Enabling/Disabling: Fanfiction and Disability Discourse
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Abstract: While fanfiction ostensibly provides a safe space to explore and challenge ideologies about *any* belief media texts reify, a review of fan studies literature shows little attention to disability from scholars in the field. This erasure seems odd, since Archive of Our Own, the fanfiction archive associated with the Organization for Transformative Works, lists "disability" in its list of "most popular" tags, and most fandoms include a significant body of texts that disable its characters ("Tags"). Blindness, deafness, injuries leading to mobility impairments, and other visible and invisible disabilities feature strongly as tropes in fanfictions themselves. Clearly fandom has something to do with disability of all kinds: physical, cognitive, and emotional.

Keywords: disability; fanfiction; tagging; labelling; normalization

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This special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* is founded on the idea that fandom has some kind of relationship to disability, disabled people, and disability studies. While there have been many efforts to sketch a general profile of who fans actually are since fan studies' inception (cf Henry Jenkins 1992; Constance Penley 1997; Camille Bacon-Smith 1992; Nancy Baym 2000**),** most to date have focused on gender identity and sexual orientation, so much so, that fan studies' unofficial founder Henry Jenkins' latest exploration of participatory culture, *Spreadable Media,* glosses over the presumption of women-writing-for-women quickly and without much need for explanation (29, 149-150). Indeed, fan studies has proceeded from a shared understanding that fandom's core identity stems from a rejection of hegemonic narratives about sex and gender, resulting in a radical denunciation of the production/consumption model that disseminates and reifies those narratives (Jenkins 1992, 18-19). While questions of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality sometimes appear in fanworks, the majority of fantexts engaging in what scholars recognize as "subversive" storytelling fit into the genre of slash fiction, works that create sexual and romantic pairings between two characters—and those characters overwhelmingly are male, white, and cishet, as one survey of fanworks found (centrumlumina "AO3 Ship Stats").

Thus, while fanfiction ostensibly provides a safe space to explore and challenge ideologies about *any* belief media texts reify, a review of fan studies literature shows little attention to disability from scholars in the field. This erasure seems odd, since Archive of Our Own, the fanfiction archive associated with the Organization for Transformative Works, lists

"disability" in its list of "most popular" tags, and most fandoms include a significant body of texts that disable its characters ("Tags"). Blindness, deafness, injuries leading to mobility impairments, and other visible and invisible disabilities feature strongly as tropes in fanfictions themselves. Clearly fandom has something to do with disability of all kinds: physical, cognitive, and emotional. While it may be easy to dismiss this relationship as escapism (in which disabled fans engage with media texts to avoid coping with social and physical difficulties) or to see disability as an easy trope on which fanfiction writers can base their stories (such as the "hurt/comfort" genre that often involves disabling a character to provide grounds for emotional intimacy), this relationship between disability and fandom is significantly more complex.

The temptation for both scholars is to simply include disability as a "value added" identity in the recognized methods of fan studies: ethnography, cultural studies, gender studies, and communication studies[1]. In recent years, the fields of literacy[2] and new media studies[3] have added their methodologies and concerns to fandom's ever-growing set of intersections, and it would not be unusual to just add disability studies as yet another field to weigh in. But there is something more substantial in the intersection between fandom and disability. Instead of just inserting disability into the growing field of social positions fan studies concerns itself with, a reversal of the standard practice may be in order: Instead of considering disability in terms of fan studies, a more generative approach might be to consider fan studies—and in particular, how scholars describe fanfiction—in terms of disability, agency, and access. This article attempts to show how fanfiction may be seen as another expression of the ways ability and disability are

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[1] Both Hellekson and Busse's introduction to fanfiction studies (*The Fan Fiction Studies Reader,* 2014) and Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington's similar overview of the field (*Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 2017) recognize these methods as part of the "first wave" of fan studies.
[2] See: Rebecca Black, *Adolescents and Online Fanfiction*, 2008.
[3] See Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*, 2010.

constituted by our cultural practices. To do so, fanfiction is considered not as a set of practices

but as an artifact that reflects agency-building and agency-denying systems in popular culture.

Choosing Our Terms: Agency and Act in Fan Studies

Fan studies may still be a young field, but with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the

publication of Jenkins' foundational *Textual Poachers,* many have paused to consider the

discourse, methodologies, and dominant paradigms that determine how we describe fans, what

they do, and why they do it. In its early stages, fan studies, largely due to Jenkins' influence, read

fan practices primarily as subversive rejections of the dominant culture, with a particular

emphasis on fanfiction, fanart, and fanvids as counterarguments against both the canon texts and

process by which mass media turn narrative into vehicles for reproducing the dominant

(heteronormative, capitalistic) culture in the first place. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's

2014 *The Fan Studies Reader* argues that the "second wave" of fan studies is less likely to

naively accept fandom as a wholly subversive act (79-80). This second wave, however, still

references subversion as its key term for analysis for reasons this article attempts to illuminate.

Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington's 2017 edited collection on fan studies

argues that we are already in the third wave, which "extends the conceptual focus beyond

questions of hegemony and class to the overarching social, cultural, and economic

transformations of our time, thereby offering new answers to the question of why we should

study fans" (7). While Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington promote a focus on "how we relate to

ourselves [and] to each other" (7) as fans, their introduction to the collection maintains a focus

on fan actions instead of the agency, access, or ability needed to complete those acts in the first

place. Their introduction's suggestion of a fourth wave of fan studies emphasizing the "affective

and identificatory dimension" (22) of fan acts, both of which may be seen as the result of a logically prior establishment of agency. The agency to read, understand, speak, and be heard all exists before the fanfiction itself, and this is where fan studies may find common ground with theories of disability and the activism, policy considerations, and the tensions between theory and lived experience that disability studies discourse articulates so well.

