HUMANITÉS RÉTICULAIRES

Nouvelles technologies, altérités et pratiques ethnographiques en contextes globalisés

Jacinthe Mazzocchetti,
Olivier Servais,
Tom Boellstorff,
Bill Maurer

12 Investigations d'Anthropologie Prospective

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INVESTIGATIONS D'ANTHROPOLOGIE PROSPECTIVE n° 12

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Table des matières

COLLECTION
« INVESTIGATIONS D'ANTHROPOLOGIE PROSPECTIVE »

Collection dirigée par Nathalie Burnay, Julie Hermesse, Pierre-Joseph Laurent, Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, Olivier Servais et Anne-Marie Vuillemenot
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Investigar, investigate, investiguer... L'investigation est synonyme d'une recherche menée de manière systématique et minutieuse. La ligne éditoriale de la collection *Investigations d'anthropologie prospective* défend cette exigence de qualité dans la recherche anthropologique et sa publication. C'est aussi le caractère prospectif de l'enquête qui définit la collection. Nul intérêt pour des états de l'art figés sur ce qui a été sans se questionner sur le devenir de nos sociétés contemporaines.

Par la publication d'ouvrages collectifs, la collection a pour objectif de croiser les regards dans une dynamique d'échange constructif et de dialogue entre pairs. Les ouvrages proposés permettent au lecteur de s'approprier la thématique traitée avec rigueur scientifique et mise en débat.

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Homework and the Digital Field : Reflections on Fan Identity and Identification

4

Anne **Kustritz**

In considering my ethnographic research on slash fan fiction, I am reminded of Kamala Visweswaran and Adi Kuntsman, who both comment on the messy emotional and political consequences of doing « homework » in an intimate field where the researcher will continue to live (1994, 2004). While fan fiction refers to amateur writing about previously published characters, the sub-genre « slash » not only marks homoerotic writing but also a personal identity and the subculture that facilitates the distribution and discussion of such stories. Located at the crossroads between changes in technology which allow small subcultures access to global audiences, and changes in social norms which nonetheless often still pathologize women's and queer sexualities, on-line and in-person slash forums offer a unique space for women's literary, social, and sexual expression. Yet, these identities often still remain hidden, and as both a group member and researcher, my work troubles the carefully tended borders of the community. Known within the community as an « aca-fan », or hybrid academic and fan, the position of researchers with one foot in the community and one foot perched at the border between academic disciplines constantly provokes debate from both camps (Jenkins, 2011 ; Lothian, 2012 ; Fanlore)[1].

1. For instance, on the Metafandom aggregator, there are 5,032 public posts archived wherein fans debate aca-fan work/identity (Delicious).

Yet, my work in the mobile field of Internet culture also repeatedly reminds me of slash's ability to draw people together across great distances, as well as cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences. Upon accepting my current position at the University of Amsterdam, I immediately checked whether I knew of any slash fans living in the Netherlands. Indeed, somewhere in my network of contacts I found someone living in Den Haag, and she agreed to meet me. Moving to the Netherlands involved constant frustration as I attempted to simultaneously understand a new university, culture, and language. Yet meeting a virtual stranger in Den Haag, although the city was still just as filled with *haring* and canals as Amsterdam, for the first time I felt at home. Here was one of my people. Many slash fans travel this way, visiting a network of friends-of-friends across the globe on the seemingly fragile basis of a shared interest in fictional same-sex exchange.

What gives meetings between slash fans this power ? Even between people who have never met, or never met in person, slash provides a shared language, shared passion, and expectation of some sense of connection. Balancing between the felt profundity of these connections and the fleeting, constructed, voluntary nature of fan affiliations, especially in the Internet age, is a critical challenge of homework and native ethnography in the digital field, inspiring new methods for recording and writing these multiple, contradictory experiences. Within the burgeoning field of fan studies in particular, combining the insights of anthropological debates about identity within ethnographic practice with debates on aca-fan research provides a critical perspective on researchers' self-identification. On the one hand, publicly acknowledging a fan identity marks a position of solidarity against systems of stigma and shame, while also locating the social and emotional origin of the research ; yet, at the same time, precise self-reflexivity about researchers' fan affiliation and activities, as well as the very particular spaces and communities which underpin their work, provide a vital and often missing limitation to fan studies, as any one investigation can never hope to speak for the multiple and constantly proliferating experience of all fans or all fan cultures.

