From Transformative Works to #transformDH: Digital Humanities as (Critical) Fandom

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Introduction: #transform(ative)DH

Participants in and observers of the digital humanities have tended to describe this amorphous field, network, discourse, or discipline through metaphors of belonging. Great influence has been exerted by scholars' and bloggers' discussions of who is "in" and who is "out."[1] At conferences, academic digital humanities' fashionability has lent itself to the metaphor of a "cool kids table."[2] Any emerging field is likely to prompt debates over definition; in digital humanities, though, expressions of self-directed celebration or anxiety have proved to be a resilient and prolific genre. Underlying the questions of belonging are more concrete questions: do aspiring digital humanists need to be able to build digital tools?[3] Has digital humanities fully attended to the insights of feminist, queer, and critical race studies?[4] Are the field's dominant practices complicit with the logics of the neoliberal university?[5] While I consider these questions important and have strong opinions about their answers, this essay takes as its starting point the conditions of their asking: the fervor and intensity with which digital humanist nerds and geeks appreciate their objects of study. I argue that digital humanities, characteristically known by the acronym *DH*, is a fandom—and that there is much to learn from attending to its processes and practices through lenses developed by fan theorists, practitioners, and scholars.

I come to this analysis through two personal genealogies. Since the mid-2000s, I have been a participant in science fiction media fan communities. And since its formation at the 2011 American Studies Association annual meeting, I have been a member of the #transformDH (Transformative Digital Humanities) collective, which has sought to center critical race and gender analysis within and in critique of DH. Throughout the years of my greatest participation in DH, the arguments I encountered in scholarly blogs and on Twitter

felt inchoately yet intimately familiar from my immersion in fan cultures. As modes of production and consumption associated with fan practice have entered mainstream media culture, I have come to perceive this correspondence as worthy of further analysis. Engagements with fandom bring important insights to American studies and digital humanities alike through their capacity to make visible the mobilizing work of emotional investments—especially, but not exclusively, pleasurable ones. And the creative subcultures of online media fandom have an especially generative relationship to transformative knowledge production.

Like *digital humanities, transformative* is a term that resonates across multiple fields in contradictory ways. It is used by leftist thinkers to describe the need for systemic change,[6] but it can equally index the technology industry's demands for disruptive innovation.[7] Among its more technical meanings is the provision in US intellectual property law that allows use of copyrighted material in the creation of new "transformative works," assuring the legal defensibility of fan fiction, fan art, and fan video that responds to existing media and cultural texts.[8] We sought to capture the first and last of these meanings in naming #transformDH, calling for recognition that "feminist, queer, and antiracist activists, artists, and media-makers outside of academia are doing work that contributes to digital studies" while it "productively destabilizes the norms and standards of institutionally recognized academic work."[9] I now use that naming as the opportunity for a deeper engagement with the intersection of digital humanities and American studies—one that can also account for the potential complicities within the transformative by highlighting the conflicts that accompany discussions of digital scholarship as a site of social and political transformation.

My arguments are grounded in the theory and praxis of social justice in media fan culture, which I am glossing as *critical fandom*: the ways that members of fan communities use diverse creative techniques to challenge the structures and representations around which their communities are organized. It is an approach that can also suggest potential modes of engagement with the academic fandom of American studies, whose commitments and practices are likewise not restricted to academic contexts. In developing this concept, I draw on the work of fan creators and thinkers whose digital knowledge production, in the form of fiction, video, and critical analysis, has shaped my understanding of what critical fandom can be. Three fan-created digital remix music videos, or vids—"The Price" by thingswithwings (2011), "How Much Is That Geisha in the Window" by Lierdumoa (2008), and "Field Work (Imperial March)"

by eruthros (2017)—provide frameworks for reflection on academic digital humanities' field formation and on the practice of critical digital knowledge production. The essay begins by exploring how the discourse of fandom can apply to scholarly networks in general and to the digital humanities in particular. It turns next to the vids by thingswithwings and Lierdumoa, reading them as exemplary of critical fandom as a digital humanities operating outside the bounds of the academy. I then offer a brief account of #transformDH and related interventions as examples of critical fandom operating within academic DH, before turning to eruthros's vid to reflect on the implications of a collaborative relationship between fannish and academic modes of knowledge production. My goal is not to send aspiring digital humanists out to study fandom but to urge us all to consider the impact of our fannish investments on the knowledge practices in which we participate.

Digital Humanities Fandom and Its Discontents

Why fandom—and what is fandom anyway? To reduce a complex and contested field to its elements, we might say that fans are serious lovers of media, objects, sports, or ideas. In fan studies, the question of whether we can all, on some level, be understood as fans is a central debate. For some, *fandom* is a feeling, a near-universal affective experience; others emphasize its material manifestations, focusing on *fandoms* as the networks and communities whose participants gather around particular objects.[10] My own work and my own fandom have typically taken up the latter focus. To see the fandom in digital humanities, however, requires both: I am arguing that people feel fannish about digital humanities *and* that digital humanities' networks operate like a fandom. In their introduction to the 2017 edition of the influential anthology *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Cornel Sandvoss, Jonathan Gray, and C. Lee Harrington describe being a fan as having "an affective and identificatory dimension . . . shaped by the personal and interpersonal" that can, among other things, contribute to "a disjuncture between affectively invested form and fans' beliefs and convictions."[11] Fandom is an investment of affect and identity into an object; it exists in relation not only to the object but to other fans (and nonfans), bringing forth intensities that may contradict a fan's more rationally articulated commitments.

