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**Eds. Hellekson, Karen., and Kristina Busse (2014). *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Ohio  
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Disability is often absent in both the content and the production levels of Western film and television media, and other popular cultural productions. They rarely include disability except as plot devices that invoke ableist tropes such as: tragedy, pity, or a temporary challenge for non-disabled characters to overcome, or as lessons for the main character to learn from, and many more. In the Ruderman white paper on *Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*, Woodburn and Kopic found that 95% of disabled characters in the top ten US television shows were played by non-disabled actors (2016). Yet, these marked absences of disability from popular media has not been reflected in the numerous fan creations produced by fan communities in tribute to their favourite fandom.

Fan communities have provided an abundantly rich and diverse presence of disability in multimedia and multi-modal fan works in their respective fandoms. Particularly, fanfiction - meaning stories created by fans that reference a particular fandom, be it through the universe the fandom is situated in (ie. Marvel universe), or characters (ie. Hawkeye or Charles Xavier) - has been one of the richest and most diverse areas in which disability has appeared. For example when I recently typed in the search tag “disability” on Archive of Our Own (AO3), which is a prominent archive and community space for fanfiction, 21684 fanfics appeared tagged with

disability.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there are many disabled people who identify as fans and contribute or consume fan creations. Some disabled fan writers have even provided experience-based guides to ensure respectful portrayals of disabled characters. For example, Kouphe, a Deaf multi-fandom storyteller wrote an introductory post on how NOT to write a D/deaf character in response to the mis-representation of D/deafness in fanfiction on the popular blogging platform Tumblr.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, there are many signs that the fields of fanfiction and disability are already in conversation with each other, even though these conversations may be rare in academic settings. Hence, I was excited to review *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, an anthology edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2014) from a disability studies perspective. With its in-depth analyses of contemporary themes and foundational texts in the field, the book is meant to introduce new scholars to fan fiction studies as a scholarly field. With this in mind I am reviewing the text with the questions: how does *The Fanfiction Studies Reader* engage with disability in fanfiction? And what might critical disability studies scholars who wish to expand their theories, methodologies, and critical analyses of cultural productions of disability and disablement through fanfiction gain from addressing this anthology?

From an academic perspective, I am a stranger to the field of fanfiction studies as my own work, which is situated at the intersections of critical disability studies, critical race theory, and decolonizing theories has not overlapped with fanfiction or fan studies. Hence some of the theoretical concepts that were introduced in this volume were new to me. However, that is not to say that I’m a stranger to fanfiction.

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<sup>1</sup> I didn’t read the fanfics, I just did a search March 5, 2019 1:06 PM EST. So it isn’t necessarily that disability is represented by disabled fan creators or represented with awareness of non-medical models of disability, or that they don’t reproduce problematic disability tropes.

<sup>2</sup> The post has since been liked and shared over 400 times on Tumblr.  
<https://kouphe.tumblr.com/post/164034526950/how-to-not-write-a-ddeaf-or-hoh-character-101>

Growing up as an Asian queer disabled woman, fanfiction has always offered me alternative ways of imagining the world in difficult moments such as, finding racist and anti-immigrant messages written in colourful chalk in front of my parents’ house, or coming home after yet another gruelling neuropsychology evaluation traumatic post-brain injury in high school. I spent much time growing up immersed in alternative imaginaries of childhood fandoms such as Dragon Ball, Naruto, and Harry Potter universes that were lovingly re-interpreted by fans. Together, these experiences positioned me as a familiar stranger to fanfiction in that I am personally familiar yet distanced from it as a field of academic study. Hence, I found myself eager to gain deeper insight into possible dialogues between fanfiction and disability studies that might appear. My excitement increased when I noticed that this anthology was produced by people who are deeply involved in the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), a fan-created non-profit, which has been actively encouraging transformative fan works and modalities since 2007 including the infamous AO3. Over the years I have been impressed with how this organization has prioritized access as a key community value. For example, labeled as their 4th value on the organization’s page titled *What We Believe* is the statement, “we value making fannish activities as accessible as possible to all those who wish to participate.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, I began my reading journey wondering how, and whether, the anthology would take up any of the questions such as: "how have fans engaged with disability to challenged ableist interpretations of “normal” life and our interpersonal relationships with each other as humans both in the fandom and in real life?" "What sorts of transformative analyses and engagement with ableist tropes produced by fan writers are possible?" "What would disabled subjects written into an able-bodied centric fandom have to teach us about how people learn and reimagine disability meanings?"