1. What is a Native in Popular Culture ? What is a Native in the Digital Field?

« Are you a fan yet ? »

This seemingly innocuous, often repeated question from my undergraduate honors thesis supervisor never failed to trigger a flash of jittery self-doubt. I feared making a claim to fan identity that some fans might deem inauthentic, wished to escape the negative social judgments associated with being a fan, and worried about the consequences for my academic credibility should I openly identify with my object of study. The first time he asked I squeaked out a « no », and it felt like a lie, but « yes » felt just as sourly disingenuous. Was I a fan? Quite a bit of evidence supported that conclusion. Ever since I can remember, as a child I became passionately attached to narratives from books, television, film, radio, and oral storytelling. I clearly recall feeling so personally involved in the fate of my favorite characters that I used to lie awake in bed at night, narrating and renarrating how MacGyver or Wonder Woman would escape their latest cliffhanger. Perhaps this intensity of affection alone makes a fan. In 1994 I fell in love with a quirky little Canadian police dramedy called *Due South*, which infused nearly every waking moment and every ounce of my being, but also left me isolated, trapped inside a feeling it seemed that no one else could understand. Recruiting my friends into *Due South* mania transformed my solitary devotion into a shared practice and experience. Together we talked in code, a mixture of hand gestures and memorized *Due South* quotes completely impenetrable to « outsiders ». We sang « Ride Forever » at the slightest provocation. We took a shared pilgrimage to Canada, which we referred to as the « Double Douglas Fir Telescoping Canada Tour », just to make it clear this was not an average vacation. Surely at this point we were all fans ? Another layer of fan practice intervened in our local, individual connection to the text, when we became involved with on-line fan communities and fan fiction. Suddenly my love for *Due South* was not only mine, and not only shared with a few friends I saw daily, but

instead became part of a larger social system of organized fans with a history and an on – and off – line infrastructure and culture. Fan fiction was something I always wanted but never believed was possible, or knew how to articulate. Finding out that other people shared these longings, people all over the world who I had never met, but who also loved stories passionately enough to make them into something new, felt like a profound form of validation and recognition. I was certainly not alone anymore.

Finding slash fan fiction came as more of a gradual surprise than an immediate sense of recognition. Around 1997, after flirting with a few episodes, I cheated on *Due South* with the French-Canadian fantasy series *Highlander* by searching out fan creativity on-line and falling head-over-heels for *Highlander* slash. That feeling of "cheating" and rupture upon leaving a first, monogamous fan object, and its description in the sexualized language of romantic relationships, is echoed by the reports of many of my study participants who recalled the community schism when early slash fans first began to cheat on *Star Trek* by writing about new shows like *Starsky and Hutch* and *The Professionals*. For me, the concept of immortality upon which *Highlander* was premised widened the potential gaps in the text (Jenkins, 1994). It suddenly seemed obvious that, especially for characters who lived hundreds if not thousands of years, what appeared on the screen could not possibly account for the full depth of lived reality. Just as characters rarely sleep a full night on screen, many other types of activities and relationships are also systematically edited out of mainstream narratives, including same-sex relationships. This silence and absence, once recognized, ached to be filled, and once I had seen this narrative gap, I could no longer remain unaware of the way in which the silencing of same-sex possibilities structures so many stories. Known in fan circles as « slash goggles » for the way knowledge of slash filters experience, this new awareness becomes a way of seeing the world, one which is shared and validated by the norms and existence of slash communities (Russo, 2007).

But the nagging question still persisted : was I a real fan ? Each of these stages represents very different sorts of activities, practices, identities, and forms of community ; so which one defines being a « fan » ? Further, despite what may seem like an impressive resume of fan emotional and social experiences I still hesitated to officially take on that label. Most popular representations of fans that I knew of at the time were associated with science fiction. Indeed, as explained most in depth by Henry Jenkins, the image of the Trekkie often contained cultural baggage which socially marked fans as geeks and outsiders (Jenkins, 1992, p. 9-50) ; yet the Trekkie figure in some circumstances also policed the boundary between "real fans" and wannabes. In « A Brief History of Media Fandom », Francesca Coppa details the « geek hierarchy », a flow chart of fan identities and activities which often places readers of so called « hard » literary science fiction at the top, furries on the very bottom, and everyone else in-between (Coppa, 2006).[2] Although somewhat tongue-in-cheek, this scale of value represents how fans often validate their own activities at the expense of other kinds of fans. Thus the geek hierarchy states that I may be a Trekkie, but at least I don't dress up. I may dress up, but at least I don't obsess about the characters' sex lives. I may write sexually explicit fan fiction, but at least I'm not one of those weirdoes who writes about real people rather than characters.[3] As in Sherry Ortner's work on gendered archetypes, the fan identities and activities that rank higher in the geek hierarchy also tend to have associations with masculinity or historically male parts of the fan community, thus the distinction between hard science fiction and « soft » culturally-oriented science fiction, deemed less serious due to its focus on social issues rather than technology (Ortner, 1974).

