

Revolutionary America from Concord and Lexington to Ferguson

Folk Transmediation of Historical Storytelling

Fandom and fans' cultural production may bring to mind heartthrob singers, blockbuster films, or even homoerotic stories and art about pop culture icons of the past and present. Yet what if the hot new trend in fandom was neither a pouty teenage crooner nor a commercial fictional world built from multimillion-dollar special effects, but a source as dry as an 800-page history book, and characters with such sexy accoutrements as powdered wigs and wooden teeth? Alexander Hamilton's unlikely ascent as the subject of numerous fan discussions and remix works marks an important and seldom discussed trend not only within fan culture but also in scholarly discussions of transmedia storytelling structures. In his landmark 2006 text *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins argued that transmedia is primarily organized with a corporate, mass-media property at the center and amateur fan works accumulating at the periphery. Although Jenkins persuasively documented the powerful civic and social possibilities of remixing mass culture using this formulation, his work does not fully explore transmedia storyworlds organized around noncorporate centers, including works that reinterpret and remix the lives of historical figures like Alexander Hamilton (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, *Convergence Culture*, and "Fan Activism").¹



By transmediating the public domain instead of corporate private property and distributing amateur and professional works through similar digital platforms, fans and professionals collaborate in such transmedia networks on more even ontological and legal footing, which creates additional social, political, and artistic possibilities for digital connectivity and the future of storytelling. Examining a collection of historically-based “vids” (works of fan remix video art with a uniquely female-dominated forty-year history) through the lenses of participatory history and the spreadable culture of social justice media demonstrates the role fan creativity can serve in maintaining a lively public engagement with history. By rewriting and remixing the life of Alexander Hamilton, the AIDS epidemic, and the African American civil rights movement, modern professional and amateur artists are able to create a living “history of the present,” not only to excavate the genealogy of modern problems but also to intervene in contemporary political storytelling by writing a new version of the foundational collective national past. As a result, fandoms with their root property in the public domain offer an important curb against the encroachment of the media industry and allow for multilayered creative and civic interchange in a shared symbolic language.

Hamilton, *Hamilton*, and the Shot Remixed 'Round the World: Constructing Nonfiction Transmedia Fandom

Imagining a participatory form of transmedia historical storytelling may create productive new opportunities for narrative and activism in the convergence era.² It is also necessary to account for the activities of what are called creative or “transformative” fans who take less commonly studied fan objects as their primary source, namely, activist issues, political institutions, and historical figures like Hamilton. There is a considerable body of academic literature on how and why fans use icons of popular culture to articulate easily understandable political claims and arguments, perhaps most notably by Jenkins (Brough and Shresthova; Burwell and Boler; Gray; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Jenkins, Shresthova, et al.; Van Zoonen). However, many scholars are increasingly critical of the economic exploitation of fan creativity as “free labor,” made possible by the same convergence-era embrace of fans by corporations also documented by Jenkins, as well as fans’ ideological reliance on industrial processes of production for raw materials (Andrejevic; Bird, “Are We All Producers Now?”; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; de Kosnik; Scholz; van Dijk



and Nieborg). Yet the terms of this debate are framed and set by the assumption that fans exclusively remix and reinterpret corporate properties. Examining transmedia storyworlds based on historical material wherein amateur and professional interpretations commingle complicates these debates because none of these versions may fully assert the status of “original” and thereby attempt to claim a cultural or economic monopoly.