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.transformativeworks.org/what\\_we\\_believe/](http://www.transformativeworks.org/what_we_believe/)

Beginning with the editors’ introduction of fanfiction as a “(sometimes purposefully critical) rewriting of shared media (2014: 6),” *The Fanfiction Studies Reader* offers readers insight into the connections between key questions, histories, and issues asked within fan fiction studies. The editors compellingly introduced fan fiction studies as an intersectional and interdisciplinary field when explaining that, “a fan-created text functions as an artistic object for literary scholars, but media scholars may regard it as an important insight into the reception of the commercial text on which it is based, and sociologists may read it as one data point in the vast amount of texts within that particular fandom” (2014: 4). Furthermore, they eloquently captured the expansiveness of fanfiction’s influence when pointing out that, “anyone who has ever fantasized about an alternate ending to a favourite book or imagined the backstory of a minor character in a favourite film has engaged in creating a form of fan fiction (2014:1),” thus painting a clear picture of fanfiction as easily engageable by a broad and a diverse audience regardless of whether or not they consider themselves fan fiction producers.

Given the broadness of the field and the trickiness of navigating multi-discipline theories and methods, the anthology is thematically well organized and positioned to provide readers who are new to fanfiction studies with a broad introduction to current conversations in fanfiction studies. The first theme, “Fan Fiction as Literature” focuses on the idea of fanfiction as a form of “textual poaching”, following Henry Jenkin’s influential work which defines fanfiction as the act of fan creators “poaching” elements of the original creation and recreating it as their own (2012). Works under the second theme titled “Fan Identity and Feminism,” explore the subjectivities of fan creators and fan fiction readers through works focusing on binary gender role subversion, and non-commercialized pornography for women, through “slash,”<sup>4</sup> a fanfiction genre dominated

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<sup>4</sup> “Slash” fanworks are works wherein canonically presumed heterosexual or potentially asexual characters of the same gender expression are reimagined into queer romantic or sexual relationships in fan creations. “Slash” fanfiction on its

by female identifying writers that features characters in queer relationships. The third theme “Fan Communities and Affect” considers the work of community building through practices of welcoming and training new members to a fan-writing community. The final theme, “Fan Creativity and Performance” draws on performance theories to consider the act of writing and interacting in fanfiction communities.

I found it troubling, however, that while there was some content that could arguably be considered disability moments and one article that referenced a canonically disabled character, the anthology distinctly lacks any disability perspective. Certainly none that would consider disability beyond dominant impairment-based rhetoric, nor any that might engage with the ways that disability might intersect with race, gender, class, relationships and sexuality in fan fiction. Given that the anthology aims to provide readers new to fanfiction studies with a strong grasp of its foundational concepts, I was also concerned by the editors’ choice to limit the works to Western Anglophone-based fan media as that seems to contradict the diversity and expansiveness of the fan fiction works and communities. I couldn’t help but wonder what it means when disability and its complex intersectional relations is excluded despite its’ prominence in fan works (as demonstrated by the 21684 fanfics tagged with disability on AO3)? How might we, as disability studies scholars, bring fanfiction studies and disability studies and their intersectional worlds into conversation with each other using this text?

To begin with, this anthology reproduces a problem in fan fiction studies that disability studies has historically struggled with, namely the centrality of western society in academic

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own commonly references relationships between characters that are canonically identified as male, such as Kirk and Spock; whereas “femslash” refers to fanfiction where canonically female characters are depicted in romantic relationships with each other. There are complex gender-based politics involved in slash fanfiction, both in terms of fanworks and fans who produce those works. For example when performing a simple search in the most popular fanfiction archives will demonstrate an underrepresentation of the femslash, furthermore as some of the authors in the anthology mention “slash” fanfiction is conventionally written by those who identify as heterosexual women, although most slash fanfiction writers in recent years are identifying as queer as well as trans/or non-binary.