By describing digital humanities in terms of fandom, I might seem to trivialize the seriousness of an academic field. I do this intentionally, in the cultural studies tradition of attending to people, objects, practices, and motivations

rarely taken seriously by dominant institutions. Insofar as the term names a networked subculture, fandom is another way to describe the informal formation of what Robyn Wiegman calls a field imaginary, reminding us that affects, arguments, and identities in scholarly circulation do not wholly depend on the institutional structures in which they play out.[12] As a field and frame emerging in the digital age, academic DH produces knowledge through channels indistinguishable from those used to respond to popular culture. Its public networks of blogs, tweets, and backchannels make visible the progress of ideas from thought to conversation to codification in a peer-reviewed repository. Also visible are the not always rational investments that get ideas from here to there.

DH scholarship is filled with descriptions of online debates where the definition of the field is called into question. Matthew Kirschenbaum highlights the affective, embodied dimension of such conversations when he writes that their print versions are "mute remainders, mere husks, of the frisson, the serotonin- and caffeine-fueled jags that propel real-time online exchange."[13] These debates are shaped like fannish conflicts. The affects of fandom that Kirschenbaum describes carry meanings that cannot be contained in publications or institutions; they are held in and between bodies, in memories, as what José Muñoz describes as the ephemeral evidence that "does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues and specks of things."[14] With regard to the projects that digital humanities scholars undertake, a fannish perspective might allow for a focus on what exceeds the tangible knowledges and outcomes that are produced. For example, if crowdsourced data is being solicited, what tangible and intangible events, emotions, and conflicts happen within, between, and among the members of the crowd who do the sourcing? What seethes beneath the surface of a field that has declared itself to be particularly "nice"?[15] Amy Earhart calls attention to the personal and political harm that has resulted from DH social media conflict in an age of high-intensity digital harassment and surveillance; acknowledging this reality as well as the truth in Earhart's assertion that "battles between insiders and outsiders" can be "unnuanced and potentially destructive," I nevertheless think that there is much to learn from attending to what recurrent conflicts produce and maintain.[16]

In my opening paragraph, I cited three questions that have raised turmoil in DH circles: the relationship of DH to coding, to critical race and gender studies, and to neoliberal complicity. One's answers to these interrelated questions might be said to define one's position in DH fandom. A recent salvo in the ongoing debate took place in response to "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives):

A Political History of Digital Humanities," a 2016 essay by Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Allington et al. argue that the digital humanities institutionalized at research universities is necessarily complicit with the neoliberal, corporatist restructuring of humanities education. Critiquing the material history and discursive construction of "the Digital Humanities that has proved itself so useful to university administrators and to funding bodies" by allowing for the promotion of technical knowledge without concomitant support for less marketable humanities critique, they acknowledge that "many will be able to say, with some justification, 'But that's not *my* Digital Humanities!'"[17] Responses to the essay, however, were dominated by precisely the claim that the DH described by Allington et al. was not recognizable, placing the authors outside the jurisdiction of DH as the respondents understood it in turn.[18] The language of "neoliberal tools," which Allington et al. used to call attention to the demand for instrumentalizable, entrepreneurially compatible knowledge in the neoliberal university, was taken as a personal accusation by some respondents.[19] I do not mean to imply that Allington et al.'s essay is not worthy of critique or to refute that responses cited above make valid points but only to acknowledge that I recognize, in the outraged tone that underlies the critique as well as in the sheer volume of the voices raised on social media, the sound and sensation of a fannish object having been impugned.[20]

This was far from the first time such an argument had provoked such a backlash. In her 2014 article "The Brave Side of Digital Humanities," Fiona Barnett documents a similar response to a 2012 conference panel on "the dark side of digital humanities":

> The panelists . . . offered critically engaged commentary regarding the discursive position of digital humanities in the academy . . . and the specter of the neoliberal educational system primarily focused on profits and identifiable markers of success. . . . Many audience members took their disagreement to Twitter to lament . . . that the panelists were mistaking these glossy narratives for "real" digital humanities projects . . . that would presumably have been more readily understood as representative of the scholarly DH ecosystem. . . . For me, in that moment, the interesting questions were . . . why such a challenge to the boundaries of DH was met with such derision.[21]

The same questions arise for me as I contemplate the anxiety with which the prospect of being a "neoliberal tool" was greeted by respondents to Allington et al. For surely, given the structural centrality of academic institutions to neoliberal capitalism, there are few of us in academe who are not operating on some level of complicity. The affective investments of DH fandom operate

against the recognition of what is, at least for those conversant in American studies, a fairly straightforward critique.[22]

To understand the fannish content of DHers' disavowal of the neoliberal academic ecology, we can usefully turn to a distinction coined in 2009 by obsession_inc, which uses the terms *affirmational* and *transformational* fandom to describe modes of engagement with media.[23] Affirmational fans engage with their source object as it is, deferring to an original author or creator; transformational fans, while they also celebrate their source, do so through an open and undisciplined process of reinterpretation that "twists it to the fans' own purposes."[24] The defensive responses to the critique of DH described above emerge from affirmational fan perspectives, with digital humanists holding to preferred origin stories for the scholarly fandom they know and love. A transformational DH fandom could not demand a single story.