Furthermore, historically based vids in particular offer a popular mode for interrogating public history that draws on the collaborative, nonprofit, critical traditions of certain fan creative communities. As one specific subset of fan remix video with its own unique protocols documented by scholars including Francesca Coppa, Tisha Turk, and myself, vids derive from a largely hidden and almost exclusively female fan community based on the principles of gift economy exchange, with a strong investment in media critique (Kustritz, “Seriality and Transmediality”). Vids may be posted on YouTube and other commercial platforms in recent years but historically were only shared on hidden, fan-constructed distribution infrastructure and networks. Many vidders still use password protection or prefer to only host their works on internet archives and platforms owned, coded, and operated by fans for fans, such as the nonprofit Archive of Our Own (Lothian). Given the underground, female community where vids originate, as argued by Coppa, many vids pivot around the problematic of visually representing the invisible perspectives of female and queer characters and spectators. These techniques can offer a powerful intervention into how political futures and historical narratives are enacted by unexpectedly suturing repressed knowledge and radical perspectives into official versions of events or bringing scattered ideas and instances into contact to, in the framework of Michel Foucault, narrate individual acts of resistance into a coherent revolution. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the primary strengths of vid editing is an ability to renarrate the flow of culture into coherent sequences and thus visualize the experience of immersion within ideological metanarratives (Kustritz, “Seriality and Transmediality”). For instance, VividCon was a central annual convention for vid makers and audiences with a highly anticipated screening of premiering vids, somewhat akin to the Cannes Film Festival of the viding world. At the 2017 VividCon, alongside vids featuring *Star Wars*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Thor*, Bessyboo and Queeelez premiered their vid about US political activism in the Trump era. Their montage of news, documentary, and self-made footage splices current resistance to the Trump administration with other historical social justice movements of US history to the song “These Days Are Dark (But We Won’t Fall)” by wizard-rock



band Harry and the Potters. The lyrics use a small number of fictional metaphors from *Harry Potter*, including the notable line “Voldemort is back” as a frame for the election of President Donald Trump. Yet this is not a vid about being a *Harry Potter* fan or the *Harry Potter* storyworld, but a vid about being a fan of US democracy and narrating present events into a narrative sequence of American history. Since Trump had not been elected to public office before, the “back” of “Voldemort is back” undermines a reductionist association between Voldemort and Trump as specific individuals or one-dimensional embodiments of evil to suggest instead a historical cycle the rest of the vid enacts between reactionism, xenophobia, and nativism, and popular movements that have repeatedly fought for economic, gender, race, and sexual equality.

The metaphor of unity from the *Harry Potter* story that resurfaces in the fan-made song helps suture together images of modern activists, including original footage of the vid’s maker, following in the footsteps of earlier demonstrators as they appear to march, write letters, and raise awareness in tandem across decades. However, *Harry Potter* is far from the origin or source of this story, no more than Vietnam-era protest songs invented the notion of solidarity and resistance. Nor can Warner Bros., the Christopher Little Literary Agency, Bloomsbury Publishing, J. K. Rowling, or indeed Harry and the Potters claim even an illusory form of ownership or authority over the story being told, unlike the terrain of authorial struggle that sets the terms of engagement in most corporate transmedia franchises.³ Instead, resignified by Bessyboo and Queeez, wizard rock takes its place alongside other sounds of political hope, just as the vid editors’ images visually take their places next to a long history of activists, all participating together in shared and equal civic belonging. As such, vidding shares much in common with Valdimar Hafstein’s suggestion of the collector-editor as a figure who usurps the dichotomies between known authors and collective folk creation, originals and derivatives, insisting instead that all creativity consists of an iterative process of re-presentation with a difference. Such a vid project begins to suggest what may be accomplished by commingling fan practice with historical sources in the context of convergence-era media and the digital public sphere, wherein popular culture, history, and politics flow together across networked communities. Certainly Bessyboo makes vids about other topics, ranging from *Ghostbusters* to her perhaps most famous offering about the Twitter account We Rate Dogs™, and vid audiences view a range of materials as well. Yet the very ease with which fan works commingle undermines any uniform evaluation of the economic or ideological meaning of all fan expression, since



each connects to a different range of questions about mass media and political engagement (Kustritz, “Politics of Slash”).