Trying to locate the place where the two fields share, as Kenneth Burke says, "a great central moltenness, where all is merged" (*Grammar,* xix) is the first step of re-seeing the terminologies both fan studies and disabilities studies rely upon to find new, productive lines of inquiry. For Burke, the words we use and the names we give to situations are the critic's primary objects of study: what does it mean, he asks, when we choose one set of words over another? How do those terms invite certain actions and prevent us from taking other points of view?

Finding the point where divergent and even contradictory ideas share a set of describing words and phrases helps scholars point to the motives and actions in relation to those terms. Our sets of terms create a "terministic screen" through which we filter the world, and doing so can be both creative and limiting[4] (*LAS, 44)*. For Burke, the terms we select as our means of analysis are vitally important because a chosen term's history, connotations, and associations "necessarily [direct] the attention into some channels rather than others" (*LAS,* 45). More radically, the terms we opt for can change the "nature of our observations" about a given topic, making it impossible for us to see anything other than what those words provide us with; as Burke says, "a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (*PC,* 70). It is difficult, then, for critics to discuss the intersection of "disability" and "fandom" because the critic's main method is to select one screen

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[4] Burke's "terministic screens" overlaps with many of his other phrases. In short, the terministic screen is a language-based filter, like a polarizing lens that lets in only one direction of light; by using one set of terms to name our situations, we necessarily deny others and become unable to see other views. David Blakesley gives the example of an act that some may call "cyber terrorism" (one set of terms) but others might see as "social activism" (121-123).

over the other and filter their observations accordingly. Instead of finding the merger point where disability studies becomes fan studies (and vice versa), it is more natural for us to focus on representations of disability in fan fiction, or to psychoanalyze why disabled people may identify with specific characters.

Burke's "central moltenness" assumes the two fields in question have some "participation in a common ground" (*Grammar* xix). Burke suggests analyzing situations through the words we use to describe our motives; he calls his analysis model the "Pentad" because it includes five ways to categorize our terms[5]. A set of terms can be focused on the Agent (who is acting), the Act (what is being done), the Agency (how it is enacted), the Scene (the context of the action), or the Purpose (why the action was done). By categorizing our sets of terms, we can find which of those five are *privileged* in our discourse about certain topics. We might say, then, that disability discourse is particularly focused on Agency; our theories and our analyses tend to privilege questions of ability, of *how* something is accomplished, or identifying the lack of agency certain social systems construct. In fan studies, particularly the first and second wave, the emphasis lands on Act—fans have "practices" and engage in specific "poaching" techniques that we worry about defining as subversive or not. But implied within fanfiction's potentially revolutionary Act is the Agency to participate in the conversation at all. Fanfic is made possible through various Agencies: literacy, the digital platforms fandom now lives on, and access to the canon texts. Any discussion of fan studies is necessarily embedded in a discussion of Agency, and that means disability studies may have much to offer. In fact, the practices and study of fandom then can and should be seen as already participating in disability studies discourse, and while not neutrally

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[5] Burke's later addition of a sixth term, Attitude, might also be a generative term for analyzing the language of specific fan communities through sociolinguistic studies. As Attitude is more strongly tied to affective studies than issues of embodiment, I leave out the implications of reading the language of fan studies through "Attitude" in this article.

interchangeable, the sets of terms, associations, and models we have constructed to explain both

of these areas of study can reveal missed opportunities for theorizing in each field.

The initial impulse of most critics when considering the merger point of these two areas

of study is to consider "disability" as shorthand for any kind of Othering or power imbalance,

such as the socio-economic imbalance Jenkins tends to highlight in his work. The temptation is

to simply collapse "disability" studies into other discourses about power; but as Simo Vehmas

and Nick Watson argue; such mergers dangerously ignore the particularities of disabled bodies,

resulting in attitudes that influence morally questionable policies. Instead of flattening the two

into the merger point of "power," then, I want to suggest that fan scholars borrow the discourse

of disability studies—of embodiment, recalcitrance, normativity, and access—as the primary

screen through which to view all fanworks, regardless of their engagement with disability

explicitly. Doing so shows that this is more than an intersection of disenfranchised identities; by

reading fandom and its acts as always/already and primarily disabled, we can find new areas of

concern in both fan studies and disability studies. Reading fandom studies as disability studies

not only shows us the power imbalances and failures of systems to grant personhood; it also can

help us locate possible re-enabling strategies available in fannish practices.

Fan Fiction as Negotiated Reading

Traditionally, fan studies as a field has viewed fanfic in terms of production and

consumption; in *Textual Poachers,* Jenkins elaborates on fans' resistance through reading

through Michel de Certeau's idea of power and authority in "active reading" (Jenkins, 1992, 24).

Jenkins' use of de Certau in that first major fan studies text directly challenged the dominant

critical theory of media consumption at the time, the Frankfort school, which sees mass media

entirely as a hegemonic exercise constructed to discourage critical interaction from its audience; such a screen invites the language of production and consumption, seeing *readers* as *consumers* instead of as critics. While traditional media studies had used the production/consumption terms to denigrate fans as passive receptacles for dominant ideologies, Jenkins argued for a different set of terms, redefining fandom not as an excess of "adoration" (to borrow from the title of Lisa Lewis's 1992 fan studies anthology), but a critical method for negotiating the ideologies emerging from mass media narratives. For Jenkins, the critical stance fans take on interrupts the cycle of production and consumption that continually recreates our dominant culture. Jenkins, and most fan scholars that followed, emphasized early on that active reading in fandom is more than just an individualized resistance to single texts—more than a reading against the grain as taught in literature and composition classrooms, but a standard procedure of textual interpretation shared by a subculture that signifies a much larger, more radical approach to the power structures involved in maintaining the status quo. Jenkins' thesis ties together several strands of neo-Marxist cultural theory to argue that the group we call "fans" has emerged in direct response to the systems of power maintenance embedded in our mass media. He gives a much more succinct version of this thesis in a *New York Times* interview when he defines fandom as "a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk." In that interview, his personal blog, and his highly accessible series of media studies books in the last twenty-five years, Jenkins has articulately justified fanfiction to academia and the general public as an important and subversive cultural activity in this and his other fan studies work. However, for the most part, Jenkins' work emphasized the ownership, authority, and consumption issues in fandom, and that production/consumption screen has tended to control the terminology of fan studies.