The urgent need for a transformational digital humanities fandom is made clear by recent activist interventions in DH. Amid the surge of disclosures of past sexual violence that the #metoo movement's expansion from grassroots organizing to mainstream social media has made prominent, multiple former students of the digital humanities superstar Franco Moretti—who initiated the influential DH practice of "distant reading"—came forward with stories of sexual assault at his hands.[25] As Lauren Klein sets forth in her powerful 2018 talk "Distant Reading after Moretti," these disclosures of interpersonal violence cannot be separated from conceptual and structural violence within the intellectual field he instigated: "It is not a *coincidence* that distant reading does not deal well with gender, or with sexuality, or with race."[26] The exclusionary structures were always there, even if not every participant in the formations that grew around them has actively reproduced them. But what does it mean to remain in a fandom once the structuring violences of its objects have been made visible? Klein suggests that a transformational approach is possible: "If we re-commit ourselves to the project of exposing and interrogating power, we could arrive at a form of distant reading that is much more capacious, and much more inclusive."[27] Yet such an approach may not be well served by the institutional structures that have sheltered Moretti and his affirmational fandom, even as those structures (conferences, departments, disciplines, the university itself) must by necessity be the means through which a new formation of distant reading would be produced and reproduced. Transformational fandom cannot always leave its objects intact.

Not only the digital but all the humanities operate a lot like a fandom. How could one devote a life to study without an intense affective connection

to an object of fascination—whether it begins in love or as anger, discomfort, a critical itch? We identify with our fields, and communities cohere around them; to the institutionally employed, scholarly fandoms may mean more than department affiliations. Fandom is what gets left over when we parcel our scholarly selves into commodities, for the market or for tenure or for funding applications; it is what we might struggle not to lose in those depressing and laborious processes. It is no wonder we seek to defend it. But if fandom is a name we might use for the affects and commitments that continue to be produced in excess to academe as industry, its pleasures also come at a price. For fandom is what gets exploited endlessly by the forces of academic capitalism, immiserating graduate students and contingent faculty while elevating productive and high-status stars. And fandom can forestall critique of those stars when they commit or perpetuate individual or institutional acts of violence. Transformational fan communities have their own long histories of wrestling with problematic objects, and in doing so they have developed tools that can help DH and other scholarly fandoms leverage fannish affect for more than defense against warranted accusations of complicity.

Gender, Race, and the Transformative Work of Critical Fandom

For casual observers, "fandom" is likely to denote uncritical positivity. To be *a fan* is to be in a position of emotional excess: invested to the point of identifying oneself with an object. To be *critical*, on the other hand, is what professional intellectual practice requires of us: critical analysis is assumed to demand critical distance. To speak of *critical fandom* is to insist that an affectively intense relationship with an object does not preclude critique of it. Paul Booth describes critical fandom as a grassroots mode of fan engagement that encourages "counterhegemony" and "alternative values and meanings" in the face of a "neoliberal media ecology" where "critical or alternate views are ignored or elided."[28] My use of the term refers specifically to the times and places where transformational fan practices push against dominant raced and gendered power structures.[29] Transformational fandom is a widespread practice, but its history is most often traced to the network of interlinked online communities that has historically connected to the subcultural identifier of "media fandom": a counterpublic of makers for whom popular media provides raw material for transformative works of fiction, art, and video. Participants—long documented as composed primarily of women—have used these creative practices to engage with television, film, and print fiction since the 1970s, first

via zines and mailed VHS tapes, then through diversifying digital means.[30] Certainly, not all transformative fan works can be said to be critical; many create narratives that are more invested in conservative social norms than the media to which they respond.[31] Nevertheless, the affordances of transformative works can facilitate powerful critical possibilities.