knowledge production. In the introduction, the editors’ stated that the anthology would focus on the “transformative written works of Western media texts in order to provide a cogent history of one particular strand of fan studies research that has been prolific and influential to both fans and media studies” (2014:2). While arguably, specificity in academic works allow for greater clarity in a field as well as recognition that the field is not hegemonic and that there are multiple approaches to fanfiction that are not present in the anthology, however fandoms are as broad and varied as their corresponding original media texts. To make an argument of specificity requires some engagement with how their specific area of focus is different from the rest of the field. Indeed, while Hellekson and Busse acknowledged the significance of non-western anglophone fandoms and fan works,<sup>5</sup> there was no discussion of the differences that editors perceive to exist between Western and non-western media such that it was necessary to focus on only Western media. Furthermore, fans’ imagination of alternative endings and side characters’ lives do not take place only in regards Western film and textual media. There are many fan works which re-imagines non-western media and language-based worlds such as Japanese fantasy games, Japanese animation, and manga/manhua/manhwa who use western based languages in their everyday lives, reside in western societies, and use western based sites. A quick glance at popular fanfiction archives such as Archives of Our Own and Fanfiction.net will demonstrate the popularity of non-western based fandoms (ie. Naruto, One Piece) among western-based fanfiction communities, not to mention most fanfiction hosting sites now acknowledge and welcome a diverse linguistic fan community as demonstrated in language tab options available on both Fanfiction.net and Ao3.

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<sup>5</sup> “fans of texts produced outside of Western Anglophone media (anime, J-Pop, K-Pop; the reception of western texts in non-Western cultures” was mentioned in the list of “important aspects of fan studies” that will not be included in the anthology (2).

As such, for a text that aims to provide scholars interested in fanfiction as an academic field with an overview of what the field offers, the refusal to engage with non-western media, texts, and fan communities provides a worrying meta-narrative. It is one that I am intimately familiar with in the absence of non-western bodies, names, epistemologies, and world views in the pages, citations, footnotes, and glossaries of texts I’m expected to read and to know in my field (Tuck & Ree 2013; Gill & Erevelles 2017). A metanarrative that signals that Western cultural imperialism continues to haunt western knowledge production and praxis, just as many scholars across many different social science and humanities disciplines have critiqued (Smith 1999; Connell 2007; Meekosha 2011). Hence the editor’s choice to focus on scholarly writing and fandoms from “western media” traditions meant that I was also reading a metanarrative of absence, placelessness, estrangement, and unbelonging for non-western narratives in western academic traditions and the reproduction that non-western narratives are irrelevant to knowledge production in fanfiction as an academic field of study as a non-white reader being introduced to fanfiction studies through this anthology. Subsequently, the centralization of academic knowledge based on Western social, political, and cultural norms is a problematic historical practice of western imperialism as it reaffirms the dominance and normalization of western thought over those considered “Other” in relation to the West. This practice is one which consequently marginalizes knowledges of communities who fall outside of those norms including racialized; black; indigenous; and orientalist communities (Tuck & Yang 2014).

Disability studies as a field has historically struggled with the centrality of Western intellectual traditions and epistemologies, as well as the influence of Western medicine, which continues to hold powerful sway over how disability is interpreted, defined, and acted upon (Soldatic & Grech 2015; Annamma et al. 2013). Considering this ongoing struggle and the



slowly increasing presence of disabled, racialized, and indigenous scholars whose works have critiqued and problematized the dominance of Western epistemes (Erevelles 2011; Meekosha 2011; Norris 2014); it is necessary for disability studies scholars to be intentional in not reproducing what Chris Bell aptly termed “White Disability Studies” (2010). That is not to say that scholars who are interested in the possibilities and struggles over crip bodies in fanfiction should not read this anthology, but a note to read the anthology critically with supplementary texts that engage with non-western fandoms and fan studies. Or perhaps, given that such texts are quite scarce, disability studies scholars may take up the inherently intersectional and interdisciplinary possibilities that disability has to offer and crip fanfiction theory in ways that are critical of the dominance of Western socio-political thought in both fields.

Secondly, I found that while there were two chapters in which disability was referenced in the anthology, there was little engagement with disability. In the chapter by Roberta Pearson, the author engages with Dr. John Watson’s war injuries in her article on the changing activities of Sherlock Holmes fan communities with the increasing access to information and technology. Although disability was referenced in the example, there was no engagement with the significance of disability, or the significance of a canonically disabled character and how fans chose to engage with him. Instead, John Watson’s wounded body was objectified as an example of modern fans’ dedication to Sherlock Holmes as they used the detective’s infamous deductive reasoning methods to theorize where the wounds were located, and from which trajectory the bullets would have come from (2014: 55). Disability seems to occupy an “absent presence” here. Disability is present as it occupies a central role to move Pearson’s analysis forward as it would literally be impossible without John Watson’s wounded body; however in not naming nor engaging with disability itself, disability becomes a “mythical absence while being part of the

productive sensibility” and in doing so, obscures the depth of theoretical and conceptual contributions of disability in fanfiction (Titchkosky 2011: 81).