Thus part of the reason I feared openly identifying as a fan was because the borders of fan identity are porous, unstable, and internally policed, particularly at the expense of fan activities considered feminine and/or historically associated with women. Additionally, for academic-fans, the fraught position of studying a group to which one claims membership, either as native anthro-

2. A furry refers to someone who enjoys dressing and often role-playing as an animal.

3. Just to be clear, I am almost all of these weirdoes, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

pology or in the framework of media studies analysis of taste cultures, may also complicate public identification. Movements in both disciplines toward greater self-reflexivity and appreciation for inside perspectives, in response to critiques of the hierarchies enforced through the supposedly objective practice of "studying down" the social ladder, can paradoxically come at the cost of heightening boundaries between insiders and outsiders, making cultural identity appear artificially natural and coherent. In the last thirty years, critical ethnologists like James Clifford and George Marcus have questioned whether anthropologists record something real when they study « a culture », or if they produce the coherence, stability, and historical transcendence of culture through writing (1986, 1988 ; Behar and Gordon, 1995). Clifford explains that in her letters about fieldwork Margaret Mead reflected, « They have no name and we haven't decided what to call them yet » (Clifford, 1988, p. 230). She later named the people she studied « the Mountain Arapesh », and through this act of writing Clifford argues that the mobile, adaptive, and acquisitive people who happened to be in the space she studied at the time she was there seem to appear as though they shared one essential character (1988, p. 215-252 ; p. 277-348). Clifford thereby calls attention to how anthropological writing can make culture seem deterministic and ahistorical, while positioning anthropologists as the only authority on culture. Like many forms of critical ethnography, media anthropology, and anthropology of globalization, studying fans exacerbates and amplifies these concerns about the instability and historical contingency of cultural identity (Appaduraï, 1986 ; Elliston, 2002 ; Gullestad, 1996 ; Kulick, 2005 ; Michaels, 1994). Fans have no centralized geographic location, no visual markers, no ethnic similarity, and, like the Mountain Arapesh, no one unified standard for group membership. On a drive through New York a friend once asked me if he was a fan. Despite his decades of experience in science fiction literary circles, as well as costuming and a variety of other fan activities, he still questioned his fundamental belonging to this imagined community of fandom. Because I research slash fan fiction, he hoped that I had somehow discovered the one true fan litmus test. Between us we had been involved in a staggering variety of fan practices. We had cooked fan foods, worn fan clothes, sung fan songs, written fan stories, watched fan videos, purchased fan art, lived with fans, traveled with fans, researched fans, and yet our tension filled my little car to bursting because neither of us felt beyond reproach in calling ourselves fans.

The denial of some fans' claims to identification and group membership by other, more recognized or privileged fans highlights the many different microcultures that co-exist within the blanket term « fan », and complicates the « insider » status of accounts of fans by fan academics. Internal policing of fan identity often includes gendered components, and my passenger through the rolling hills of Western New York also participated in activities that some fans' standards deligitimated as feminized. Periodic fear, loathing, and panic expressed by increasingly powerful fan communities against fan objects associated with girls or women, and fan activities popular among girls or women also reinforce their marginal position within cultural definitions of fans. For example, Suzanne Scott writes that many male fans resisted the incorporation of *Twilight*'s young female fans at ComicCon, a longstanding fan convention that has achieved increasing sway within the media industry (Scott, 2013). In addition, female fans have long been stereotyped as faking their interest in fan activities to please or secure a boyfriend, typified in the stereotype of a woman who attends a convention dressed as « Slave Leia », referring to the gold bikini costume famously worn by Princess Leia in *Star Wars : Episode 6- Return of the Jedi*. Thus female costumers often face a combination of ridicule undermining their fan bonafides and intense sexual scrutiny, because many male fans believe women only attend conventions to please men. In each case, the « realness » of these male fans went without saying, while no conceivable amount of evidence would suffice to prove the « realness » of these female fans. To underscore this differential in cultural legitimacy and visibility between female and male fans, the term « fanboy » became an official entry in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2008, while « fangirl » still remains a term known and used only subculturally.