Understanding the layers of significance at play in a work like “These Days Are Dark” requires unpacking several assumptions about the study of media, fan creativity, and transmedia narratives in the convergence era. Discussions of public history, convergence culture, and audience creativity often pivot on a similar problematic: common people’s ability to establish authority over, participate within, and enact change over their own cultural landscape and the power structures that exert a countervailing force to limit, blunt, redirect, and reabsorb popular expression. In the field of history, this may mean disrupting both the authority of academic historians and other social institutions that control how history is recorded and remembered, including museums, governments, politicians, nonprofit organizations, and corporations. As historian Michael Frisch puts it, “What is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly . . . rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy” (xx). In media studies, this may mean emphasizing the continuities between folk culture and fan culture and refusing to fetishize corporate-produced “top-down” forms of transmedia at the expense of what Jenkins calls “bottom-up” and Marie-Laure Ryan calls “snowball” transmedia, which arguably began with collective storyworlds like Greek mythology and Arthurian legend (Blank; Bird, “Cultural Studies as Confluence”; Falzone; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* and “Transmedia Storytelling 101”; Toszenberger). In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins argues that fan cultures are the modern inheritors of folk storytelling practices because they reclaim commercial stories for communal retelling in the interest of community members’ needs and desires. They reintroduce corporate narratives, which have been artificially closed off by copyright law, back into a dynamic and collective practice of cultural participation more common to the preindustrial period, allowing the common folk to again participate in producing and critiquing their own culture (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Lessig). Thinking of fan practice as folk practice thus entails highlighting the historical and practical continuities between these concepts, while simultaneously pushing back against the corporate claim to legitimate control over popular expression.

The specific conjunction proposed here between folk, transmedia, and history seems to prompt the question of what is historical about storytelling, when both the folktale and modern fan creativity seem so deeply rooted in the proliferation of competing versions rather than the search for truth. On one hand, this formulation



acknowledges poststructuralist critiques of history as monolithic by emphasizing the multiple interpretations and perspectives that have often been sidelined by dominant historical practices (Kellner). Yet in the other direction, thinking about history, folklore, and fan creativity together exposes the extent to which history requires narrative to shape its meaning and reveals the extent to which any social use of history requires an act of storytelling (Hutcheon; Lorenz). As H. R. Ellis Davidson cites, the discipline of history functions in “date-time” not “dreamtime” (73). Yet social reality is shaped not only by facts but by dreams, rhetoric, and metaphor. Therefore, Ellis Davidson and Henry Glassie both argue that regardless of their “truth,” folklore and storytelling profoundly shape history (Ellis Davidson 91). As Margaret Murray argued, “Folklore can become history, and history folklore” (1). As a result, if fan creativity is indeed a modern form of folk storytelling practice, thinking about history, folklore, and fan works together helps elucidate why certain historical events are repeatedly renarrated in professional and amateur contexts and how such storytelling practices come to exert power in social and political life. The incredible popular success surrounding Alexander Hamilton provides merely one of many instances wherein the “[three]-way traffic between history and folklore” (Ellis Davidson 73) and modern digital fan culture can be observed, as a historical figure is strategically taken up by politicians, artists, media professionals, and regular folk to express a dream of American citizenship, rooted in struggles to construct a truly shared history.

Alexander Hamilton rocketed into social media celebrity with the success of the Broadway musical *Hamilton* (Miranda 2015). Written by Pulitzer, MacArthur, and Grammy award winner Lin-Manuel Miranda, the smash hit show became famous not only for its record-breaking soundtrack and ticket sales but also for its unique approach to the Broadway musical genre and to history. Despite its setting in the American Revolution, featuring familiar characters from the pantheon of America’s dead White founding fathers, the cast is almost only composed of actors of color, and the music draws on the rhythms and sounds of rap and R&B. Born in New York of Puerto Rican ancestry, Miranda explained these choices in interviews as stemming from the lack of roles for people of color on Broadway, and his determination to make more roles available by writing them himself (Mead). He explained the casting as a natural extension of the music, since R&B and rap emerged from communities of people of color (Binelli). The show quickly became the most difficult-to-score ticket in town, frequently outperforming enormous established shows like *The Lion King* and *Wicked* to take the top spot on the



Broadway box office, while its soundtrack charted in the Billboard top 20 overall, and top 10 for rap albums and digital albums (Binelli). To further bolster its social resonance and position within contemporary politics, the cast performed twice at the White House under the Obama administration and became embroiled with controversy over the cast's comments when Vice President Mike Pence attended a show (Brown; Jamieson).

