Fanfiction and the Author

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2. Methodology

Two research traditions inform the methodology of this study: discourse analysis inspired by Foucault, and internet studies. This section outlines the contribution of each. I explain how I apply those Foucauldian principles of discourse as active, constructive, formative language and practices to the context of online fanfiction, informed by earlier Foucauldian studies of text and network analyses online. I note particularly a lack of methodical attention to the reception of statements in discourse, crucial to the hierarchization and regulation of fanfic, which this project addresses. Finally, I explain the ethical protocols of the project.

Discourse Analysis

Foucault considered his texts as tool boxes, from which useful parts could be taken or discarded as required (1975 interview, cited in Patton 1979, p. 115). Previous researchers have taken up these tools in ways that set some precedent for this project. Foucault’s influence can be generalized or specific: on the general side, Critical Discourse Analysis takes him as one of its founding philosophers (see e.g., Fairclough 1993, 2003; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001; Van Dijk 2001). A problem here is that ‘discourse’ can be interpreted in terms so broad as to be unhelpful. Fairclough, whose precedent is a useful one to me, links close textual analysis to relevant social structures, arguing that discourses can be ‘invested’ with ideologies even though they are not ideological in themselves (1993, pp. 59–60, 67, 91). He seeks the sources of discourses in socially available genres, so that each discourse combines pieces of many others (1993, pp. 65, 80, 105, 115–119). A newspaper article on a promising new drug might combine lexes from the discourses of religion (miracle, hope), science (jargon) and commerce (brand names, costs and benefits). This intertextuality and interdiscursivity creates ambivalence and potentially changes the discourse, as meanings associated with the source texts carry more or less powerfully into the new one (pp. 104–105). As we will see, statements from canon mix in fanfic with statements from other discourses, inflecting the new formations with their histories.

Others employ Foucault’s tools more specifically. The most famous ‘Foucauldian’ work is probably Said’s Orientalism, which argued that the powerful, cumulative, tight-knit discourse of the title produced an entire
field of study for imperial Europe (Said [1978] 2003). The construction of the ‘Oriental Other’ will be further explored with regards to *Sherlock* (p. 59, pp. 93-98), but, regarding language generally, Said shared Foucault’s perception of the constructive and organizational capacities of discourse. He understood the ‘enormously systematic discipline’ by which the West has invaded, administrated and exploited the East as a discourse (p. 3). However, Said’s use of ‘discourse’ is primarily concerned with the formation of objects (Young 2001, p. 403): in this case, the object of ‘The Orient’. He neglects the other constructive aspects of discourse, such as the means by which statements authorize individuals, make concepts emerge and make choices available (this is Young’s helpful gloss on Foucault’s ‘formation of strategies’: see Young, *Ibid.*). The aim here is not to validate or invalidate truth-claims, but ‘to establish the rules according to which [...] discursive events emerge’ (Young 2001, p. 389). Said remains a strong influence in postcolonial work, but has been modified by Bhabha especially to account for the ambivalence and heterogeneity, which Foucault himself understood to inhere in power. Bhabha draws attention to Foucault’s ‘repeatable materiality’ of statements, the ‘process by which statements from one institution can be transcribed in the discourse of another’, where the change in context renders the statement different (1994, p. 22). In a project dealing with fiction that appropriates a canon, identifying statements which accumulate this materiality across various contexts is important (cf. Hodges 2011). Each repetition thus involves both citation/consolidation of a statement, and variation or transformation of it (cf. Kristeva 1980). Clearly, citation and variation of statements is a large part of how fanfic consolidates and changes popular texts.

Closer to my subject matter, Miles (2002) conducts a Foucauldian ‘genealogy’ of Gothic fiction from 1750 to 1820. Genealogy, in this sense, is the technique of tracing discourses backwards to their unstable and fragmentary origins, thus unsettling assumptions certain cultures take for granted. Miles historicizes the Gothic genre in terms of eighteenth-century discourses such as ‘national origin’ and ‘the sublime’ (2002, pp. 1–6) then conducts close intertextual readings in which those discourses are evident, focusing on particular codes and devices. But Miles lacks a systematic analysis of the reception, validation or rejection of the texts he studies. Therefore, his perception of discourse suffers theoretically: recall that a discourse is defined by its *regularities* and *conditions of existence*, and statements become significant through their support or alteration of those conditions. Sparing attention to the reception of texts makes it hard to see the regularities and boundaries of discourse formations in Miles’s study; though, in fairness, evidence of such phenomena is much easier to find for a project
like my own. Where Miles does discuss critical reactions (pp. 176–191), these are not clearly linked to how the text’s statements challenge or uphold a discursive formation.