Similarly, disability also appears as an “absent presence” in Joanna Russ’ essay on the phenomenon of women-identified Star Trek fans who queer the infamous duo Captain James T. Kirk and Spock in erotic fiction within the wider genre of “slash” fanfiction. Noting that such fiction often uses some sort of external force to bring the characters together, she connects these external forces with the writers needing to place the characters in conditions where they are not responsible for their actions (2014 pp. 84). She then proceeds to describe these forces in terms of states of embodiment when she states that, “somebody is always bleeding or feverish or concussed or mutilated or amnesiac or what-have-you in these tales” (2014 pp. 84). However, Russ does not engage with the problematic ways in which disability is equated to metaphors of damage, and is used to explain embodied behaviours and actions that are outside of the characters’ canonical portrayals, including non-consensual sexual activities. Nor does she question what the fans’ use of ableistic logics to justify queer relationships tell us about the social conditions such that fans who are queering futuristic themed fandoms still need to rely on presently dominant impairment based rhetoric to imagine queer sexual and romantic relationships happening in futuristic worlds.

The lack of disability engagement with disability seems odd considering the tensions and struggles over ableism and disability representation which have been making waves in anglophone-based fanfiction communities in the past decade. For example, in 2010 a heated debate rose within online fanfiction communities over the hurt/comfort bingo. This was a fanfiction writing event where authors were invited to contribute stories where characters experience something that constitutes as “hurt,” and then receives some form of comfort or

healing in response to the “hurt” (Zubernis & Larsen 2011: 90). Included on this list are disability related terms and labels like “brain damage, chronic illness, insanity (always there), loss of hearing, loss of limbs / limb function, loss of vision, loss of voice, spinal injury, post-traumatic stress disorder” and many more.<sup>6</sup> While related to disability, these terms reflect only the dominant medical model of disability that imagines disability as an individual problem located in one’s body, as abnormal to the human condition, and as a loss to one’s ordinary way of living. Moreover, when these terms are invoked only to signify a character’s “hurt” and the solution to disability is comfort for fan-writers’ imagination of the “pain” of disability or healing, the narrative of disability is reproduced as a problem to be eradicated or fixed in some way. In this respect, there is little conceptual space for imagining disability into fandoms in ways where disability is just an ordinary part of the character’s lives. That the characters reimaged as disabled can live, love, desire, and hold meaningful romantic, aromantic, or platonic relationships with chosen partner(s) and families. Some fans who raised concerns about ableism in the wide range of disability labels being listed as clichés representing “hurt,” experienced ableistic backlash from fans who opposed the critique argued that to raise these concerns about ableist issues in the challenge is an obstruction of fan creativity. Sasha Feather, a fan creator who was one of the first to draw attention to the controversy of using disability based scenarios as representative of “hurt,” compellingly argued that there were ableist elements to the challenge that fan creators needed to pay attention to and carefully researched in their post on why they refused to participate in the hurt/comfort bingo. Their arguments on the ableism implied in listing disability labels such as brain damage, as living with disability and experiencing disablement are not mere “cliché” narratives, but real experiences and struggles. Furthermore, ableist tensions in the world of fanfiction is not limited to issues within fan communities but is

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<sup>6</sup> Original Hurt/comfort bingo prompt list can be read here: <https://hc-bingo.dreamwidth.org/2293.html>

arguably also a scholarly issue. For example, while Zubernis and Larsen’s otherwise excellent work on shame and fanfiction writing has briefly delved into the hurt/comfort debate among fan communities, their work did not fully explore the arguments on ableism proposed by fans, nor did they explore the possibilities of a disability informed perspective even when disability lies at the heart of the hurt/comfort bingo debacle (2011).

In this respect, while a disability studies perspective is missing from this anthology, it is undeniable that fanfiction is an area in which disability holds undeniable presence and influence over community and academic conversations on fanfiction. Such is demonstrated by the struggles over ableism in the hurt/comfort bingo, alongside the numerous fan works tagged with the “disability” as a search label on popular fan work sites such as AO3, and the growing participation of disabled fans sharing their cripistemologies<sup>7</sup> in the form of writing guides with fans may not share their disability experiences but are interested in reimagining disability experiences and crip identities respectfully into fandoms or challenging canonical representations of disability. However much like with other academic literary traditions, disability studies must grapple with what Mitchell and Snyder called “narrative prosthesis” meaning the use of disability literary representations to mark a distinction of the character, or the socio-political conditions that the character is situated from “the anonymous background of the norm,” either in the form of a characteristic or as a metaphoric device (2014: 204) when in conversation with fanfiction studies.