Although *Hamilton's* success suggests an encouraging embrace of innovative and diverse music and history, Broadway's exclusivity created a stumbling block to a more widespread, popular fan base. After all, how can a bottom-up fan community form for a musical that almost no one has seen? As an imperfect but instructive comparison, *Hamilton* topped the Broadway box office with 558,977 seats sold in 2016; TV's top-rated show of 2016, *NCIS*, had 20 million viewers in one night; and fan-oriented Hollywood top blockbusters of 2016 *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* and *Captain America: Civil War* sold over 49 and 47 million tickets, respectively (BroadwayWorld; "The Numbers"; Porter). To undermine some of the elitism associated with Broadway, Miranda instituted a ticket lottery, offering a chance to buy twenty-one tickets each for one *Hamilton*—that is, \$10—to anyone lining up before the show ("Ham4Ham Lottery"; Miranda, "HAM4HAM"). Yet as the waiting lottery crowds swelled to 700 or more, the ticket gesture clearly wasn't enough to truly reach the popular audience. Miranda also began to offer short, spontaneous shows to the gathered lottery hopefuls, and these micro-performances were uploaded to YouTube and social media platforms like Tumblr under the hashtag #Ham4Ham (Miranda, "HAM4HAM"). In addition to the commercially available soundtrack, these freely available viral videos, as well as other media appearance and footage of the White House performances, formed the central basis of early *Hamilton* musical fandom and provided raw materials for fan literary, art, and video remix works.

Although a musical fandom largely living off of free viral videos is unusual, it does not completely undermine the established structure of fan–producer relations. While the videos themselves are free to anyone with an internet connection, they, and the associated fan activities, might merely be considered marketing for the commercial parts of *Hamilton's* transmedia network, which include the album, theater tickets, official merchandising, and the bestselling biography by Ron Chernow that Miranda famously used as a source. Whereas many scholars like Jenkins argue that fandom represents a form of bottom-up power and participatory culture, others (including Tiziana Terranova, Jose van Dijk, and Mark Andrejevic) emphasize fandom's role in propping up the exploitative ideological and economic structure of the media



industry and capitalism in general, through fans' purchasing and their free labor in producing and distributing marketing materials (van Dijk and Nieborg). However, as in Jenkins's *Convergence Culture*, this debate often assumes that fan creativity remains organized around a central mass media property owned by a corporation and operated for their exclusive profit. In response, some scholars, such as Julie Levin Russo, investigate case studies wherein fan works criticize popular culture in aesthetic, ideological, and economic terms, while others, like Alexis Lothian, study the alternate nonprofit economies created by fan infrastructure and distribution systems. While these are both fruitful approaches to the question of fandom's economic meaning and potential, this investigation adds another perspective by questioning how fandoms might develop by borrowing not from corporations but from historical source and the public domain, wherein professional and amateur authors, corporations, and citizens, may converse and create on more equal footing because none can claim to own the ground on which they speak.

Although *Hamilton* may at first appear to fit the free labor thesis—because the widespread popularity of #Ham4Ham videos is provocative, but they and the associated fan works drive sales of the album and contribute to social media's data exploitation—what is most important about *Hamilton* is that it is not the musical that serves as the root property but collectively owned historical figures and events central to the history and identity of the United States. In this manner, the *Hamilton* musical, in a very real sense, is itself fan fiction, drawing from and intervening in the same national mythology that a long series of professional and amateur authors, artists, politicians, and average citizens have already remixed, re-presented, retold, and resignified. Indeed, only because the figure of Alexander Hamilton cannot be legally owned or controlled as intellectual property could Chernow freely write and publish his biography and Manuel freely write and produce his musical. In fact, anyone may borrow from his likeness and life story to circulate artistic or political ideas in the for-profit market or through alternate distribution systems. Thus, investigating historically oriented fan remixes like *Hamilton* brings into focus the importance and promise of public domain fandoms engaged in collective historical storytelling. This project also intersects with studies of fan activism, as two complementary examples of AIDS and civil rights remix video contain clearly activist dimensions. Yet it is each example's relation to history that is currently under scrutiny, and if each might be considered activist, this project is interested in how fan creators imagine an activist stance via participatory history and spreadable social justice media.