Lack of attention to the reception of statements also weakens Said’s argument (Young 2001, pp. 389–390). Indeed, this is a significant gap in Foucault-inspired studies dealing with texts, which the present research addresses (note the lack in, for instance, Halperin 2002; Walker 2002; Fuentes Peres 2003; Archimedes 2005; Harwood 2006; Berglund 2008, Fejes 2008; Fogde 2008; Skålén et al. 2008; Solomon 2008; Kirchengast 2010; Mazher 2012; Moncrieff and Timimi 2013). The problem is not that these previous studies never acknowledge intertextuality or responses to statements, but that they lack a methodical and transparent way of addressing them and tend to treat them thinly: why is a particular critic quoted? Where did the author find that particular response? How popular is ‘popular’ or ‘influential’? Compared to what? These questions must be addressed in order to see how a discursive formation takes the shape it does, and how it changes. In this project, I conduct systematic analysis of response and reception to statements in the form of further statements, enabling me to support arguments about boundaries and changes in discourse without sliding into objectivist fallacies that claim knowledge of essential meaning or authorial psyches.

In summary, then, I follow the Foucauldian tradition back to Said in seeking the regularities and boundaries of discursive formations, taking note of Fairclough’s precedent in intertextual effects. Originally, however, I attend in a methodical way to the reception, affirmation and rejection of statements in discursive formations. As I coded fic, I kept qualitative and quantitative records of the amount and type of feedback each work received in different online contexts, including recommendations and insults. This data forms an integral part of the analysis. For, if, as Andersen writes, the aim of Foucauldian discourse analysis is to ‘detect the rules that govern the way different statements come into being in discursive formations’ (Andersen 2003, p. 18), it is necessary to ask how those rules come to be put in place, how and where their implicit power operates.

Internet Studies

Much research on internet text and communication takes the label ‘cyberethnographic’. The reference to culture in the ‘ethno’ morpheme exhibits its early impetus: to rebut fears that the internet would damage social
ties through the medium’s inability to convey emotion or sustain ‘real’ relationships (Walther 1992; Hine 2008, p. 259). Important works in this vein include Rheingold 1993; Watson 1997; Mackinnon 1997; Hine 2000; and on fan community specifically Baym (1995, 1998, 2000) and Bury (2005). Most of the procedures are recognizable adaptations from traditional ethnography; participant observation, interviewing and surveying online and in person, focus groups, close linguistic analysis and coding procedures taken from quantitative discourse analysis (Baym 2000, pp. 24–30; 219–230; Bury pp. 18–30; 217–223). Baym notes that ethnographic work on fan audiences relies on shorter research duration and smaller subject pools than ethnography typically demands (2000, p. 19). Though I am a full participant in fandom, and in agreement with Hine that ‘being a participant in [discourse] creation allows for deeper understanding’ (2000, p. 23), my methodological deficiencies from the perspective of traditional ethnography are not problematic, as I make no claims to overarching description of a culture. I do agree with Samutina that ‘long-term participant observation, which presupposes extensive reading and communication within fan fiction communities [is] important condition for the study of specifics of this type of literature’ (2016, p. 3), as it is this that affords the researcher perception of community tropes, conditions and patters; however, not have sociological data on the backgrounds, aims and perspectives of the writers quoted, nor have I attempted to describe or explain what fandom is, who counts as a ‘fan’, or where. This sort of data is unneeded for a discursive study that declines to read authorial intention into text or posit text as symbolizing or representing extra-discursive cultural phenomena.