Thus, on the one hand, the group maintains its own system for policing usage of the term « fan », and actively works through an

internal process of hegemonic struggle wherein many different types of fans and fan cultures compete for internal and external recognition within the blanket term « fan ». Claims to fan identity thereby stake a position within this struggle for legitimacy and recognition, while blanket and unproblematized use of the word « fan » erases these internal hierarchies and the way they interact with larger socio-political stakes. It is thereby important to recognize that in some sense « fans » do not exist, because the collective identity and shared characteristics implied by the generic usage of the term are an illusion. Many times, news or magazine articles about « fans », academic accounts of « fan activities », or popular representations of « fans », do not in any way include « my fans », the ones I study or the one I have become.

On the other hand, in addition to the group's own policing of the term, identifying as a fan also carries social stigma and shame, potentially magnified many times over depending on what specific kind of fan culture one identifies within. By itself, the fan label often connotes immaturity, outsider status, and low taste cultures. Yet slash fans in particular, who invest in same-sex relationships expressed through fan creative and transformative works including fan art, fan fiction, and fan video or « vidding », and also often value slash's homosocial female community, invoke at least four layers of social stigma at once : against fans, against amateur cultural production, against same-sex relationships, and against female cultures, sexual desires, and expression. Publicly acknowledging a fan identity therefore also means taking on this position of social stigma, and my initial hesitance to admit the depths of my investment in fan objects, activities, and spaces certainly stemmed both from the fear of denunciation as a « fake » fan, but also from a reluctance to face negative social judgments. In her ethnography Camille Bacon-Smith argues that slash practitioners engage in a « conservation of risk », wherein they collectively amplify fears of discovery to increase the pleasurably dangerous nature of the activity (Bacon-Smith, 1992). However, the protection she documents, including the use of pseudonyms and a word-of-mouth distribution system linked to an initiation process, also responds to real forms of intolerance and oppression. Many forms of social control have policed women's sexual expression

over time, and despite social change, same-sex desires and narratives still remain underrepresented and marginalized in mainstream culture. In such an environment it is not unreasonable to feel afraid, or at least uncertain, about the reaction of family members, friends, potential romantic partners, co-workers, bosses, or government officials, to the revelation of one's participation in slash.

Thus many fans talk about revealing their investment in fan objects and cultures as « coming out », a phrase particularly apropos for slash which includes a component of non-heteronormative sexuality. While coming out as a slash fan does not carry the same socio-political significance and consequences as coming out LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex), it still bears a family resemblance. Both position the speaker outside of the heteronormative matrix, because although slashers may identify with and enact sexualities from all across the spectrum, interest in slash itself names a desire and libidinal investment which exceeds the strictures of dominant heterosexuality, and also exceeds the boundaries of how sexuality is generally defined.[4] Therefore while slash's cultural illegibility often allows slashers to escape the most serious consequences of coming out for LGBTQI people, it also requires constant explanation and validation. This is not equally the case in all cultures and public awareness of slash has grown steadily. Yet the fundamental question leveled at slash practices continues to be : why would so many women invest in predominantly male same-sex materials ? Some accounts like Catherine Salmon's *Warrior Lovers* seek to thereby isolate slash readers and writers as deviant or failed women and thereby a separable sub-group of the population with an inherently different psychology and perhaps even different neurobiology (Salmon, 2001). Very much like Foucault's pronouncement about the historical moment when systems of

4. While many previous studies identified slashers as predominantly heterosexual, including my own earlier article, my more recent research in my forthcoming monograph finds that slash participants identify with a full range of sexual identities, and that those who claim an unproblematized heterosexual identity may be in the minority. This difference can be explained largely by changes in data collection methods.

categorization defined same-sex desire as that which completely and totally determines a person's being, some approaches attempt to make the slasher into a species. Therefore, slashers often must balance between explaining the centrality, meaningfulness, and importance of the activity, and the pathologizing tendency which would reduce them to nothing but their deviation from heteronormativity.