So then, how might we, as disability studies scholars interested in expanding our analyses of cultural productions of disability meaningfully engage with this anthology?

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<sup>7</sup> By “cripistemologies” I’m referring to many different forms of knowing made possible through disability experiences and relationships. Johnson and McRuer (2014) narrated the term’s complex emergence as an epistemological field in the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Studies*’ special edition on Cripistemologies.

While the anthology doesn’t engage with disability, I do believe that disability studies scholars might find some concepts in it useful when doing a disability analysis of fanfiction. Francesca Coppa’s chapter *Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fanfiction as Theatrical Performance* for example might be helpful for centering the body and embodied interactions in texts (2014). Here, Coppa responds to the critique that fanfiction “fails by conventional literary standards” and is an “inferior art form” due to its focus on bodies and characters already created rather than the plot and argues that this focus may actually be a strength of fanfiction as an art form. Drawing on theatre studies, she states that, “fanfiction’s concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium” (p. 222). While Coppa does not engage with disability, I believe that her approach to fanfiction is compatible to disability studies as it makes embodiment salient to the analysis of fanfiction and frames the body as a expressing a narrative in and of itself. This insists that we consider *how* the body matters, thereby creating conceptual space for asking how the disabled body matters beyond lending flavour to the character’s backstory in the form of a narrative device that signals a separation, distinction, or deviance from concepts of a “normal” imaginaries of social life and embodiment (Titchkosky 2007); or as a plot device to further the story line (like a post-it note to signify a need for revenge, or the beginning or end of a relationship between characters). For example, the non-western fandom for the Japanese animation *Full Metal Alchemist* features a disabled protagonist and has over 13000 fanfics dedicated to it on Ao3 and over 41000 on Fanfiction.net. Set in a fantastical world where alchemy is commonly practiced and used for combat, the show features a canonically disabled protagonist named Edward Elric. While the show does begin with a tragedy trope of disability and frames disability as a consequence in that Edward gains prosthetic metallic limbs and his

little brother Alphonse, whose entire body was replaced with a suit of armour when they attempted to perform a forbidden type of alchemy to resurrect their mother at the beginning of the show, Edward and Alphonse continue as disabled characters throughout the majority of the show. Edward is frequently shown making use of his prosthetic limbs to escape deadly situations, repair them himself, and be without them. Drawing on theories such as Coppa’s notion of the body in fanfiction as performative, disability studies scholars might ask how fanfiction writers write Edward and Alphonse’s Crip bodies in action and in relationships? Does disability appear or disappear from their embodied performances in fanfiction? How are the ways that fanfiction writers imagine the characters coming to know and navigate canonical combat scenes with disability? In this respect, scholars and fic writers might consider how disabled characters carry out meaningful and wholesome relationships with each other as fanfiction writer sasha\_feathers suggested in their critique of ableism in the 2010 hurt/comfort bingo,<sup>8</sup> or have grand adventures, be loved, be in non-pathologized caring relationships, have partnerships (including queer platonic), enact world domination, or rescue princes and cats *as disabled people and with disability* rather than *because of, or despite* disability.

In conclusion, while *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* may not directly have much to offer to critical disability studies interested in fan studies, disability studies scholars should not turn away from fanfiction. Perhaps we might consider these absences as entry points for where disability studies and fanfiction studies might come into conversation with each other. As disability studies is a broad, expansive, and innately interdisciplinary field and disability is experienced across multiple complex intersectional social locations, I have often found myself mired in the trickiness of navigating fields that historically have not engaged with non-

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sasha-feather.dreamwidth.org/420637.html>

medicalized interpretations of disability, or theories which are problematically driven by impairment rhetoric and only reference disability as a metaphor for harm (Titchkosky 2015). Not to mention many foundational works in disability studies centers Whiteness and western socio-political thought and cultural norms (Bell 2010; Meekosha 2011; Norris 2014). In this respect, the gaps in theory left behind through the dominance of western socio-political norms and disability absences are often the starting point for transformative analyses of cultural productions of disability and their sociological implications. Hence, perhaps we ought to enthusiastically engage with a bit of textual poaching<sup>9</sup> of our own and crip *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* by bringing in disability perspectives as a transformative act in analyzing fanfiction.

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Jenkins introduces the idea of "textual poaching" to describe the fan as renegotiating the meanings of a text, and claiming the right to retell the story in their own terms (2012: XXI).

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