The Language of National Struggle: Shifting Politics of the Revolutionary Storyworld

Hamilton draws its resonance from at least two intertwined contexts: memory of the American Revolution, which functions as a repository of national identity, and contemporary racial politics. *Hamilton* was well positioned to take off as a popular success, and specifically a success within fandom, because it fit several preexisting fan traditions and fan genre forms. However, the musical was also positioned because it speaks in the shared language of American national identity, in conversation with long-standing symbolic structures. In her study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lauren Berlant developed the concept of the national symbolic, which she postulates as the sum total of collectively understood, shared symbols for speaking about and representing the nation. These include state propaganda like Uncle Sam, landmarks like the Statue of Liberty, literature like that of Hawthorne, mass culture like Superman or Captain America, formal history like the American Revolution, and folk culture and history like family stories and other types of “history from below.” Although there can be enormous value in fighting to control the meaning and deployment of national symbols owned by corporations, Berlant also points toward other fields of meaning on which claims about the nation’s past and future may be articulated. As a result, *Hamilton* builds on a long-standing conversation about not only the historical facts of the revolutionary war, but upon a battle over how the revolution will be represented and remembered, of who will be narrated into and out of the founding of the United States. Notably only some of the participants in this struggle see themselves as engaged in politics, as many draw on the iconography of the American Revolution as a shared starting point from which multiple stories may unfold. Thus, although *Hamilton* is perhaps the flashiest and most publicized Founding Father fandom, it is hardly the first and perhaps not even the most well-known entry into the revolutionary national symbolic. People come to *Hamilton* fandom for a wide variety of reasons, but most come from another reservoir of emotion. *Hamilton* thereby becomes the receptacle of numerous preexisting fantasies, needs, and desires already developed in other practices and media, while functioning as the battlefield on which these contradictory claims to American national history and identity clash. Those who renarrate the revolution thereby engage in an implicitly political form of storytelling.

The second important context for *Hamilton*’s circulation, success, and emotional resonance is contemporary racial politics in the United States and the use of



social media in racial social justice campaigns. Because the American Revolution is a seed myth of US national identity and citizenship, it carries critical importance not just for understanding the past but for making political and social claims in the present. Thus, at a moment when viral video and social media make the violent exclusion of African Americans in particular and people of color in general from the American body politic ever more undeniable, *Hamilton's* clever reinscription of the rhythms, bodies, speech, and lives of people of color into the nation's founding strikes a bold counterpoint. The eager recirculation of #Ham4Ham videos, as well as *Hamilton*-based fan art, fan fiction, and fan video, must be placed in the context of what Jenkins, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford called "spreadable" media. Using the motto "if it doesn't spread, it's dead," they theorize the media environment in which a great deal of internet content is designed for maximum mobility and shareability via social networks. In such an environment, diverse media forms travel across social and technological boundaries promiscuously. As a result, it becomes relevant to consider which media content shares similar digital pathways, and thus to note that *Hamilton* transmedia elements and user-generated media oriented toward protest and social justice frequently circulate in the same spaces. Although #Ham4Ham and *Hamilton* fan works do not necessarily address contemporary racial politics directly, they build on a preexisting climate in which social media offers a space to contest and publicize persistent racial disparities. It is significant that *Hamilton* materials circulate in precisely the same social media platforms as materials circulated, for example, under the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, which protested the lack of diverse nominees at the 2016 Academy Awards (Lim). The juxtaposition of the two points out critique and possibilities produced through radical storytelling. #OscarsSoWhite points out persistent limitations to national and cultural inclusion, highlighting how few African Americans are involved in producing mass media, especially at the culturally venerated level of achievement marked by the Academy Awards. *Hamilton*-related media, both professionally produced and fan made, in this context may be seen as the implicit complement to such projects, producing a politically charged affirmative vision of racial inclusion and a celebration of the creativity, legacy, and vitality of communities of people of color. However, because it draws on the iconography of the American Revolution, and reimagined founding father Alexander Hamilton through the voice and body of a person of color, *Hamilton* is not just the metaphorical Black Is Beautiful wing of Black Lives Matter or #Oscars-SoWhite movements. Perhaps even more profoundly, *Hamilton* is a statement that places people of color at the very center of affirmative national identity.