Aycock and Buchignani (1995) took a Foucauldian approach in their study of events on a Usenet newsgroup, tracing both the continuity and discontinuity of related postings. Rather than topics or objects, they found ‘broadly constrained chronological incoherence [in posts that] disperse themselves along tangentially related threads of discussion’ (pp. 200–201). Strategies of coherence—like citing past posts—could be undermined by the way Usenet technology mixed up posts and by cross-posting (p. 205). Threads nominally on the same topic could be ‘genealogically coiled differently’ and ‘unwind at different rates’ (p. 205). This genealogy showed the discourse in the process of object formation, but also revealed the fragility of the ideology on which the group was based (science as an objective practice). Their brief but dense article is a useful demonstration of how the Foucauldian concept of fragmentary origins resulting in apparent coherence can be visibly demonstrated online, structured partly by code and its flaws. For my work, the technological and social codes that govern fanfiction archives
and community spaces must be considered as shaping factors of discourse (see also Rebaza 2008; Schäfer 2011).

Though neither a discursive, nor linguistic study, Schultz’s (2011) work provides some precedent in considering how the technological structures of LiveJournal and Fanfiction.net structure participation differently. She posits these sites as ‘sponsors of literacy’ after Brandt (1998, 2001), which ‘recruit, enable, regulate, and suppress’ literacy as they position participants (Schultz, p. ix): an argument very compatible with Foucauldian theory. Shultz is concerned with what university instructors of composition can learn from college students’ extracurricular practices, and pays little attention to the actual fic in favour of analysing the positioning of writers and readers. Nonetheless, she makes several useful observations, including how Fanfiction.net’s posting rules ‘position FFN as a site that shares some of the same standards as the dominant culture’ regarding good writing, such as correctness in spelling and grammar (Shultz, p. 84). She also explores the ways profile and homepage templates shape, to some extent, the presentation of authors and beta-readers, in conjunction with the users’ own input (pp. 90–116; 121–136); and observes that LiveJournal encourages more interactivity and more in-depth criticism of fic (p. 86), as the Fanfiction.net review page does not allow the two-way conversations LiveJournal’s comment feature does (pp. 155–158). These are good examples of how techno/social codes work to structure discourse, though Shultz underestimates how the shared codes of specific fandoms and fandom in general operate across different sites to form a websphere, though a varied one. Further, at several points Shultz displays a lack of familiarity with fan practice that undermines her perceptions of regulation. For instance, she posits without context that slash is ‘controversial’ (pp. 54, 68–69, 100), which is hardly the case everywhere, and that writing OOC (out-of character) is a ‘cardinal sin’ (pp. 2, 123), whereas crack and parody can depend on it.¹

This method is best characterized as an archaeology. Archaeological analysis is concerned with the conditions of a discursive formation at a particular moment, though this may include ‘displacement over time’ (Andersen, p. 30), which is necessary in tracing reception. Genealogical criticism, the other tradition claiming inheritance from Foucault, is less applicable. Foucault stated that

¹ ‘Crack’, appearing in all fandoms, is outrageous and/or surreal humour, often featuring bizarre adventures, semi-coherent plots, transformations, talking objects and/or animals, and a variety of in-jokes. The name is derived from the double implication that it is addictive, and that it makes sense when one is high (cf. Supernatural Wiki 2011a, ‘Crack’).
‘archaeology’ would be the appropriate methodology of the analysis of local discursivities, and ‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play ([1976] 1980, p. 85).

Kendall and Wickham suggest that archaeology be seen as the explicit method, genealogy more of a strategy, a way of putting archaeology to work (p. 31). Despite much overlap between the concepts (Neal 2006, p. 41), it is archaeology that ‘describes regularities of statements in a non-interpretative manner [...]’; analyses the relation between one statement and other statements [and] [...] formulates rules for the repeatability of statements’ (Kendall and Wickham 1999, p. 33). Archaeology also ‘analyses the positions which are established between subjects in regard to statements’ (p. 33), rather than seeking the interpretative principle of an author. There is some consensus that genealogy is broader, more historical and more concerned with subjectivity than archaeology. My work is better characterized as archaeology, because it is a close study of specific local discursive formations that have existed for a relatively short period of time. I do, however, trace the descent of certain statements in a small-scale way, notably from canon to fanon, thus showing in genealogical moves the contingency of certain solidified regularities. I also draw attention to the possibilities and eruptions of subjected knowledges. I take precedent from internet studies in developing the concrete, pragmatic steps to do so.