While the terms of the production/consumption cycle create one fruitful terministic screen for fan studies, such a focus masks the other two ideas from Jenkins' quote: damage done and folk. Both ideas point to ways that ability and disability might have already made their way into our understanding of fandom: Jenkins chooses a term set that references an idealized "whole" individual who exists among others on an equal playing field. When he considers hegemony through media narratives to be a kind of "damage done," Jenkins necessarily refers to a normative, fully functioning society—a body of individuals that runs smoothly and at peak performance. This phrasing or the *terms* that filter our perception of the situation, invoke a sense of the normal against which he posits a damage that must be healed. Jenkins' use of "folk" also connotes a group or body of individuals who are less elite; folk stories, folklore, and the adjective "folksy" point to traditional values and commonly held beliefs—in other words, lower-class formations of normal that challenge the dominant epistemology.

Jenkins' choice in these terms demonstrates how disability, normativity, and agency are already part of the discourse on fandom, and this suggests that disability studies might share terminologies, concerns, and solutions with fan studies. I spend time here with this dated quote from a newspaper interview instead of an academic monograph because it serves as a reflection of the field of fan studies as a whole: While his description offers multiple avenues of possible research, one—fandom as a kind of corporate resistance—has dominated fan studies' focus since its inception and that terministic screen continues to influence most of our discussions. While numerous books on fan studies followed Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* using similar methodologies and arriving at similar conclusions[6], few have questioned his and the other early fan studies

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[6] What we might call the first generation of fan studies emerging in the 1990s set the terms for the field that many today are just beginning to work against. Notably, Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1991), composed roughly in tandem with Jenkins' work, provided an autoethnographic analysis of *Star Trek* fandom in the 1980s, using second and third wave feminist lenses as her framework. Constance Penley's *NASA/Trek* (1997) also took on a

scholars' initial claims about fanfiction's operation in the production-consumption cycle,

continually putting fanfiction in terms of consumer culture. More recently, for example, fan

scholars have taken up the idea of fandom's "gift economy" as a strategic and symbolic

interruption to the consumption/production cycle[7], and numerous works consider fandom's

products from within that system. Tisha Turk, writing for *Transformative Works and Cultures*,

argues that fans' resistant readings are only part of their disruption and critique of a socio-

economic system that uses narrative to reify cultural norms; fans also directly interrupt the

production cycle by creating their own system of exchange outside the official channels. This

"gift economy" results in fans creating texts, visual art, and videos but also handmade goods as

gifts without the expectation of reciprocity. Such a failure to match labor to exchange, Turk and

others argue, both critiques the capitalistic system fans are indebted to for their narratives and

builds a community through that resistance to "symmetrical" reciprocity in labor and reception

of product (Turk 3.5). From this angle, it is tempting to point our scholarship even on disability

and fanfiction in a single direction: how disability resists hegemonic narratives given to us in

commercial media. The focus on fandom as the Act of resistant reading logically suggests a

consideration of what is being resisted instead of the Agency needed to make that resistance

possible.

Finding Agency Through Opposition

       This terministic screen of consumption is necessary and unavoidable. But as Burke notes,

there is a point logically prior to that discussion of Act that includes considerations of Agency.

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feminist lens, but merged her discussion with cultural studies approach to the US space program. Nancy Baym's work on early online soap opera fandom (culminating in her book *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (2000) also influenced the field's methodologies, assumptions, and critical lenses.

[7] Hellekson 2009, Tisha Turk 2014, and Booth 2010

One way to help find where fan studies becomes disability studies is to focus on that Agency in more detail, to analyze how we have chosen to name and provide terms for the agencies involved in reading media texts *prior to* the acts of fic writing, commenting, headcanon theorizing, fan vidding, and creating art that have become the focus of fan studies scholarship. One way to pin down the conditions that make fannish acts possible is to consider Stuart Hall's model of mass media communication. Hall's work is often mentioned in fan scholarship, but it is rarely used beyond reference. For example, Hellekson and Busse claim that fan scholars are "indebted" to Hall's iconic "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse", which gave us the "incorporation/resistance paradigm[8]" (9) but further discussion of that model is only glossed in the rest of their anthology. This nod to Hall is not uncommon; his model appears as a brief reference in fan studies texts, but while it is recognized as important, scholars have tended to use the essay only as a starting point to justify other claims about the resulting fan identities, communities, and texts that emerge *after* the initial encoding/decoding process.