Thus, the performance of *Hamilton* at the White House that inspired the #Bam-4Ham hashtag must be read not only as a commercial event or an entertainment event but a political event of national imagination (Stone). “Fan activism” was a phrase first associated with fans who campaigned for the return of dead characters and canceled TV shows; recently, more scholarly attention has been paid to the activism of fans aimed at the political and nonprofit spheres (Brough and Shresthova; Gray; Jenkins, Shresthova, et al.). Unlike most examples currently associated with fan activism, *Hamilton* fans do not mobilize formal political action via a shared love for an entertainment object, such as the *Harry Potter* Alliance, which fights for LGBTQ equality and fair trade using metaphors from the *Harry Potter* universe (Jenkins, “Fan Activism”). Likewise, *Hamilton* fandom does not borrow the tools of transmedia immersion and community to fuel a political movement, like the Invisible Children network or the Obama campaign, both of which used viral video, transmedia lifestyle branding, and social networking to increase political engagement (Meikle). Instead, *Hamilton* fans’ engagement with radical historical storytelling is its own form of direct activism. It is through a radical act of national imagination that Barak Obama became the first African American president, but it will take a much longer, sustained campaign of imagination to produce a truly inclusive vision of American belonging. Rewriting the life of Alexander Hamilton, whether for Broadway or YouTube or a collective fan audience, is one way of attempting to make US history into a story truly available to everyone. In this way, *Hamilton* fandom, with its transmedia extensions in professional and amateur media and roots in the public domain, represents a critical collective project in rewriting the history of the present, not to excavate the causes of present problems but to imagine a history that brings us toward a present we want to live in. *Hamilton* remix authors, artists, and video editors therefore bring the past and the present, politics and entertainment, into conversation via the shared language of transmedia historical storytelling.

Remixing History, Remediating Politics: Nonfiction Fan Vids as Participatory Activism

This section analyzes a collection of vids that take real historical events as their root source. Commenting on the AIDS crisis and LGBTQ activism, the Black Lives Matter movement and the longer process of African American civil rights, and



the place of people of color within revolutionary America, these fan works weave together serious history with popular culture to represent their own version of US citizenship in action. Together they demonstrate a range of experimental approaches to participatory historical storytelling found in creative or transformative fan communities, and they contextualize the significance of *Hamilton* fandom as one among many examples of possibilities that emerge when fan works draw on public-domain historical sources. In each example, fans playfully appropriate history and bring it into conversation with contemporary politics, digital technologies, and spaces of discursive circulation. As a result, they democratize history and mass media, using the tools and cultural possibilities of convergence Jenkins identified, disrupting hierarchies of control that limit nonspecialists' and nonprofessionals' ability to produce, disrupt, and reimagine their own culture. They demonstrate the political potential of independent fan infrastructure for experimental, independent micromedia production and circulation and of fan communities, whose tightly knit social system may facilitate political consciousness raising (Van Zoonen).

Drawing primarily from the made-for-HBO film *The Normal Heart* (Murphy), "Afire Love" by Anoel appears to tell a fairly linear story of the tragic romance between two men during the early years of the AIDS crisis. As such, it may fit easily within the larger genre of homoerotic fan works known as slash and may seem like a straightforward example of fan vids that comment on popular culture. However, like *Hamilton*, *The Normal Heart* is its own form of historical fan fiction as the made-for-TV movie reinterprets a play based on the lives and experiences of real people (Kramer). Anoel intersperses the professional source with a variety of other archival footage, contextualizing this story within a broader political framework of activism and community. As such, she uses a technique common to a subgenre of vids that resituate individual professional texts within a larger history of collective storytelling, such as "Effigy" by Obsessive24, which dramatizes the cultural significance of the BBC's choice to cast a black actress as Lady Guinevere in their production of *Merlin* (Capps, Jones, and Michie). Yet "Afire Love" does not merely place *The Normal Heart* within a larger history, it also opens that history to modern identification and use.