**Sampling and Process**

I locate this work as Foucauldian archaeology in an online context. I am attempting first to identify statements in the discursive formations of masculinity, authority and authorship in *Sherlock*, *Game of Thrones* and *Supernatural* fanfiction, respectively; then, working outwards, the governing statements and conditions of possibility of the formation to which the statement belongs (cf. Foucault 1981, p. 67). The research on fanfic was conducted between 2012 and 2015, and I kept a research diary dating all searches and findings: formations change, after all, and archaeology can only hope to describe them at a certain point in time. Fanfiction exists all over the internet, but I began seeking material in the points of highest centralization, i.e. the fanfiction.net category for the fandoms and LiveJournal communities dedicated to them. However, as Hine notes, technologies themselves are not research sites (2005, p. 111; cf. Kennedy and Hills 2009,
p. 171): over the course of this project, the fan-run Archive of Our Own (hereafter A03) became an increasingly important repository for texts and another major research sites. There is much cross-posting between the sites: fanfiction is best conceived of as a ‘websphere’: a set of ‘dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple sites’ requiring a process of ‘dynamic bounding’ to analyse (Schneider and Foot 2005, pp. 158, 161–163). In other words, the ‘site’ is not defined at the outset but ‘explored through the course’ of the work (Hine 2000, p. 64).

From points of centralization, I followed links to any relevant fics on other sites and pages, including Dreamwidth and Deviantart. These fics contributed statements at the edges of the discursive formation, partly due to their niche context. Each site has searching tools, which made finding fic related to my discourse formations easier (cf. Lindgren Leavenworth and Isaksson 2013, pp. 44–45). LiveJournal and A03 rely largely on tags, whilst Fanfiction.net has genre and character filters as well as a keyword search. LiveJournal also has a function called ‘memories’, allowing users to affix keywords to entries. The introduction of each chapter specifies the relevant keywords used to locate fic, informed by the discursive formations under study and my insider knowledge of fandom.

Fig. 1: A variously tagged entry on A03. Clicking on one of the tags will produce a chronological list of fics with the same tag. Clicking on the title takes one to the story.

Each time I found a relevant fic, I coded it for discursive regularities by close reading. I noted whenever a statement contributed to an emerging regularity, or transformed or subverted one. No computer program has the necessary understanding of context and semantics to automate the process (cf. Deacon 2007; Blank 2008, p. 547). Having viewed instructional videos for the latest versions of NVivo, Atlas:ti and MAXQDA at their respective websites, it seems the only advantages they would afford me are organizational and
tagging functions, which I can do sufficiently in MS Office programs. Fiction is sufficiently allusive and unpredictable that I would still have to close-read large bodies of text, because I would not know what kind of statement would change or consolidate a discursive formation until I found it.

Though keywords can be a useful means of locating material for analysis if supplemented with other search methods, I would not depend on keyword-searching as a means of analysis itself. As Willig notes,

> Both explicit and implicit references need to be included. The fact that a text does not contain a direct reference to the discursive object can tell us a lot about the way in which the object is constructed (2001, p. 109).

As I read, I considered how significant statements enacted and affected the regularities that comprised the discursive formations. Where applicable, I theorized the most consistent regularities as governing statements, for, as Young observes, there is a hierarchy of importance within the regularities of a discourse.

Next, in order to claim that any particular statement is ‘transformative’, I will need evidence of its impact on a discourse. As noted above, this is where many discourse analyses lapse. The context of my work allows a sustained and comparative study of reception and discursive impact, based on the number and content of reviews a work receives, number of recommendations and other responses. I established versions of what network analysts call ‘ego networks’ (Beaulieu 2005, p. 186) for each fic, by searching for the title and/or author in quotation marks, always remembering that the context of a connection bears on its importance in a network (Park and Thelwall 2003). This part of the process has an unavoidable margin of error: occasionally, where both the title and username were very common words, I had to enclose ‘[title] by [author]’ in quotation marks, and thus may have missed some references. A title-and-author reference, whether a recommendation or a negative comment, almost always takes the form of a hyperlink. I began these searches with Google, as it is the world’s most-used search engine, then repeated them on Yahoo and Bing, the world’s second- and third-most used search engines at the time this research commenced. After these, the market share in search engines drops dramatically, so it is unlikely that further engines would yield more relevant data.² Figure 2 presents the process as a flowchart.