Outside of fan studies, media scholars have heavily critiqued, explicated, and extrapolated the implications of Halll's model, which attempts to explain the potential ways that readers can "decode" the messages producers of mass media texts (particularly television) use to communicate their texts. In his first text about the encoding/decoding model, Hall argues that all human communication is dependent on "encoding" signs and signifiers so that recipients can "decode" and understand the signified meaning, but in texts produced for popular culture by large corporate entities, that process becomes a major reinforcer of culture, including the power

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[8] Hellekson and Busse use this phrase as a shorthand to reference the reading process. Readers may either incorporate the ideas by accepting the logic and emotional appeals of the mediated story or readers may choose to reject those ideas and their reasoning. Hall's model in its various versions attempts to explain the assumptions, associations, and attitudes needed for readers to both understand the ideas and then respond to them, either by accepting or rejecting the ideologies encoded in the narrative.

structures, constructions of personal and collective identity, and self-policing that comes with such "culture" in late capitalism. For understanding the ways that normative bodies are displayed, naturalized, and celebrated by the codes, Hall's essay gives us much more than a model of transmission and reception. On the surface, Hall argues that media—television and movies, but also the nightly news and any other event turned into story-- encodes shared values in a common discourse that must then be decoded on the other side. For example, to tell a love story, media producers must know the common ways we have all agreed to represent love and what kinds of love are appropriate to represent on screen. Both the producers and their audiences should share that same set of codes for what love looks like: not just the plot of a love story, but the way characters look, color use, eye line matches, and patterns of editing are all part of how we encode "love story," and the repeated use of these sets of codes across stacks of media texts tells us what is normal and natural.

Since the encoding process leads to normalization and naturalization, Hall defines mass media communication as "a complex structure in dominance" (508). Beyond just representations symbolically forming the norm, though, the process by which we are disciplined and trained by media to appropriately decode the stories told in movies and on television is a tool of domination. The very act of encoding and decoding requires both producers and audiences to participate in systems of access and control. Just as learning a language requires speakers to accept the rules of grammar, the set of possible sounds, and the stress patterns or tonality of a particular dialect, learning the "language" of mass media means accepting the basic structures it is built on: the "frameworks of knowledge" the dominant culture assumes its audience has access to that help them understand a text, the "relations of production" that in American popular culture texts are embedded in a capitalist economic system and a democratic government, and

the "technical infrastructure" that media corporations own and control, letting them create mass culture through that means of production Those structures of meaning making in film and television—by their very nature of *being* a key way we now make meaning in our culture—are invested in reproducing systems of dominance and oppression. For Hall, learning to decode is more than learning to read; it is learning to identify the dominant culture's set of definitions, assumptions, and attitudes that inflect all encoded ideas in some way. We must accept not only that women have traditionally been equated with the domestic sphere in media texts, for example, but we must also accept that such an equation can, in fact, be determined *for* us by those corporations without our input. In Hall's model, mass communication is not possible without both producer and consumer agreeing to the power dynamic that encoding and decoding reproduces.

The stories our fandoms are built on are not possible without this acceptance of the system of power; to read a soap opera, we must first let a producer have the power to determine broad cultural norms. We must accept the "cipher" needed to decode the text—but just for a moment (508). Central to fan studies' starting assumptions is Hall's claim that the act of reading, decoding, and entering the discourse of the dominant culture is dependent on what he calls a series of "determinant" moments. Determinant moments are the points in the production and consumption process at which audiences may accept or reject codes and even the frameworks of knowledge, production system, and ownership of the technical infrastructure that exist to produce those codes (509); and those determinant moments can create a disjoint between the encoding and the end-point decoding (510). While there is "some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments" (515), those in the chain of production can select *how* they position themselves in that process.

Hall does not directly reference fans or fandom in his first version of the
encoding/decoding theory, but the description above could be explained as the process by which
a fan becomes a fan. Fandom viewed this way—and the way Jenkins, Bury, Hellekson, and most
of the major fan studies scholars insist upon—is defined not by an adoration of the text or its
creators but by what these readers *do with* the text. Hellekson and Busse identify two kinds of
fan Acts, and in doing so, they separate fandom into two basic types: Affirmative and
transformative (3-4). The affirmational fans decode the canon text in predictable ways, accept its
messages, and collect artifacts related to the text (3) but the transformative fans—the usual
subject of fan studies scholarship—take a different approach. The differences between these fan
acts align well with Hall's theory of encoding/decoding model.

Hall divides communicative subject positions into three camps: "dominant-hegemonic,"
or what happens when the encoding and decoding align well and both message and the
production system are reproduced; "negotiated," or what happens when the audience decodes in
line with the dominant position but questions some of the ideologies it reproduces; and
"oppositional", or what happens when the audience decodes in a "globally contrary" way (516-
517), and he implies that readers can opt in to any one of these. Put another way, fans occupying
the dominant-hegemonic position interpret the canon text as intended by its encoded semiotic
cues, leading to fic, art, vid, and other discourse that takes as its starting point the validity of the
easiest-to-access reading. These fans do not read against the grain, but still find ways to reclaim
some voice in the production process by constructing fanfic that expands the canon text in ways
that do not challenge the specific ideologies that are encoded in the original text. When a
Supernatural fan writes a Tumblr post analyzing Mary Winchester's gestures in a particular
episode or a *due South* fan pieces together what Ray Vecchio was doing during his Season 3

absence resulting in a Vecchio-centric story about his time as a mob boss, they are working in the dominant-hegemonic realm. These kinds of stories and analyses have often been a secondary focus for fan studies, as they seemingly fail to offer scholars new, exciting ways to understand the process of cultural production.