In her author's notes, Anoel describes choosing the music for the vid because of the repeated chorus calling on solidarity with a complexly gendered extended family, which spoke to her experience as a queer person assembling a chosen family of lovers, friends, and allies. The author weaves herself into the footage,



adding her queer history and experience to the ongoing story of LGBTQ identity, community, and activism. Thus, although *The Normal Heart* may seem like a limited story of specific people's lives, sealed off in a distant past before development of the AIDS drug cocktail, Anoel's choices as an artist open the historical narrative to contemporary intervention, identification, and mobilization. Notably, *The Normal Heart* received criticism for focusing primarily on a tragic love story between two beautiful, professional White men, leaving out the many people of color, lower-class, and LBTQ victims and allies of the AIDS crisis. Yet Anoel's vid precisely punctures this silence, splicing a tapestry of the many people and groups affected by AIDS into the frame of *The Normal Heart*, prominently including African American gay men, lesbians, and straight allies. The repeated pairing of the words "family" and "rise" with archival and professional footage of protest and community togetherness invite the vid's audience to join the still unfinished fight for LGBTQ recognition and AIDS activism.

At the far other end of the spectrum, "Say Her Name" by Absternr may appear to have little in common with other fan vids, as it draws exclusively on archival, journalistic, and user-generated footage of actual events related to the Black Lives Matter movement. If this is a fan video, its "fan object" may seem strangely obscure, as one is unlikely to identify as a "fan" of Black Lives Matter, since phrases like "supporter" or "ally" connect more readily. Yet it was produced by request as a gift in a fan video exchange festival and distributed alongside other remix works created by and for fans dealing with fictional sources. The procedure for the festival involves participants requesting the kind of fan video they would like to receive and the kind of video they are willing to make. Large fan exchange festivals match participants using computer algorithms, while moderators match participants themselves in smaller festivals. The resulting gifts are usually posted together so the extended community of direct participants and spectators can enjoy the outpouring of creativity. Most exchanges run on the social understanding that all members of the extended community will post public comments and commentaries about as many of the entries as possible, and they may incentivize collective viewing and commenting in the period just after the gifts' release through anticipation or social custom or by adding a competitive or game element, such as challenging viewers to guess the author of temporarily anonymous vids. As a result, the context of fan festival exchange culture is important because it means that the Black Lives Matter movement was requested and fulfilled by two fans who legitimized each other's desire for a fan video on this topic, and the vid then circulated within the context



of other, more recognizable fan practices and expressions in the same social and discursive space.

“Say Her Name” offers a vivid example of how fan works can function in the absence of a dependent relationship to a professionally produced media property and exist instead as a form of independent, amateur media characterized by its circulation within fan infrastructure and culture. The vid chronicles the Black Lives Matter protest movement, and at first it appears to be a sort of activist remix or viral video, condensing the many different protests within an overall narrative of solidarity and packaging it in a strongly emotional and spreadable medium and format. However, toward the last third, the vid takes on a technique similar to “Afire Love,” splicing the contemporary scenes of protest with historical footage of the 1960s civil rights movement, while the song lyrics switch from naming contemporary victims of police violence to referencing the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, and the associated miscarriage of justice in that case (Hudson-Weems; Metress). As such the vid becomes a history of the present, constructing a still-living document of African American civil rights struggles and the violence of American racism. The vidder’s decision to use the spare lyrics and raw delivery of Janelle Monáe accentuate this effect; her litany of names invites the addition of more entries in this ongoing history of contemporary injustice, while the many scenes of protesting crowds, including alliances between African American and LGBTQ protesters, invite the audience to add the names of those who need to be remembered and avenged and to join the movement themselves.

Last, “Comedy, Tragedy, History” by Such Heights splices the transmedia *Hamilton* network together, including public memorials for and artifacts of the actual historical person, the musical, and public discussion of the musical as well as Hamilton’s legacy in media coverage and fan activity. This vid appeared in the same exchange as “Say Her Name,” making them part of the same social and technological space, as well as the same web page and media collection, meaning the same audience easily flowed between both vids. Such Heights’ use of the music by Akala reinforces the complex cultural intersections at play in the *Hamilton* musical between high and low culture, elite history and public history, and canonical white-dominated taste hierarchies and cultural forms originating in communities of color. Much the same way the *Hamilton* musical resituates dead White founding fathers within the living cultural forms of communities of color via the rhythms of rap and the bodies of stage performers, Akala’s “Comedy, Tragedy, History” mixes Shakespearean language and cultural cachet with rap music to articulate the