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² Search engine data correct as of 29/12/11 (Experian Hitwise 2011). The shares are 61.71% (Google), 16.26% (Yahoo) and 15.06% (Bing). After this usage shares drop to 3.93% (Ask). These
This brings me to the issue of comprehensiveness. To engage a reflexive lens that Foucauldian research can be criticized for lacking, if technology and contexts shape the discourse studied, so do they shape this research. Firstly, I am only able to read fics written in English. The majority are: for example, figures are based on volume of searches. Measured by visits, Bing and Yahoo exchange places, but the top three sites are the same.
of the 58,669 available on Fanfiction.net as of 24/02/12, 46,656 were English language (79.5%). Secondly, just as Hine notes that her virtual ethnography is shaped by the available technology and [her] understandings of it (2000, p. 81), so is my archaeology. According to the search methods above, I attempted to catalogue every relevant fic, at least for statistical purposes, in the more centralized archives during the periods of the study, though this approach had to be modified slightly in the case of the vast Sherlock fandom (see p. 66). However, whilst I am computer literate, I am certainly not an expert in IT, and where on some LiveJournal communities I have had to resort to insite searches, I am less certain of its comprehensiveness. It is possible that a researcher capable of designing his or her own search programmes would present a different project.

Even given those constraints, I am dealing with a vast amount of material. Some fics will warrant close analysis, others mere inclusion in statistics. I take note of highly influential fics—those with the most reviews, most references and links—for their impact on discourse. Some are chosen for analysis for that reason. But I also consider texts that are otherwise illustrative of the discursive formation. Either they are paradigmatic, exhibiting discursive regularities clearly, or they are critical cases: texts that most visibly alter or challenge those regularities (the criteria are adapted from Flyvbjerg 2006). As Jäger and Maier (2009) advise, I pay particular attention to discursive limits, or peripheries as Young might say, seeking techniques for extending those limits and narrowing them down. Where fic contributes statements that alter boundaries, there may be special techniques necessary to render the statement acceptable or intelligible, to produce a relation to sameness and regularity as well as difference and change.

Thus, I combine Foucauldian principles with techniques of network analysis and participant observation to access and analyse my material. My means of observation have been adequately discussed, and I must now locate my position as researcher with regard to the material before proceeding to the analysis.

Position and ethics

Given that I have been writing and reading fanfic since I was 14, I locate this project as ‘insider research’ (Hodkinson 2005). ‘Insider’, however, does need some qualification. Supernatural has been one of my main fandoms, though I have also read and written a fair amount of GotT fic; the BBC’s Sherlock fandom is newer territory to me. Larsen and Zubernis rightly note a ‘danger for the researcher [...] in believing that whatever slice of fandom he
or she knows best is therefore representative of the whole’ (2012, p. 36). This would be an irresponsible over-representation, given that the researcher addresses an academic audience as well as a fannish one. I am not claiming to be ‘inside’ some holistic entity called ‘fandom’ (cf. Campbell 2011), but rather to use the term signalling my ‘location’ in ‘a set of [particular, fannish] networks and connections’, which properties the label ‘aca-fan’ signals to Lothian (2011). The way I write to and for other fans is a learned practice common to these particular networks, and, internalized long before I started this project.

Moreover, deciding to approach one’s fandom academically has consequences. I write from an institutional context as well as a fannish one, a ‘culture of research production’ (May and Perry 2011, p. 176) with its own narratives, priorities and expectations. Conversely, bringing fanfic to academic and/or outsider attention, removing it from its context of publication and reprinting it as part of an academic text for a new audience, is an exercise of the power that my institutional position gives me.

Therefore, my ethical policy is openness with regard to my project. I sought permission for every fic and review quoted, and offered to share a draft with the author. In this way, I hope to mitigate the power imbalance of the ‘politics of knowledge production’ (Sultana 2007, p. 376) between the ‘knower and the known’ (Adkins 2002, p. 340). This is particularly important given my privileged education and networked institutional context, which afford me with protections and advantages that the fans whose work has gone into the making of this thesis may not have.