Fan scholars' job has traditionally been to point to the ways in which fans enter into negotiated or oppositional positions, which seem to offer a kind of hope to media critics against the usual narratives of hegemonic indoctrination through television and film. The idea of decoding as potentially "contrary" has remained central to fan studies' claims of fantext production as a kind of resistance to the reproduction of dominant hegemonies, creating a "way of seeing" fandom as necessarily subversive[9] that scholars are now beginning to question. That questioning is built into Hall's theory: Hall's own claims that encoding and decoding are part of a system of dominance must also be considered if we are going to think of fanfiction as a kind of disability discourse. In naming the mass media communication system as a kind of "domination," Hall's theory implies a kind of cultural transmission process that can enable and disable its users through its dependency on norms to produce understandable codes with common signs and signifiers, through the ways bodies are permitted to receive those codes (or not), and through the ways such transmission authorizes and reauthorizes such cultural production in the first place—audiences are audiences because they (initially, see below) give

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[9] Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* lists ten genres of fanfiction as he saw it in 1991. Of these ten fic genres, only about half *require* a negotiated or oppositional position, with "eroticization" and "genre shifting" as the two most recognizably subversive fic types (169-176). Despite this, Jenkins' descriptions of the other genres uses language that suggests even the dominant-hegemonic readings are revolutionary; when he describes fic that imagine post-canon events when a series has ended, for example, Jenkins references "the vagaries of commercial broadcasting" leading to canon stories that "[fail] to realize their full potentials" (164), leading to dissatisfied fans who feel hurt by the production process' emotional rollercoaster. Fanfic becomes a way of healing that hurt. Importantly, Jenkins reading of these otherwise dominant-hegemonic fic as counter-cultural requires viewing fanfic at one level of abstraction higher than the text itself: To see the Act of fic writing in general as the real subversion instead of the specific ideologies and representations an individual fanfic can create. Even in

authority to the canon creators. To even *have* fans, fan fiction, and fan communities that can critique the hegemonic messages, then, there must first be an implicit acceptance of the system of production of popular culture and the encoding/decoding powers within.

Fandom as a Frame of Acceptance

Implied in Hall's theory is a sense of agency through physical, cognitive, and social ability: both the individual text's meaning and the social relationships involved in mass communication must be adeptly re-encoded and re-decoded at multiple stages of creation and reception in order for the audience to participate in the act we call "reading." The audience for the television program *Supernatural*, for example, must be able to receive the text (through sight, sound, or both), and use their knowledge of American culture to decode the text's possible messages about masculinity, ritual, and morality. Fans must also grant power, though, to the producers of this text, relinquishing their own agency for a brief moment. In other words, before fans can insert their own readings of *Supernatural*, replacing the patriarchal, heteronormative mythos with, for example, fanfiction celebrating the two brothers' potential sexual relationship, they must initially accept the premise that the producers of a teen drama on a broadcast network *can* create, replicate, and reinforce such cultural institutions as patriarchy and mythology, temporarily disabling their own agency in a determinant moment. Only once they are initially dominated by the production systems encoding of the dominant culture can fans choose to or re-enable themselves to critique the messages they are receiving.

Media texts can and do reinscribe the same normative messages time and again—and the semiotic system does, in fact, train us to read them in the "preferred" manner (Hall 515). But there are multiple times when the message and the encoding process can be disrupted and the

normative message can fail to take hold for a given audience. Not only can accidental miscoding and decoding happen, but fans, in the move between a neutral reception and an affective, personal interpretation can purposefully choose to decode with the wrong cipher—what Jenkins calls resistant reading or what Hall designates as oppositional positioning. And often the agency for such a resistant reading comes from what Burke calls the "recalcitrance" (*PC,* 255) of the fans' own bodies. Recalcitrance is what happens when abstract ideologies run up against the real, embodied lives of the people being asked to accept those controlling ideas. While rhetorical scholars disagree on what recalcitrance might mean for the interaction of symbolic action and real activity, the term is useful here as a reference to the ways the physical existence of audiences may interrupt the progression of the norms.

In fact, Hall's model builds in this interruption to the smooth communication of dominant ideologies by suggesting that the decoders—the recipients of the message who are aware of the rituals and relationships involved in encoding and decoding—can "talk back" to the encoders and their resulting message by themselves encoding a different set of values in response to the presented text (508). Fan scholars like Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (173), Jenkins, and Hellekson and Busse find this resistant reading to be key to the current formulation of fan studies, but usually this model emphasizes the "subversiveness" of fans' oppositional readings instead of the ways those fanfics depend on fan agency. While the second wave of fan studies has been far more critical of fan culture and does not assume that communities of fans can completely overcome the hegemonic narratives produced by mass media, the language of subversion persists as the standard for analysis; it has become our "occupational psychosis" in Burke's terms (*PC,* 48)—the idea that preoccupies us so much that we miss other pertinent interpretations.

To avoid becoming so preoccupied, we might choose to frame fan studies through questions of Agency instead of Act, and with it, consider what choices fans have available when engaging in those acts. Hall's model explains why fans are ultimately forced to engage in some acts that impair them culturally and symbolically: The very systems we use to communicate in mass media rely on all parties accepting the power imbalance between producer and audience. Encoding and decoding, with all of the cultural assumptions, knowledges, and myths needed to fully participate in those acts, require audiences to be able to accept the dominant ideologies. That coding system, though, also requires audiences to accept the notion that some entity *should* have the power to create and maintain ideologies in the first place, whether that entity be a major media organization or a self-policing fan community that substitutes one set of values for another at the risk of being alienated.

In Burke's terms, the encoding/decoding model of mass communication requires seeing the world through a "frame of acceptance" (*ATH,* 5). Brett Biebel explains Burke's concept of "acceptance-based frames" as interpretive choices that "encourage acquiescence to a given order while rejection-based ones encourage the overt transformation of the same order." Fans accept the "given order" of encoding and decoding and each fan must "[gauge] the historical situation and [adopt] a role with relation to it" (Burke *ATH,* 5). Fans agree to their role as receivers and decoders, acknowledging the power relations needed for mass media to exist. Even as a *Supernatural* fan writes Sam/Dean slash fic, imagining an incestuous relationship that subverts the hypermasculine, heteronormative canon story, she first accepts the canon story's starting points and the power the CW broadcast channel has to shape not only *Supernatural* but other contemporary myths that form our popular culture. But Burke suggests as well that acceptance is not passivity (*ATH,* 19): Working within the system allows for a substitution of terms while

avoiding collapsing the mechanisms already in place. This view is a less radical understanding of fandom than what fan scholars have traditionally offered, but it is an important one: it acknowledges the conditions of access and agency that are necessary for fanfic and other fannish acts to happen (*ATH,* 4).