experience of being black in contemporary Britain. Together the lyrics and images demonstrate a virtuoso mastery of dominant and subordinate cultural registers, seamlessly quoting the Bard and throwing mad shade at the same time. The vid also requires that its audience understand minutia of formal history like obscure references to the last known portrait of Aaron Burr and the complex wordplay of rap diction to fully decode the vidder's messages. As such, the vid ties together a multilayered history of the present, evoking a history of elite and exclusive founding fathers history and then turning it upside down, repurposing that history to tell a new story of national inclusion. In this manner, *Such Heights* presents a semi-sacred image of Hamilton beginning with a prestigious oil painting, which takes its revered place on the \$10 bill, then merges with the cover of Ron Chernow's popular but still formal biography, and finds its way into the hands of Lin-Manuel Miranda in a decidedly relaxed sprawl on a hammock, before finally merging with the body of Miranda himself when he portrays Hamilton on stage. The vid follows several of these trajectories, connecting cultural artifacts and images of historical figures like Aaron Burr with the actors of color who become the faces of these founding figures in the eyes of modern audiences. *Such Heights* thus contextualizes the cultural power of *Hamilton* by taking a playful, appropriative approach to the history of the present, providing modern audiences with a joyfully and radically inclusive reason to dredge up America's revolutionary past.

Each fan video project discussed here uniquely reflects what can happen when independently produced and distributed fan transmedia crosses paths with public history. "Afire Love" expands the activist memory of *The Normal Heart* to include a more diverse chosen family and invite modern viewers to join the unfinished struggle. "Say Her Name" visualizes the continuities between the Black Lives Matter movement and the 1960s civil rights movement, arguing that America has unfinished business with the racial injustices of the past, placing present protests within that sacred legacy. "Comedy, Tragedy, History" performs a virtuoso pastiche between cultural registers to construct a radically hopeful vision of hybridization between diverse periods and peoples, imagining a cultural landscape that values the contributions of all Americans in our collective sense of self and cultural memory. As a collection, these videos begin to suggest the power and potential of transmedia fan works rooted primarily in the public domain, which open political, cultural, and historical conversations to participatory intervention.



Conclusion: Transmediating the History of the Present

Together these video remix projects, circulating through similar online pathways, create a powerful argument for the importance of radical historical imagination and defiant public acts of storytelling about the histories that still animate our present struggles. By suturing together an archive of historical representation, these fan video artists comment on the importance of remembering struggles like AIDS activism, use histories of civil rights struggle as fuel for the present crises of state violence against African Americans, and construct a radically inclusive version of American identity and belonging. As these videos rub digital elbows with other spreadable social justice campaigns, like #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo, and with an enormous volume of remixes sourced from corporate media properties, fan vids remixing history amplify activist messages in the shared language of the national symbolic within the slick packaging of viral video. Like Jonathan Sterne's argument regarding the MP3, MP4 video is likewise a compression technology designed not for perfect fidelity or immersion, but for what Jenkins, Ford, and Green call spreadability. Fan remix videos' bytes are designed to move, and their beats are designed to flow within the conversational stream of popular culture. When these attributes are put to the task of reflecting on the nation, they provide fertile ground for a democratically oriented practice of participatory history and collective political imagination. They enable a radical practice to flourish among common folk who leverage digital connectivity to amplify their social, political, and aspirational story.

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■ NOTES

1. Although Jenkins begins to discuss political remix in *Convergence Culture*, he frames the phenomenon as revolving around elections and news cycles. His forthcoming work deals in much greater detail with fan activism.
2. The “Shot Remixed ‘Round the World” in this section title refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn,” wherein the shot that reverberates around the world is the opening volley of the American Revolution:

“By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.”

3. *Harry Potter*’s ownership is divided among the author, J. K. Rowling; her representatives, the Christopher Little Literary Agency; the owners of the print rights, Bloomsbury Publishing; and the owners of the film rights, Warner Bros.

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