In addition, because both fan and LGBTQI identities are in many ways invisible, they require public, performative enactment to become socially visible, adding a parallel political project of solidarity to both types of coming out. Certainly, the stakes involved in LGBTQI coming out are different, including the degree to which some people align with social stereotypes of LGBTQI identities to such an extent that they can never access the privilege of invisibility.[5] Yet, knowing that social disapproval may follow, taking up a stigmatized identity in public functions as an act of political will and a refusal of the privilege of the invisible norm. Sexual norms in particular continue to function largely because of their unquestioned status as normal both in the statistical and moral sense. As argued by a range of scholars from Hortense Powdermaker, to Gayle Rubin, to Michael Warner, part of the power of sexual norms lies in an inaccurate social belief that a narrowly defined range of heterosexual acts are most popular and common (1951, 1984, 1999). This belief goes largely unchallenged because most people do not publicly announce when they transgress these imagined boundaries of sexual normalcy, and thereby they can continue to function as « sexually normal » for those around them and continue to reap the social privileges afforded to those at the top of the heteronormative matrix. If everyone's sexual behaviors and fantasies were public, a massive reevaluation of sexual variation would follow. To some extent, the Kinsey Report provoked this very reaction, but even that study was limited by what people were willing to tell researchers, and to people's present behavior and fantasies, not their potential in the absence of social coercion ; thus such studies cannot plumb the full depths of human beings' innate sexual capacities, only their sexual identities, desires, and behaviors as shaped and conditioned by present cultural and historical circumstances.

It must also be acknowledged that it is not practical or safe for all participants to come out as a fan, or a slash fan. However, for those willing and able to do so, the repeated enactment of coming out can publicly refuse the status of sexual normalcy to unseat beliefs about everyday sexual practice and the mental limits of sexual possibility. Similarly, choosing to name one's passions « fan activities », whether they may be stamp collecting, wine tasting, orchid cultivation, or writing fan fiction, may likewise seek to challenge the denigration of « low culture » tastes, inviting solidarity against the class privilege that shames investment in « immature » pleasures. As well, women loudly proclaiming their fan affiliations do so within the context of both geek and mainstream gender stereotypes that deny the legitimacy of their participation, and thereby their ongoing processes of coming out as fans insists on their right to be both women and passionately involved in commenting upon, remixing, and producing popular culture (Coppa and Tushnet, 2011). All of these performative acts call into being a kind of solidarity based on public refusal to retain the privilege, and break the cloying claustrophobia, of remaining invisible.

Smothered by our collective insecurity in the car on a New York country road, I asked my friend if he felt like a fan. Yes, but he also knew some fans would deny his identity. His hesitance called to mind my own fan roots, which slowly brought me from isolated love of narrative, to connections with larger and larger communities of fans who, despite their many forms, somehow felt like my kind of people. I once hesitated to call myself a slash fan because, as a lurker, I didn't create slash texts, art, or vids, which produce one's status and reputation within the community, and because I hadn't attended slash conventions ; neither of these things were true anymore, but more importantly I no longer invested in the desire to find a way out of slash affiliation. There is no possible ideal fan, I recall telling him. I think that if you believe you are a fan, then you become a real fan. Fandom is not genetic. There is no approved course of instruction or coming of age ritual. There

5. It is worth noting that many geek and fan identities are also always already visible because of their recognizablility within stereotype.

is no fan high council to approve your citizenship. Pretending as though any of those things might be the case grants authority to the loudest and most privileged group of fans to define everyone else as they see fit, and exclude whomever they deem unworthy. No - there is nothing more real than finding a particular fan subculture and saying, « These are my people. I am a fan. »

2. Narrating (Aca-)Fan Histories : Many Stories, All of Them True[6]

The complex balance between problematizing the implied coherence of fan identities and strategically taking up a position of solidarity and refusal through fan identification also intersects with anthropological understandings of fieldwork and identity. Jenkins, who popularized « aca-fandom », described his need to openly self-identify as a fan partly as a result of the emergence of self-reflexive anthropology, but also as a way to challenge the assumption that a critical or dismissive relationship to popular culture constitutes objectivity (Jenkins, 2013, VII-I ; Gray, 2005). Yet, at times the term aca-fan also threatens to revisit the essentialist paradigm of anthropology famously critiqued by Clifford as an encounter between two « pure products » (Clifford, 1988, p. 1-19). At its best the term aca-fan can construct a hybrid position between fan and academic spaces, languages, and sites of publication. However, it can also imply that that as an identity the aca-fan represents an equal mixture of two « pure products », and thus function as though the structures and experiences within academia and fandom are uniform and unchanging, ignoring the complexities, hierarchies, and diversity within each. Ideally the term aca-fan should begin a conversation interrogating the specific pathways by which one becomes a quite particular sort of fan and academic, and how these pathways intertwine, without giving in to an essentialist desire for natural origins and unchanging identities. Yet, it can also act as the end of a conversation, providing the answer to a process of searching for one's « true » identity which, once named, requires no further interrogation.