I find the fannish form of vidding compelling for its capacity to generate transformative critique. Vids are remix videos set to music; now popular on YouTube, they have been created by members of subcultural fan communities for thirty years.[32] Vids make meaning through the digital manipulation of sound and image files, creating audiovisual arguments that rely on viewers' prior relationship with images on-screen.[33] As a rule, vids require a fan's level of investment in a source—most often a single film or television show, but sometimes a genre, trope, or tendency—to comprehend. Their intensification of that investment means that they pack a powerful affective punch when they are mobilized for critical ends, as thingswithwings's 2011 multisource feminist critique vid "The Price" amply demonstrates.[34]

Using comic effects to highlight fannish contradictions, "The Price" showcases a deeply problematic gendered economy of fannish pleasures and desires. To the soundtrack of a comic song by Wax Mannequin, thingswithwings spends five minutes linking a massive number of sources to critique the representational trope of "manpain" in film and television. Over and over, the vid shows male characters at the center of media narratives losing lovers and family members whose death and pain is instrumentalized so that protagonists' facades of patriarchal control will be cracked and they will elicit viewer sympathy. Minor characters who die for the sake of others' stories are invariably women, creating the dominant narrative that male pain is worthy while female pain and death is simply "the price" men must pay. Images that have brought forth many viewerly tears are recodified through the image of a single tear, made to sparkle through image manipulation, that slips down the cheek of protagonist after protagonist. The more we might have cried along with these sad men, the more (it is to be hoped) we laugh and shudder in recognition as the critique hammers home. "The Price" is a masterful work of media criticism that showcases fannish creative praxis as a form of critical argument. It also demonstrates why critical fandom is necessary: the price of fandom without critique is simply too high.

"The Price" suggests that when fans reappropriate tropes like manpain, they are as likely to reinscribe as to critique the structural inequalities embedded in popular media, since the pain and tears of televisual men are fetishized in

many fan works. Thingswithwings calls attention to problematic aspects of fannish love by insisting on the persistent misogynist imagery that underlies its pleasures. Yet the vid is also itself a fannish product, and one that circulated to great acclaim. It is not a call to give up pleasure in media properties. In an essay posted along with the vid, thingswithwings writes: "I'm not here to take anyone's desire or pleasure away from them. . . . As often as not, when these shows pull shit like this, it still rings a bell inside me and I feel deeply for the characters involved even though I sometimes don't want to. . . . That's what culture does to me—forces me to identify against myself. So this vid is . . . me trying to loosen those bonds a little bit."[35] The transformative subculture of media fandom is built on the overwhelming feeling of being hailed by media, responding to a call whose resonance one cannot easily avoid. Recognizing that the price of fannish love might be death and dehumanization, that the shared joy and depth of feeling comes at a cost, does not expiate complicity even if it is accompanied by an effort to disinvest in the name of justice. Yet creatively critical possibilities do continue to be realized in fannish media transformations. What critical fandom as a mode of knowledge production offers, perhaps, is a refusal to step away from contradiction and ambiguity: to loosen the bonds while acknowledging that they can often be fun to play with. Nevertheless, "The Price" is as critical of fandom as it is of the media industry; it asks its viewers to seek out more ethical, less implicitly violent ways to play out pleasures and desires.

Transformational media fandom is not primarily or even predominantly a site of critique. Rather, critical fandom is a mode developed by those who have grown weary of paying the price of erasure or violence for their participation in fannish pleasures. The operations of racial discourse in media fandom make this especially visible, through the ways that fans of color have intervened in the unmarked whiteness of dominant media fandom's objects and spaces.[36] In the aftermath of a wide-ranging 2009 debate over race and representation in science fiction media and literature fandom, the fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* published a roundtable discussion among antiracist media fans who understood their critiques as rooted in decades of women of color feminist theory and practice.[37] Their statements highlight both the power of critical fandom's intersectional analysis and the resistance that such critiques can provoke. Jackie Gross and sparkymonster describe their interventions as mirroring the work of Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith in feminist movements of the 1980s—yet despite this evidence of the slow pace of change, many participants also express hope, noting that their critiques have led to shifts in the ways that media fandom engages with race.[38]

Deepa D. notes that "fans who are involved with the production of trans-formative works are used to discussions where a community can constantly reinvent itself, where it can self-correct if things are going wrong."[39] Yet that reinvention comes at a price. Even as fans of color articulate their critiques as efforts to access the pleasures of fannish creativity and community, they face extensive backlash against a critical fandom that brings attention to white fans' racism. Coffeeandink describes the tendency among white fans whose participa-tion in racist structures has been critiqued to have their emotional reactions in public, unintentionally but powerfully affirming the fannish public as "a space where white concerns are paramount."[40] Meanwhile, fans of color, fighting to make a space where their own fandom could be welcomed, perform enormous emotional and archival labor. Their interventions may have made fandom a space more accepting of critique, yet Deepa D. describes many fans of color as leaving discussions of race "burned out, hurt, not paid, and not rewarded," having "paid the price by having to retreat from something they love."[41] The price of critical fandom can be fandom itself.