We might, then, turn our criticism away from a purely consumer/producer model concerned with subversiveness of fanfiction by substituting Agency for Act and finding the point at which fan studies and disabilities studies merge: concerns of agency, access, and ability. If we choose instead to view "encoding/decoding" as enabling/disabling, we generate an entirely new set of concerns for fan studies: that of the body and its limits.

Fans Decoding and Enabling

Trading out the language of mass media subversion for the language of individual and communal ability lets us suggest something that has direct bodily ramifications: that our mediated texts--all of them, from film to television to music to books to magazine articles to paparazzi photos to, yes, fanfiction--continually enable and disable those engaged with the text, reinscribing the notion of an able body and mind. First, media texts address the ability/disability binary through their norming mechanisms and codes about what bodies look like and do—they construct the notion of ability through our symbol systems, creating or denying agencies of all kinds in the process. When disability scholars speak of the "social model" of disability, they are speaking about how our encoding of social principles relies on a shared sense of "able" to make texts mean at multiple points of the distribution process. But the social model also includes how our codes reify those same notions by spreading them and further normalizing them. Much of disability studies' intersection with media studies has already tackled this problem, and

arguments for better representations of ability and media texts that counter the current norm are needed now more than ever, particularly from fan studies.

The act of encoding and decoding is still central to the larger enabling and disabling structure created by mass media communication's system of semiotic exchanges. All meaning-making through symbols is part of this structure; all mass media texts are a performance of symbolically disabling and enabling, norming and alienating, that naturalize the ideas of abilities and disabilities in the first place. Mass media narratives train us in the ability to read stories (and their related ideologies) along with the rest of the normal audience; they disable bodies through their socially constructed ideas of what normal bodies look like and what acts those bodies are naturally capable of performing; and they discourage working against the codes divide average from monstrous, capable from impaired. Storytelling turns into the ultimate source of power distribution, and--the part fan studies has thus far missed-- with those stories comes a control over how bodies are perceived, called into a subject position, and subsequently treated. In short, the very process of encoding a narrative in mass media results in an act of disabling and enabling. When producers create, approve, transmit, and market texts that turn individuals into dominated subjects, they create the conditions of possibility for disability as an organizing principle. "Enabling" in media narratives, then, is both a metaphor for agency and a real principle of social change, for without a shared mythos on which to base our understandings of the power of bodies, we would have difficulty articulating the difference between *can* and *can't*.

But such power is not unidirectional, and that balance brings to cultural studies a kind of optimism. As Hall notes, we can, in fact, read against the standard code and interpret texts against the grain, regaining agency *through* the disempowering process of mediation. This process happens, arguably, to all readers, but fanfiction is a special case of this encounter with

structures that grant and deny ability, access, and agency. Fanfiction helps us to understand ways that the process of encoding--which is naturally disabling in its representations of bodies, in its limits to access, and in its limitations of acceptable reading--can, for fans, be empowering moments. Through reading in Hall's oppositional stance, fans can turn those disenfranchising master narratives into an enabling determinant moment: a moment when the power structures of storytelling in mass media are overturned as they run into recalcitrant bodies that deny the normative, normal, reading process and the norms of embodiment that accompany such stories. Fanfiction is the inscription of that moment when the reader, denied autonomy by the canon text, overthrows the dominating system of encoding by mass culture producers. In this moment, the reader becomes the writer and decoder becomes encoder, and that is why fan scholars should turn our attention to the language of disability discourse: conceptually prior to the subversive practices we identify as "fannish" is the system of meaning making that enables some speech to constitute reality and others to be dismissed as Other. Such mediation of social conditions through language is what Burke calls "symbolic action"—action that occurs through symbol use, or, as J.L. Austin might say, "doing things with words."

Fanfiction as Disability Discourse

Fanfiction can, of course, reproduce the difficulties of encoding and decoding as symbolic actions that create the conditions of impairment and empowerment; even when fans read oppositionally, writing fanfiction requires an encoding process that can impair and exclude. Still, fanfiction's intervention in the formation of a monolithic disabling force in the form of mass culture narratives offers scholars in both fields an alternate language for exploring how norms of embodiment, bodily recalcitrance, and symbolic or rhetorical actions form and are

informed by popular texts. This revisioning of fanfiction in particular as a subcategory of disability discourse requires a reexamination of fan text production at multiple points. It might be prudent to take Burke's suggestion for analysis called "perspective by incongruity" (*PC* 69), the rearrangement and recombination of principles that are often considered to be in separate realms or a "methodical misnaming" that reveals our preoccupations and associations. Interchanging disability studies concerns with fanfiction reveals fandom's agency-laden acts of encoding and decoding, letting us see fanfiction as participating in the cultural construction of ability through not only its representations of disability but its affirmation of the enabling and disabling systems of mass media narratives.

But it would require much more intensive examination of each term in the set if we were to follow through on all of the questions this perspective by incongruity suggest. I suggest a few avenues of research and questions for each of the four terms as they appear in fan practices—places we should be focusing our attention on as we consider how fan studies might be revised in terms of disability studies. Each of the four terms below share some overlap, and at times, the questions they generate point to tensions in fan studies and the way we as scholars figure "fandom" as a unified whole—our assumptions about fans, about what fanfiction can and cannot do, and about what fans *should* be doing. I hope that these contradictions that arise can be generative instead of irrational, and they can be used to help scholars reflect on how it is our differing interpretations might be either more in line with one another or even more divergent when we consider fan studies as discourse about bodily agency instead of ideological resistance.