The aca-fan term can also unhelpfully provide a moral high-ground to any fan studying any form of fandom, calling upon the legacy of native anthropology. Intended as a solution to the colonialist power dynamics enacted in the process of anthropologists « studying down », that is studying cultures with less economic and political resources and influence than their own, native anthropology sought to place authority over the production of knowledge in the hands of those who belonged to the culture they studied. However, Visweswaran writes that in her ethnographic experience interviewing women in India, her shared nationality did not put her on completely equal ground with subjects who often had less education, less social mobility, and less access to resources, including the publishing apparatus (Visweswaran, 1994). Interviewing other Indian women did not constitute a comfortable « homecoming », but instead difficult « home work » because documenting their experiences also highlighted the way in which her own life functioned simultaneously as a form of privilege and exclusion from the lives of women who had followed the « correct » path in prioritizing family over career ; her study thereby exposed the systemic double-bind which encapsulated both her life and the lives of her interviewees. Further, in her ethnographic work on-line among a community of other Russian-speaking lesbian immigrants to Israel, Kuntsman adapts Visweswaran's work to the web, arguing that even in an affinity space defined by many shared characteristics, forms of hierarchy and differentiation still persist (Kunstman, 2004). Kuntsman's and Visweswaran's conclusions bear strong relevance for fan studies suggesting that aca-fan studies must keep in mind the systems of hierarchy that differentiate fans, both within fandom, and from the perspective of outside, mass culture ; a fan studying

6. This is a reference to the finale of the original British television series « Queer as Folk » which ends with the line, « There are many rumors about Stuart and Vince. All of them true. » These lines left the ultimate fate of the series' main characters open-ended, able to sustain discussion between multiple, competing truth claims. These final title cards reappeared in a classic piece of slash video editing (known as vidding) by Laura Shapiro called « Wouldn't it Be Nice », where the well-known lines reiterate slash's flexible approach to the construction of multiple narratives.

other fans is not necessarily a native if they are studying a different kind of fan culture than the one they are most affiliated with, and even when acting within their own fan culture, forms of difference will still persist between « natives ». Being an aca-fan who primarily reads hurt/comfort slash but studies male pregnancy, for example, thus still allows the academic to comment on a culture to which she does not belong and engages the study with social systems that shame the studied group more harshly than the academic's own fan culture. Pushing these concepts to their vanishing point, Gelya Frank writes that at no point can two people ever share the exact same collection of intersecting identities and life experiences which would truly allow one to represent the other « from the same perspective » (Frank, 2000).

This conclusion echoes many post-structuralist critics of identity, and pushes researchers and activists to find a middle ground between the way people experience their group affiliations as meaningful, and the ultimately illusive nature of shared group character. It is not possible to drill down far enough to find the fan culture wherein all participants share so many characteristics that they may speak for each other without any form of difference intervening. Thus while identification as an aca-fan can highlight important alliances with the history of native anthropology, and its investment in undermining colonialist power structures, such identifications must also remain constantly aware of how they rhetorically create a social reality rather than merely describe a materiality ; there is no clear point at which one is or is not a fan apart from the moment of claiming that identity and as such identification should be interrogated as a process of self-fashioning, not an ontological question of essential being. While this is, of course, true of many types of identity, these processes become particularly visible for an identity that obviously contains no biological basis.