Lierdumoa's 2008 vid "How Much Is That Geisha in the Window?" enacts the affective work of racial critique through the methods of transformational fandom.[42] The vid is a response to Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (Fox, 2002–3), a short-lived science fiction TV series that depicts a future wherein much-loved rebel Browncoats try to hold on to independence in a world of the Alliance's corporate dominion. Challenging then-commonplace characterizations of Whedon as a feminist auteur and progressive force in mass media, Lierdumoa's vid zooms in on his decision to set a space western in a world dominated by Chinese culture yet to cast no Asian actors. To the atmospheric instrumental soundtrack of Damon Albarn's composition "Boyd's Journey," the vid makes its points by focusing on Firefly's background imagery. Stereotyped orientalist images from the show combine with small amounts of external film footage to render visible the racialized labor that underlies the rebel space cowboy narrative's simultaneous fantasy of power and marginalization. Asian women in kimonos serve tea; Chinese laborers build a railroad that will serve as a key setting in a train-heist episode. The racialization of American soil is also invoked with a flash of the Confederate flag, a reminder of the post–Civil War history of rebel cowboy stories that makes an implicit link between erasures of black and Asian labor. Unusually, the vid offers its message at the end: the words "there is one Asian actor in all of *Firefly*. She plays a whore," appear on-screen before a voice-over declares "Fuck you, Joss Whedon, you racist asshole." Heading off the potentially defensive responses of affirmational *Firefly* fans with

this sardonic ending, Lierdumoa calls out to other viewers who might share her response to the show. As the vid gets shared, commented on, and passed around, viewers' individual anger, betrayal, and despair can come together in a critically fannish collectivity.

Among the images that Lierdumoa extracts from background scenery and forgettable moments to create "How Much Is That Geisha" are numerous laboring bodies and hands. These hands, and their relative invisibility prior to Lierdumoa's critical transformation, call our attention not only to the failures of specific objects of fandom but also to the labor and the violence that are hidden in our production and consumption of the digital more broadly—including the technologies used to create this and other critical digital works. As Lisa Nakamura reminds us in her work on racialized and gendered labor in the production of digital hardware, the devices we use to type, tweet, watch TV, or vid have almost all been touched by the hands of a woman of color whose labor, and the conditions in which that labor took place, vanishes from our understanding of the final product.[43] Lierdumoa's fannish labor makes visible what is hidden in the background by Whedon, but nevertheless relies on such backgrounding to make its representational commentary. I mean this in terms of both the inequalities built into the infrastructure of digital media and the personal investment in *Firefly* fandom that is a prerequisite for the extensive labor commitment required to make the vid itself. This apparent contradiction exemplifies a larger truth about critical fandom as a mode of knowledge production: it is made possible by the very things it critiques.

To make sense of the contradictions of critical fandom, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's language of the "undercommons" is useful.[44] Harney and Moten use this term to name the spaces of possibility in which radical knowledge is produced by subjects who are also, in other contexts, producing and reproducing the status quo. The affects and identifications of fandom accompany the political commitments affirmed in the spaces they describe as "the underground, the downlow low-down maroon community of the university . . . where the revolution is still black, still strong."[45] Writing of state workers' labor, Harney and Moten state: "There are all kinds of little holes and tunnels and ditches and highways and byways through the state that are being produced and maintained constantly by the people who are also at the same time doing this labor that ends in the production of the state. So, what is it that these folks are producing?"[46] Their description of labor inside and against the state names not only the capacities of radical scholarship and pedagogy that many of us hope to enact within state institutions, but also the ways that fannish love can

be mobilized against the infrastructures that create its objects. Creative media fans might be among the producers of the holes and tunnels that aerate our deeply capitalistic, profoundly surveilled digital world.[47] Transformative fan works mobilize affective labor for a purpose that neither radically disrupts nor fully incorporates itself into the media industry's systems of ownership, but simultaneously supports and undercuts them while producing a collectivity of its own—where dominant media and cultural forms and norms are reproduced, critiqued, explored, and unmade. Critical fandom can teach us to use our tools and our own investments against the grain of the orientations from which industries and institutions profit most; to purposefully produce knowledge in and for the undercommons. I turn now to its practice within academic digital humanities.

Toward a Critical Digital Humanities Fandom

Since about 2011, #transformDH has taken on a critically fannish role inside and against DH fandom. The group's initial impetus was a set of shared experiences parallel to those Tara McPherson describes in her influential article "Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?" Trained in feminist, queer, and ethnic studies, we wondered why these fields and their inhabitants seemed so absent in DH, and what DH could bring to our study of what McPherson called the cultural "operating systems" of race and gender.[48] Those who organized panels, created a hashtag, and participated in collaborative conversations wanted a space where the "humanities" of "digital humanities" would include acknowledgment of the exclusionary history of the boundaries of the human; where we would not be expected to leave our concerns with marked bodies and systemic social hierarchies behind.[49] The digital humanities fandom #transformDH entered in 2011–12 was, as Annemarie Perez writes, filled with "visibly, notably white spaces" where "the absence of racialized bodies was un-noted."[50] Anne Cong-Huyen describes "overwhelmingly white" rooms filled with senior faculty who "energetically and aggressively defined the parameters for who can legitimately call themselves 'digital humanists,'" rarely engaging questions of "race, gender, sexuality, and inequality."[51] The *transform* in #transformDH signaled a hope that digital humanities' much-discussed commitment to open access, open source research, and pedagogy would also prove open to transformative reinvention from a perspective that critiqued the dominant tendency to view race, gender, and class as unrelated to technological invention and digital communication, challenging the prevalence of what Moya Bailey names the "add and stir" model of diversity.[52]