Encoding: Of those texts that gain a large fandom, what ideas about the body, ability, and disability are canonically present? What normative ideas about bodies are formed by both

explicit discourse about disability and implied preferences for idealized bodies? And how do these encoded norms result in either praise or criticism from an audience? These initial questions are, perhaps, the domain of traditional disability studies, but we should note here which texts fans prefer to attach to and why fans might find certain texts more approachable.

More importantly, scholars should note the methods of encoding-as-disabling that are used by media creators, including the ways that media texts may be unreadable by Deaf or hard of hearing fans, blind fans, or neuro-atypical fans who receive and decode social and emotional cues differently than the encoding/decoding process assumes. Producers' encoding methods, built on frameworks of prior knowledge, technological ownership and access, and the economic systems of production tend to exclude and disable a large possible audience.

Following Hall, a more complex analysis would examine the various moments in production and transmission in which fans must accept or reject the normative codes transmitted to them. To what extent do fans repeat codes *because* some common language is needed to transmit the story? Fans' metadiscourse critiquing their own works have strongly tackled racism in recent years, and the social media platform Tumblr has allowed for a proliferation of such self-reflection; posts exploring ableist tropes are fewer, but do exist. chaoticallyclev's analysis and critique of fanfiction about Bucky Barnes from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is particularly apt. The user pleads with fans to "stop taking Bucky's [prosthetic] arm" as a plot device, since such acts in fiction perpetuate a misunderstanding of bodily autonomy and trauma ("Stop Taking Bucky's Arm"). Fans' re-encoding of Bucky's problematic, disabled body (and mind) shows the difficulty of resisting the dominant-hegemonic subject position and how easy it is to accept the logic of the normative narratives handed to us.

Decoding: As fan scholars have traditionally approached it, fanfiction is mostly engaged in the act of decoding canon texts. In fandom, this decoding is visible both in writing that is more expository and writing that argues through narrative means. While most fan studies scholarship focuses on fanfiction as the key text, other compositions also inscribe fans' decoding activities. The genre fans often refer to as "meta" performs a non-fiction close reading of the text, essentially an amateur version of an academic's literary criticism, but this genre has not received nearly the attention it deserves, given the insight it can give into fans' processes of interpretation, acceptance, and rejection of the privileged or intended interpretation of a text. Similar in richness for critical analysis would be, "headcanon," the fan practice of presenting to an audience their "personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character, or the nature of relationships between characters" ("Headcanon"). Headcanon-based texts (sometimes narrative, sometimes not) may help scholars explain the affective and bodily modes of interpretation in which the situated, lived experience of the individual directly impacts their ability to decode a text along one of Hall's three positions. Whether a fan takes on the dominant-hegemonic, the negotiated, or the oppositional reading of a text depends greatly on their context; the nature of their embodiment; their race, class, and gender identities; and their social upbringing.

While we will never have access to the moment of decoding without a further encoding to communicate that interpretation, fanfiction in particular gives insight into the moment of deciphering because the resulting fictional text that speaks back to the canon usually follows traditional literary forms. Examining individual fantexts, "genres" and tropes of fandom, and trends within fandom subgroups (such as the racial tensions evident in *Star Wars* fandom) provide a way to discuss *how* fans decode--including the media production tools that have in

recent years begun to directly address fans and their reading practices that stand in opposition to the dominant-hegemonic decoding process and the interpretation that yields. Following Hall's original formulation, are they accepting the text, rejecting the text, or negotiating the text? And if they are negotiating and rejecting, as fan studies has long claimed, what texts are they creating to make those stances? And how are fandom-specific practices like writing fantexts, sharing headcanon with a fan community, and making and exchanging gifts, being exploited in media production cycles, particularly as the "feedback" that Hall identified as essential to television decoding in particular makes its way back to producers who must make choices about how they, in their privileged positions as gate keepers of culture, in turn decode and take positions with or against fans. We must also consider what social positions fans occupy that train them in rejection, acceptance, and negotiation positions to begin with, including the difficulties disabled readers may have in accessing the canon text in the first place.

For example, producers see marketing value in exploiting fan enthusiasm for profit by appearing to accept headcanons and common fan readings ("fanon"). *Teen Wolf* producers, for example, created a strangely pro-fan advertisement asking fans to vote for the program in the Teen Choice Awards. The ad features two of its commonly slashed characters on a boat (a pun for "ship") that seems to indicate the two would be involved in a romantic relationship in the next season. Of course, such a relationship never transpired. Similarly, *Supernatural*'s many "meta" episodes reference the two main slash pairings for the show (Sam/Dean and Dean/Castiel), sometimes denigrating the slash pairings, as in the first metafictional episode in Season 4, when Sam and Dean are disgusted that fans would write them into romance despite/because of their fraternal relationship. Upon finding slash fanfiction about their lives, Dean exclaims, "They do know we're brothers, right?" When Sam replies in disbelief that it

"doesn't seem to matter," Dean slaps the laptop shut and declares, "Well that—that's just sick!"

("Monster at the End of This Book"). On the other hand, later episodes of *Supernatural* show the

producers' acceptance the fan readings, when in the 200th' episode Dean tells a group of

Supernatural fans about to perform a musical based on the Sam and Dean story written by a

fangirl named Marie:

> Alright, listen up girls. I know you're all here because you love *Supernatural*[….] I know
> I have expressed some differences of opinion regarding this particular version of
> *Supernatural,* but tonight it is all about Marie's vision. This is Marie's *Supernatural.* So I
> want you to get out there, and I want you to stand as close as she wants you to, and I want
> you to put as much sub into that text as you possibly can. ("Fan Fiction").

Dean's acceptance of the validity of "Marie's *Supernatural"* for these "girls" grants some

agency back to fans within the production/consumption process. The episode ends with a further

validation from God himself, who tells Marie with a nod and a smile that her story is "not bad."