Critiques like Frank's emphasizing the impossibility of « speaking for » or fully « from the perspective » of a given culture push for new experimental methods of writing, research, and finding meaning in anthropological work (2000 ; Behar, 1993 ; Narayan, 1993). Ethnography with on-line fan cultures further underscores this imperative as it is impossible to definitively define either the field or the population. This quandary could sound like a profound failure, because admitting to the inability to quantify the boundaries of the field and population requires tearing apart the collective belief that holds many social sciences together : that is, the investment in the concept of representativeness, and the idea that observations of one collection of people in one time and place can validly be generalized to the entire group of that « type ». From an ontological perspective representativeness and generalizability come into crisis with the emergence of post-structuralist ethnologists who undermine the stability and homogeneity of "culture." Indeed, with regard to fans, especially on-line, the category becomes meaningful mostly in relation to a larger social stigma, but does not guarantee any shared group identity or experience, while group membership depends on shifting, voluntary affiliation and the varying standards of each fan micro-culture. Yet perhaps even more importantly, from an empirical, statistical perspective, making claims about the representativenes of a sample without knowing the true size, layout, or distribution of the population profoundly undermines any claims to a study's generalizability. Not only can researchers not know how many fans exist because the definition of a fan varies widely, many on-line spaces for the circulation and distribution of fan objects remain hidden and splintered. While it is therefore possible to individually study the population and artifacts of a single fan micro-culture, as in a particular listserv, livejournal community, or category in a large archive, researchers cannot completely know how these individual micro-communities relate to the population as a whole, largely because they cannot practically know all the hidden spaces where people calling themselves fans interact, even specifically for the purpose of the production and circulation of something they may or may not use the term « slash » to describe. Even the emerging techniques of « big data » come up short in this regard because the reliance on keywords and search terms overlooks the vast diversity in language use as well as subcultural neologisms, while privileging those parts of the community that remain most visible and active, ignoring those who participate passively or place greater emphasis on controlling, removing, and actively curating their cybertraces.

Yet, the inability to fully generalize from the observation of some groups of fans can constitute a productive failure, one that envisions alternate modes of ethnographic value. In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that « failure » exposes the construction of the system that sets the definition of « success », and divides the population by disproportionately slating certain kinds of people to « fail » (Halberstam, 2011). Recognizing the inherent bias of the system can create a revolutionary consciousness, and lead life's « losers » to reevaluate the possibilities inherent to taking routes through life that larger social systems deem undesirable ; there are many surprises and secrets to be discovered on the road less traveled by. Such a dream of escaping anthropology's normative strictures inspired many of the stories recorded by Jean Jackson regarding ethnographers' fantasies about burning their fieldnotes and starting from scratch (Jackson, 1990). This nightmare contains both the deep fear and anxiety of failing to meet the institutions' standards, as well as the longing to leave those expected standards behind in order to discover something legitimately unforeseen. Career-long advocate for experimental ethnographic writing Ruth Behar argued in her article, « Ethnography : Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre », that putting aside the illusion of absolute empirical truth need not invalidate the anthropological project (Behar, 2007). Rather, she instead advocates embracing the very things that undermine ethnography's generalizability to more fully and deliberately exploit their strengths : that is the intimate and contingent knowledge that can only be produced from specific people interacting in a specific place and time. That these observations cannot be replicated or generalized does not make them weak or meaningless for Behar, but rather makes them all the more precious because of their unique and vanishing nature. As products of history, language, culture, and biography, the relationship between this specific anthropologist and these particular people will never exist again ; yet their interaction records something vital about how large socio-political forces and the micro-narratives of individual lives overlap and interact to produce lived reality.

Thus the difficulty of capturing a culture which is not a culture from a perspective both real and constructed is ultimately a productive frustration, leading to a search for new forms of imagining ethnography, especially in the digital age. In his article « Boas, Foucault, and the 'Native Anthropologist' » Matti Bunzl attempts to side-step the often disciplinarily abject position of native anthropology by shifting the epistemological engine of anthropological knowledge production from the encounter between the anthropologist's self and the native Other, to a genealogical search for the historical conditions that produce present experiences of difference as natural (Bunzl, 2004). In this manner Bunzl attempts to undermine the way that even native anthropology still reinscribes colonialist hierarchies of self/native at the center of ethnographic methodology by merely emphasizing the other half of the dichotomy without deconstructing the division itself. Yet to do so Bunzl takes the surprisingly un-Foucaultian step of positing an improbably pure subject position outside of what Foucault would call ideology or power/knowledge and Boas would call culture's « secondary explanations » or as Bunzl phrases it, « anthropologists, be they insiders or outsiders, thus had to reach beyond secondary explanations in order to discern 'true' history » (*Ibid.*, p. 439). Arguing that both outsiders and insiders in Boasian anthropology work to overcome their own social position in order to discern historical truth beyond the « mystification » of culture (*Ibid.*, p. 441), Bunzl explains that Boas « sought to recuperate a history that was obscured by secondary explanations » (*Ibid.*, p. 439). Bunzl's turn away from cultural difference helpfully deconstructs and destigmatizes both insider and outsider approaches to ethnography, and opens a space for a more collaborative model for fieldwork and writing, as claimed by Luke Lassiter and Elizabeth Campbell (2010) ; yet, at the same time, Bunzl replaces that dichotomy with an unstable and under-problematized investment in historical genealogy. In the first instance, mirroring debates about the bracketing of identity in the Habermasian public sphere, by attempting to place both outsider and native anthropologists as equally distant from a hidden historical truth behind their observation of present circumstances, Bunzl overlooks the importance of analyzing how identities encapsulate and produce the anthropologist's own experience of the world and cannot be temporarily set aside or overcome for the duration of