#transformDH gradually emerged as a distributed, collaborative effort to shift the focus of digital humanities "from technical processes to political ones," turning the orientation of the field toward social justice rather than disciplinary professionalization.[53] The collective continues to be organized like a fandom, having preferred not to institutionalize as a formal membership organization. Its website, transformdh.org, is hosted on one member's personal server space (currently mine) and given a powerful visual identity by Melissa Rogers's cross-stitched logo (a work of transformative fan craft solicited for the #transformDH conference I organized in 2015 at the University of Maryland).[54] The site is populated largely by Bailey's ongoing labor on the #transformDH Tumblr, which links scholarly networks with fannish and social justice online spaces.[55] Without formal links to institutions, there are no barriers to entry, and becoming a part of #transformDH is as simple as saying (and feeling) that one is—though there is equally no guarantee that consensus on what #transformDH is or should be will be reached across the fandom.

Within DH fandom, #transformDH was not initially welcomed. Cong-Huyen writes: "Our critique of dh as it had been, our vision and invitation to push it into different and difficult directions, was met . . . with some telling us we don't need to 'transform dh,' it's already transforming the university, or others tweeting at us examples of projects about people of color or women."[56] Some suggested that the kinds of analysis we proposed would be more at home in media studies, implying that the study of digital media and its scholarly use were fields or fandoms without substantial overlap.[57] Even as its motivation had been to widen access beyond tokenistic representation, to acknowledge the already existing digital practices of those not often accounted for in DH genealogies, #transformDH was viewed as endangering DH fandom as it stood.

These critiques are no longer made in the same way; it is not as unusual as it was in 2011 to see analysis of race, sexuality, and gender in DH. As this special issue demonstrates, we are beginning to see a digital humanities embedded in American studies methods and critiques that demand interrogation of the racialized "origins and implications of the digital itself."[58] Black digital humanities, which Kim Gallon describes as demanding a reckoning with how "the very foundation of the humanities are racialized,"[59] has seen significant institutional funding with the University of Maryland's Mellon-funded African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities project;[60] tools are being built in collaboration with grassroots organizers to promote ethical archival engagement with activist social media.[61] #transformDH's debates and interventions have made their way into the DH canon; publications by and about

the collective and hashtag get cited and even taught in DH courses.[62] This institutionalization, however, does not mean the challenge of transformation has been met. Indeed, it is very possible that an emerging scholar now critiquing dominant frameworks in DH fandom could be met by someone tweeting a link to #transformDH, using an affirmational fandom of the prior intervention to quash the transformational spirit it was intended to foment. To avert such misappropriations, the moments of confrontation between fandom and critique encountered in the initiation of #transformDH are important to remember. These ephemeral archives call attention to an incompatibility between established scholarly fields and the radical possibilities of transformation—to what gets left behind when critical fandom becomes scholarly critique, when conversations slip out of the undercommons and into the more respected spaces of the university.

Keeping hold of the undercommons in the face of institutionalization demands open collaboration between academic and nonacademic digital knowledge producers, and awareness of their divergent stakes. The last fan work I want to discuss is a critique from the undercommons directed toward the practice of institutional knowledge production. "Field Work (Imperial March)," a 2017 vid by eruthros, critiques the colonial dynamics of dominant academic knowledge production through a remix that combines two well-known media franchises: *Indiana Jones* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981) and *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977).[63] The *Indiana Jones* films, casting Harrison Ford's archaeology professor as action hero, create representations of scholarship that academics profess to love to hate.[64] Eruthros suggests that such fandom is less critical than it might seem, just as the power dynamics of academic knowledge production are uglier than many scholars would prefer to acknowledge. "Field Work" gets much of its power from the ominous strings of its soundtrack: the Imperial March from *Star Wars*, also known as Darth Vader's theme. The political allegories of *Star Wars* are also front and center: the franchise's rebel alliance encouraged Americans to identify with the colonized while the United States consolidated itself as global empire, averting their awareness from the violence of US imperial power.[65] "Field Work" places Indiana Jones squarely as empire's avatar, linking US power, colonial violence, and scholarly production. He extracts valuable objects from their origins and transports them to the United States for study and exploitation; in his wake, bodies of color who resisted his colonial plunder pile up. Education reproduces this violence: back home in the classroom, Jones writes the word "FACT" on a blackboard and underlines it. At the denouement in his comfortable office, he is toasted by powerful white

academic men who applaud while Jones, in voice-over, responds to a question: "Are you some type of grave robber or something?" "I'm a tenured professor of archaeology." Eruthros leaves the viewer with chills and assurances: these two things are not different.