("Fan Fiction"). In these two cases of an application of agency in decoding *on both ends*

(production and reception), scholars may choose to examine these not as a competition between

producer and fan community, but a strategic decoding on both sides that maintains a frame of

acceptance of the system of mass media communication while still allowing for a dialogic

response.

Enabling: Since encoding and decoding are always part of a larger process of empowerment,

enabling becomes associated with a negotiated or oppositional decoding position. Instead of

simply discussing decoding as a hegemonic resistance, fan scholars should broaden the scope to

consider when and under what conditions fans call themselves "empowered" by fanfiction. In

fanfiction we can see both how fans control the representation of disabled bodies and how the

ideas of ability and the "normal" body/mind are necessary to our communication systems--even

fanfiction. "Normalcy" is, as Lennard Davis explains, a fairly recent construct, born out of the idea of measuring human traits with statistics, but it is also built into our stories: "...[T]he very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her" (21). In other words, the decoding process of reading a novel (or fanfiction) *requires* the audience to work within systems of normalcy and "middleness" (21). Encoding a popular media text is never far from discourse about what is average because our signs and signifiers depend on a shared common denominator to be decoded.

Fanfiction, though, can attempt to resist this appeal to the normal or "middle" experience that mass media relies on to tell its stories. Fans know that mass media creators must write to a broad audience, but that doing so means creating a norm that denies the infinite variety of human experience. Turning attention to how fans approach that problem may be revealing not only for fan studies, but as Davis suggests, literature more broadly defined. Through his Pentad Kenneth Burke reminds us that we should not just examine *what* people are doing--the focus of most fan studies--but the language they use to describe the motivation behind those acts. He asks, "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (*Grammar* xv), and then, once scholars have listed the words used to describe specific acts, Burke suggests that they play attention to the "terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise" (xviii). How, then, do we fans and fan scholars describe fandom? Fans? Disabled fans? What languages of empowerment-through-decoding happen when fans are enabled by their negotiated or oppositional positions? What ideas might be necessarily ambiguous when we talk about ableism and fandom? How might fanfiction be resisting the norming that our stories have traditionally based their logics on? And how might fanfic's occupational psychosis with

rewriting canon able-bodied characters as blind, deaf, or impaired help normalize desire for non-normative bodies?

The term "enabling" itself implies an act that gives power to act. Fanfic enables its users (both readers and writers) in multiple ways; it returns symbolic agency to fans, letting them constitute new versions of the canon text that is then legitimized by the fan community. Not only does fic enable the kind of audience "feedback" Hall imagined when he considered the mass media system as an endlessly looping communication model moving from the encoding producer to the decoding audience and then *back again*, as the audience responds with an encoding review of their own that may be evaluative or complementary. This feedback piece of the encoding/decoding process always returns minor amounts of agency to the audience, but fanfic is perhaps an extreme form; instead of just a thumbs up or down, fanfic is a discursive practice, accepted by a large body of users, that enables its creators and users to utterly change a text and its effects on the world. Instead of a simple negotiation that allows for acceptance or an outright rejection, fic and headcanon enables those who have been traditionally coded as disabled to work within the communication system and tell different stories. When author Eli Clare calls for more mass media images of heterosexual marriage, queer marriage, one-night stands, serial monogamy, lesbian butch and femme" and other expressions of romance, sex, and sexuality in mass media written "all crip style" (136-137), he means to empower and enable disabled authors to construct their own narratives that establish a new norm. What he does not consider are the privileges and agencies involved in creating such "crip style" stories that read "across the grain" of the dominant culture, including a denial of the faux-inclusive "supercrip" narratives that reinforce the logic of the ability/disability binary (122-123).

In turn, we should ask: How do fans' transmissions of their *own* responses enable others? How might this decoding and re-encoding through fic, meta, art, and video work against the encoding/decoding mechanisms that tend toward disabling audiences who do not fit the norm? What opportunities—even if they are not taken to their fullest, as the next section demonstrates—for enabling nonnormative bodies is offered by the resistant position fandom lets readers take? How can fanfiction intervene in the usual production process to question that process itself, even if that intervention is unsuccessful, incomplete, or ultimately overwritten by the disabling hegemonies of mass media communication?

Disabling: In the early days of fan studies, there was a sense of an almost utopian possibility for fans to ultimately overcome hegemonic ideologies; in recent years, scholars have complicated this notion by finding the privileges inherent in fandom--class, race, and education, in particular. It should not be dismissed how fanfiction can and does participate in the process by which our language disables us. Instead, we need to question in what ways the production and transmission of fan texts reifies the structures of ability and disability, how fans disable each other by the way fic is constructed and tropes are reified, how fans engage in an internalized ableism, and the ways the canon text fans choose to work with further disable them.

A study of fandom's participation in narrative practices that exclude and disable might also be used to explain, evaluate, or provide solutions for two major problems identified by the survey mentioned at the beginning of this article: that fans, despite their claims to subversive and resistant readings, tend to engage primarily with conventionally attractive white and cishet male bodies in fetishistic ways. While some meta from fans provide this self-critique and fan scholars have long called for a theory of this continued attachment to privileged bodies, considering

fandom as indebted to an ableist communication structure may provide a broader theoretical base from which to build explanations of the default to white male bodies. Critiques of fandom note the ways fans treat female characters negatively, the oddly small amount of femslash written, and the way the fandom community is often coded (and self-codes) as white and middle class. These norming acts can be read as strategic or strategically hostile, and those who live in/with/as non-normative bodies should see these problems not as minor outliers, but as emblematic of the power of encoding-as-disabling in general.

These questions and reflections are only a few that a consideration of encoding and decoding bring about. Like all fans, I eagerly await additions, substitutions, commentary, and pushback on the framework presented here.

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