their fieldwork (Kulick and Willson, 1996). Recognizing and analyzing how identity categories have been constructed through time does not release the anthropologist from their impact (Taylor, 1998 ; Visweswaran, 1994), and this desire to escape the mystification of cultural construction to discover one historical truth (re) constructs a new heroic meta-narrative dividing the enlightened anthropologist, who rhetorically steps out of history and their own identities, from the unenlightened masses.

Further, while Bunzl offers a useful rationale bridging anthropologists' study of the present day with a genealogical consideration of the past, his insistence upon discovering a singular historical truth by unearthing hidden history places the method out of step with digital logics. The dominant logic of print archives emphasizes the scarcity of information and the challenge of saving what might otherwise be lost, highlighted by Bunzl in his recounting of the vital role played by missing print records in Boas' method. However, in the digital era the problem is not too little, hidden, or lost information, but one of sorting and navigating too much information. Within the dominant logic of digital archiving, information becomes « lost » when drowned out by the overflow of other information. Thus the main issue with Bunzl's approach to discovering truth through a genealogical unearthing of hidden history is that history is neither hidden, nor « true » ; within digital logic, histories are recorded many times in many different media. As Frank notes, anthropologists no longer offer a singular, authoritative account of a given culture, but must instead develop tools to cope with populations who have already been represented many times in multiple forms of mediation, and who may indeed also « talk back » by representing themselves (Frank, 2000).

Indeed, the digital field presents precisely this conundrum as its people engage in a constant process of self-mediation. In such circumstances, the central challenge of anthropology transforms from the discovery and preservation of a hidden truth, to narrating and thus making coherent a particular collection of historical information and contemporary observations ; the goal thus becomes arguing for the importance of remembering one or another narrative version of history to make sense of present problems and questions. Andreas Huyssen thereby draws attention to the politics of remembering particular collections of historical events at particular moments, underlining Foucault's pronouncements that no knowledge (or genealogy) is a neutral escape from ideology, but instead all information remains implicated in systems of power (1980, 2000). This approach fits particularly well within slash cultures not only because they incorporate numerous analytic accounts of their own history, but also because the aesthetic practices of fan works rely on the pleasure of encountering multiple versions of the same events, each one ontologically valid. As Clifford notes, « 'Cultures' are ethnographic collections » (Clifford, 1998, p. 230). Ethnographic practice and writing cannot thus be considered uncovering or saving one « true » version of history, but curating a particular collection of historical and present observations, in full knowledge that other collections are equally possible and plausible, but that all are worth undertaking because each allows one to see both the past and present differently, and thus to process different questions.

Conclusion : Identification, as Solidarity, Specificity, and Multiplicity

In sum, the digital field exacerbates longstanding conflicts in determining the boundaries of a fieldsite, a population, and the ethnographer's own identity and authority. Examining the contradictions within aca-fan research provides insight into negotiating the constructedness of identity within a mediated culture and suggests a pathway whereby productive failure may lead toward an ethnographic practice for curating multiple, parallel cultural narrations, suited to the digital age. In fan research, self-identification often becomes a matter of solidarity within hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and taste culture. Yet, while such statements of identity often threaten to construct an ahistorical and homogenous « standpoint » that could collapse the wild diversity of both on- and off-line fan cultures into a single authoritative « perspective », thick description of the researcher's own fan activities and

identification as well as the permeability and particularity of the fieldsite(s), also serve as vital limitations to the scope of the research's applicability, as no one study may speak for all fans. In its best sense, then, self-reflexive fan identification should serve as an examination of the contingency and construction of the many diverse fan cultures while localizing individual fan cultures within their own distinct collection of multiple mediated histories.

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