The cartoonish excesses of Indiana Jones are easy to critique, as are the stereotypical racial representations of 1970s Hollywood action film. But eruthros has a deeper point. "Field Work" forces its viewers to take Indiana Jones seriously, turning the easily mockable films into a powerful account of the colonial discourses underpinning the history and present of academic knowledge production.[66] Colonial dynamics are at the roots of disciplinary knowledges even where colonization and indigeneity are not immediate subjects of study; digital humanists and American studies scholars may not be robbing graves, but that does not mean we can escape being interpellated by eruthros's version of Indiana Jones. The image of a researcher as heroic individual, bringing hidden knowledge to light or crafting innovative original theories, is too powerfully rewarded with publications, tenure, and awards. If we want to understand knowledge production and theory as not only prerogatives of the institutionally embedded, to learn from those who do not have the privilege to enter the ivory tower or who have chosen to reject it, then we must frame our endeavors in different terms. Even research inviting subjects to think, write, or otherwise contribute to digital projects extracts labor, though it may be labor that subjects choose to give. This is scarcely news for scholars trained in feminist, queer, and critical race methodologies, but it is not yet a commonplace conversation in DH.[67]

While media fandom is not a colonized community, its practices have been targeted for extractive knowledge production. In a 2009 example known in media fan studies as "Surveyfail," Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam, two neuroscience PhDs, used the internet as their data set for a popular science book about gender and desire. They had read about male/male slash (transformative fan fiction about same-sex erotics among media characters) and were fascinated by the idea that women would write fiction about sex between men.[68] Seeking access to the secrets of the female sexual brain, they created a survey to extract information. Their questions, which included leading queries about masturbation and arousal, displayed a prurience and naive biologism that was rapidly and fiercely critiqued by fans who called attention to the fact that the researchers had neither institutional support nor IRB approval. Ogas weighed in to the conversation, talking down to fans and refusing to acknowledge either their experience or their education—even when respondents had graduate

degrees in gender studies, qualitative research design, or neuroscience. After this backlash, Ogas and Gaddam deleted their online survey and most of their comments to the community, pursuing other research avenues for the book they eventually published—though not before fandom's dedicated archivists had gathered numerous screenshots.[69]

The importance of Surveyfail for me goes beyond two clueless researchers and into questions about methodology, the contributions of erotic subjectivity to knowledge production, and the barriers to respectful, reciprocal relationships with knowledge producers working outside academic structures. Early in the process, eruthros and thingswithwings—who were co-organizers of a prominent challenge for fan creators—were invited to share the survey. Their response demonstrates the opposition of critical fannish knowledge to dominant formations:

> We are operating in discourses with tremendous institutional and institutionalized power—your power, your medicalizing discourses, your determinations of what is natural and normal and what is deviant and unusual and fascinating. The subject position you are trying to retain in your query places you in authority, and places us (women, kinky, queer) as the objects of your fascination, unable to speak for ourselves, and grateful for the slightest hope that someone will speak for us. And so we decline to be interviewed by you; we decline to be the objects of your fascination; we decline to be naturalized; we decline . . . to be cited in support of the very discourses we are trying to question.[70]

In speaking back not by calling the researchers' shaky credentials into question but by challenging the power dynamics of the research process itself, eruthros and thingswithwings debunk the dispassionate gaze of any surveyor. Their critique is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's call for situated knowledges, reminding the researchers that their presumption of an authoritative view from nowhere is not universally accepted.[71] Declining the position of object, they call attention to knowledges in which they are proficient and that their scientifically empowered interlocutors lack. Those knowledges include feminist, queer, and decolonial theory as well as the theory and practice of fandom itself; not all those proficient in radical scholarship produce knowledge for academic audiences.

In a phrase from a 2013 article that is among the most cited manifestations of #transformDH, Amanda Phillips and I asked: "What would digital scholarship and the humanities disciplines be like if . . . their practitioners considered . . . how the kinds of knowledge production nurtured elsewhere could transform the academy itself?"[72] What if the knowledge from elsewhere took the form of eruthros and thingswithwings' refusal? A survey with better design and research ethics would certainly not have called forth such fierce

critique—but the "institutional and institutionalized power" underpinning scholarly fascination would have been there all the same.

As with Indiana Jones, few DH or American studies scholars would see ourselves in Ogas and Gaddam. We would more likely align our commitments to open, egalitarian, and socially just scholarly practices with solidarity and advocacy for fan creators. Certainly, that is what I hope to achieve. And yet I also believe that a vital element of critical scholarly fandom is that the scholar must be willing to be not only the critical fan but also the one who is critiqued. In eruthros and thingswithwings' 2009 letter, I am named as an example of a trustworthy researcher. I consider that naming less as an achievement than as a call to accountability; if I seemed trustworthy then, as a graduate student embedded in the networks that were calling out the problems of Ogas and Gaddam's research, I cannot assume I automatically continue to be so now, as a faculty member approaching tenure at a research university. My scholarship in queer, feminist, and critical race studies participates in the political project eruthros and thingswithwings outline, pushing back against medicalizing discourses of the normative and the deviant. But my institutionally legitimated position places me in the "you" that they address at the same time as the "we" that speaks.