Further, as Hine notes, becoming a researcher as well as a participant increases one’s awareness of one’s writing (2005, p. 21). I devoted time to the kind of fanwork that takes greater effort than simply reading fic—writing fanfiction, recording podfic, writing about this project in general terms in my LiveJournal, maintaining fan contacts, discussing the show and revealing certain aspects of my personal life. I would have been participating regardless, but perhaps less conscientiously and, like Hine, I found myself acutely aware of my self-presentation in fandom in a way I might not be had I no professional stake in it. I leave reviews and recommendations, as I consider these contributions an important form of reciprocity to the community (Fetterman 1998, p. 143) as well as deepening my understanding of discourse practices. In that spirit, I submitted novel-length fics to the 2012 and 2013 Supernatural Big Bangs (a fandom event wherein authors write and artists illustrate long works of 20,000 words or more, publicly revealed on a calendar schedule over the summer). I have promptly found the validity of Hine’s contention that ‘a reflexive understanding of the
medium, if critically examined, can provide for insights not accessible from the analysis of archives’ (2000, p. 23). For instance, when a podfic I had laboured over recording apparently failed to post on an audiofic community, I witnessed how the vagaries of technology can influence visibility or its lack. When the popular hosting site Megaupload was taken down in 2012 due to allegations of copyright infringement, hundreds of podfics, including mine, disappeared (not permanently in my case—I back up). The visibility and availability of fic thus simultaneously structures and is structured by legal discourse.

As a textual analysis, this project poses no immediate harm to participants. As I am only using text that is already, technically speaking, in the public domain due to actions taken by the author, it could be argued that I have no legal obligations of protection even where said text contains sensitive information about a recognizable individual (see the Data Protection Act 1998, Schedule 3, clause 5). Logically, it seems quite defensible to freely quote any fanfiction I find unlocked. However, as fanfic is intended for limited circulation within established communities, there are ethical considerations in quoting it, its responses and reviews. Ethics must account for experience and judgement as well as law (Ess et al. 2002, p. 4), and having participated in fanfiction communities for over thirteen years, I am confident that most fans would prefer to be asked before being quoted (and cf. Freund and Fielding 2013; Busse and Farley 2013). Secondarily, to take more steps than are legally necessary for the protection of participants quoted will benefit me as researcher, because my current good reputation in fandom depends upon my maintaining trust and openness with all concerned as much as my active participation. Were I to quote without seeking permission, and that breach of trust later become known in fandom, I would jeopardize not only this research project, but any other work I might later do in the same field. I received mainly positive responses to my requests for permission to quote, with many fans thanking me for my consideration in asking, and the rare refusals were cordial. However, as Kozinets observes, the fact that some participants do refuse weighs in evidence for the duty to ask (1997, p. 471), and I myself have received a few polite refusals with expressions of appreciation for my ethics of transparency. I asked how fans would like to be named and abided by their wishes. Most opted for screen-name, but some requested that their real name be used or that they remain anonymous. There were times, however, when it is impossible to obtain consent or denial from an author, either because I could get no response or because personal message features were disabled or unavailable. This occurred most often with fic hosted only on A03, though some
authors can be reached via Tumblr links from their profiles. In this case, balancing commitment to the project with ethics, I reference by the same screen-name/identifier given where the work exists online, duplicating only what has been made publicly available. Taking precedent from Hine (2000, p. 73), my practice was to send informal messages asking for permission to quote, using my fan-identity, which links to my own LiveJournal and Ao3 accounts, full of my own fan activity. In the messages I gave my real name, institution, a link to my university webpage and brief description of my project, offering more information upon request. I took the same approach to comments/reviews, as the respondent can be considered as an author in the capacity of critic. I did not seek permission for inclusion in numerical data as this does not reflect on individual personas.

This project, then, takes instruction from some of the most fruitful uses of Foucault to analyse text, and transposes it to the context of online research via network analysis techniques. It contributes to uses of Foucault through a methodical analysis of the reception of statements, revealing thereby the processes by which discursive formations are constructed. The next chapter begins the research proper, with my study of the discursive formation of masculinity in *Sherlock*.