces in fandom. These online spaces can range from the particular, such as meta forums and comment sections, to the more widely organized, such as *LiveJournal*'s "Queer Fest," Kyuuketsukirui's "Transfic Mini Fest," and the fan-created archive of fan fiction *Archive of Our Own*.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, thinking about the ways in which fans have responded to the inadequate representation of transgender characters in genderswap fan fiction can help us begin to conceive of how fans use their agency to effect change in other ways. At the very least, the political potential of genderfuck fan fiction manifests itself every time a fic compels a reader to reimagine a queered version of a beloved character they assumed to be straight. Much like our first encounter with Luna Lovegood in *The Relative Truth*, who is found hanging upside-down in the Room of Requirement, the strategy of these fan activists is simple but effective: "It's always good to see things from a different perspective. You should try it sometime."¹⁶⁰ That fans like Rotaryphones are actively involved in writing fics that foreground transgender materialities makes a compelling case for not only the discussion of transfic's intervention in genderswap as a form of fan activism but the insertion of transfic into a larger heritage of socially-conscious writing.

¹⁵⁹ "Queer Fest," in particular, will be discussed in my conclusion.

¹⁶⁰ Rotaryphones, "The Relative Truth."

Conclusion – Fan Activism in Pedagogical Spaces

Genderfuck fan fiction is a form of fan activism. On a narrative level, the genderfucked characters presented in genderswap and transfic call attention to the heteronormative bias in popular texts like the Harry Potter series. On a meta level, the online fan sites that house these fics provide a space where fan readers can discuss, comment on, ask questions, and critique stories by their favourite fan authors. It is the fannish discourse that takes place in these collaborative and participatory spaces that has potential to effect widespread changes in fandom. And the emergence of the transfic genre is an excellent example of how fans can be activists in their own communities. Thinking about the ways fans have responded to the inadequate representation of transgender identities in genderfuck fan fiction can help us begin to conceive of how fans use their agency to effect change in other areas of fandom and beyond. In particular, how the collaborative nature of fan fiction communities can extend to larger and more organized manifestations of queerness, such as *LiveJournal's* “Queer Fest.”

“Queer Fest” is an online fan festival held annually to “celebrate and examine the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, genderqueer, asexual, intersex, and trans* characters through fanfic.”¹⁶¹ How “Queer Fest” works is that fans submit story “prompts” to the community moderators prior to the start of the festival. These prompts set the parameters for a given story, which could include fandom, characters, plot, setting, and a specific LGBT

¹⁶¹ “Queer Fest,” *Dreamwidth*, February 24, 2013, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://queer-fest.dreamwidth.org/474.html>.

theme.¹⁶² Possible prompts could involve “stories about coming out, figuring out sexual orientation or gender identity, planning your awesome same-sex wedding, attending pride celebrations, figuring out your place in the queer community, the politics or social structures involving queer individuals in fictional worlds, or dealing with prejudice.”¹⁶³ After the community moderators categorize the hundreds of submitted prompts by fandom, writers (anybody with a *LiveJournal* account) can claim one of the prompts. After their fic is written and submitted, it is posted to the community board for others to read, share, and provide positive feedback for discussion during the festival.

What strikes me about “Queer Fest” is the way this self-sustained festival foregrounds community participation in all of its aspects: the organization (prompt submission, moderators, claiming period), production (writing, co-writing), and circulation (reading, discussing). In doing so, fans create a system of textual production in which they are infinitely more likely to read content that directly pertains to their own interests and experiences (e.g. a bisexual person reading about bi-phobia) than they would through mainstream media.¹⁶⁴ In addition to the production of these queer narratives, the comment sections of each fic house anxieties, debates,

¹⁶² A sample prompt from the 2008 “LGBT Fest” (which, not-coincidentally, is the exact prompt that inspired Rotaryphones’ *Being Liquid*) reads: “433. *Harry Potter*. Teddy Lupin/Victoire Weasley. Teddy Lupin has lived his life as male but when he becomes involved in a relationship with Victoire Weasley, who is only interested in other women, he uses his Metamorphmagus shapeshifting abilities to become female. Their friends and family believe the two are a heterosexual couple. Victoire wants to come out as a lesbian couple but Teddy is confused as to whether he is male or female, straight or lesbian.” (“LGBT Fest,” 2008).

¹⁶³ “Queer Fest,” *Dreamwidth*.

¹⁶⁴ Many fans even have the pleasure of reading a fic that was based on the specific prompt they submitted.

confessions, and questions about gender identity and sexuality that can help provide support and encouragement to queer fans who may not feel acceptance from their family and friends.

Ultimately, the pedagogical spaces opened up by fannish discourse function as popular and accessible alternatives to those of academic discourse. And the effects of these queer spaces are ubiquitous and extend well beyond fandom. Readers of genderfuck fan fiction are forced to “confront the political realities of their favored fantasies.”¹⁶⁵ Writers of genderfuck fan fiction can educate (and be educated by) others about the materialities that pertain to a full-range of queer identities and experiences. As comparative history scholar and fan Anna Zola Miller points out on her *Aca(fan)demic* blog,

Everything I know about gender I know because I participate in fandom. Fandom did not necessarily teach me these things directly – university classes and my own research and reading have often done that – but I would never have taken some of those classes, or done that reading, or gotten as much out of them as I did, had fandom not sparked my interest or given me experiences to relate to. Fandom was also responsible for teaching me basic, important, and non-academic things about gender – how to ask for preferred pronouns, [and] the deal with gender-neutral bathrooms.¹⁶⁶

That these types of educational experiences are taking place in fandom is the most compelling reason for asserting that genderfuck fan fiction (and its communities) is a powerful form of fan activism. I certainly do not suggest that *all* queer fans view their writing as a political act, nor can I turn a blind eye to the overwhelming number of fics that present problematic (and transphobic) representations of gender and sexuality. However, the implications of fans using

¹⁶⁵ Busse and Lothian, “Bending Gender,” 122.

¹⁶⁶ Anna Zola Miller, *Aca(fan)demic*, June 16, 2012, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://acafandemic.blogspot.com/>.

genderfuck fan fiction to achieve political ends, whether consciously or not, are multifarious, complex, and unpredictable. It is not the responsibility of all genderfuck fans to take on complex issues of representation in their stories (it is fan *fiction*, after all). But because these fics and online communities are spaces in which specific, intricate, and difficult presentations of gender and sexuality proliferate, it seems reasonable that, at the very least, fans be mindful of the queer implications of their fics. If we don't fight to assert and reclaim our own queer voices in these online spaces and bring academic discourse into the realm of the popular, who will?

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