It is difficult for scholars to recognize that not everyone is in our fandom or that our sincere belief in the justice of our work might not be shared by those with whom we aim to stand in solidarity. I have described digital humanities as a fandom in this essay, and I stand by the usefulness of that assertion. Nevertheless, it must be viewed critically, lest it hide as much as it reveal. Scholarly fandoms' investments and communities have capacities to be legitimized and rewarded in ways that others do not, and we must continually ask who pays what price for the professional capital toward which we mobilize our fannish excitement. In producing knowledge shaped by marginal spaces and spheres, a methodology informed by critical fandom must neither erase the effects of privilege and legitimacy nor assume that they can be determined in advance—though neither is a scholar's position risk free, and power does not flow in a single direction. In Jessica Marie Johnson's words, "the digital . . . has created and facilitated insurgent and maroon knowledge creation within the ivory tower."[73] But it does not do so without attentive intentionality or without deep connections to those outside the tower's walls.

I do not think that the knowledge production of #transformDH has been extractive, but we must guard against an overly affirmational fandom that would fail to see the ways in which it might become so. This might also prove

a good reason for remaining within DH fandom and participating critically in its messy and problematic infrastructures, even as it might sometimes seem more appealing to focus entirely on the undercommons formations to which we are committed. To purposefully situate oneself inside an object of critique, rather than repudiating it and trying to build something else in its place, is not always a justifiable endeavor, but it nevertheless describes many situations common among radical academics. Centering on the transformative rather than on the prospect of original creation acknowledges the extent to which we are always operating within systems we did not choose. Critical fandom's methodologies are one—far from the only—set of tools that might build a digital humanities with the capacity to leverage institutionalization in transformative ways and also to build in different spaces, in different ways, with different means.

Conclusion: Transformative Methodologies for the Fannish Undercommons

Critical fandom is one of many methodologies that #transformDH's participants and supporters have created in order to produce knowledge that emerges from and remains accountable to the undercommons even as it circulates within the academy. My articulation of it builds on Jessica Marie Johnson's and Moya Bailey's transformative articulations of women of color feminist methodologies in digital contexts. Johnson's autoethnographically inflected black feminist digital theory enacts liberatory digital praxis as transformative collaboration; she cowrites with her digital alter ego, Kismet Nuñez, to performatively speculate on the breakdown of divisions between credentialed academic publication and radical public digital world-making. Her work, which circulates amid the transformational fannish networks of Tumblr, shows how digital black feminisms provide a survival mechanism for a scholar situated in a hostile academic sphere while also acknowledging their extreme vulnerability to networked harassment and abuse.[74] Working in the connected sphere of trans women of color's networks on Twitter, Bailey has developed a transformative DH methodology that likewise recognizes how networked collaboration becomes a matter of life and death. Her feminist ethical praxis for collaboration with marginalized cultural producers relies on accountability as the basis of inquiry. Before beginning a new project, she gives those whom she wishes to research "an opportunity to say no," and her work is guided by questions that include "How does everyone benefit?" and "How will you

be transformed?"[75] Johnson's and Bailey's work does not much resemble the institutionalized digital humanities whose neoliberal complicity has been the subject of so much debate; its affective investments lie not with the digital itself but with what digital praxis can do if it is wielded with transformative intent and radical commitment. While it circulates through the networks of digital humanities fandom, it holds forth the potential for their transformation.

Like Johnson's and Bailey's work, the present essay has drawn its methodology from its undercommons connections: in my case, from the fannish worlds to which I hold myself as kin.[76] I consider it a transformative work, intermingling my fannish and critical investments in transformative digital humanities and media fan creativity. I have followed the fannish methodology of seeking consent for the creation of a new work from an old—a practice that marks the power differential between fan creators and the media industries whose products do not require consent to transform.[77] Pursuing this practice highlighted my own limitations, since I began to write about #transformDH as a fandom years before I realized that thingswithwings's and eruthros's work was what I needed to deepen and expand my understanding. I sought their consent much later in the process of writing than I would have preferred and grew to realize that my investments in transformative knowledge production will in the future demand a research process closer to Bailey's model. The most significant affective dimension of my effort to live up to the practices of accountability that my arguments demand has been anxiety—but I think that anxiety is something to learn from, alongside the pleasure, disappointment, excitement, and anger of critically fannish work. Surely scholars ought, after all, to worry about the price our work may elicit from ourselves and others. The complex emotional landscape of research collaboration is an aspect of critically fannish scholarly engagement that demands deeper investigation.

The call for papers for this special issue asserts that "digital humanities scholarship has coalesced around a shared set of values: that theory can be engaged through practice, that scholarship should be open and accessible to all, and that collaboration is pivotal."[78] A digital humanities framed as critical fandom can offer some modifications to these values. Critical fandom as a methodology for digital humanities acknowledges that theory and practice are lived through embodied affects whose force we must recognize even as we unpack the ideologies that produce them. It perceives that critical insights are produced in many spaces not conventionally recognized as scholarly, and that such insights cannot be imported wholesale without careful attention to the contexts that produced them. And it appreciates that collaboration is a

process likely to be laden with conflict and contradiction, both interpersonal and institutional. The transformative potential of digital humanities exists because of, not despite, such critiques and conflicts.

Notes

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