

**Marginally Fannish: Fan Podcasts as Sites of Public Pedagogy and
Intersectional Education**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

Marginally Fannish explores the ways in which fan podcasts act as sites of public pedagogy, specifically focusing on how these spaces offer opportunities for fans to express and access intersectional perspectives. [The eponymous fan podcast](#) created for the research project showcases how fans use the fictional framework of popular texts to co-create an alternative site of education and politicisation.

I recorded a total of 22 episodes over 10 months in 2020 to study how fans used popular media as a shared language to learn about each other's real-world experiences and perspectives. My 18 co-participants and I came from a wide range of worldviews and backgrounds – both marginalised and privileged in different contexts. Our podcast episodes explored various aspects of intersectionality in some of our favourite media and their fandoms.

This thesis examines how fan critiques and analyses act as a form of public pedagogy that provides access to different intersectional perspectives. The different chapters show in what way conversations among fans from diverse backgrounds bring together multiple knowledges and priorities; and how this intersectional literacy can challenge and expand mainstream norms and representations. I describe how collective and critical analysis emerges through a combination of fans' emotional investment in their favourite worlds as well as in their own identities.

The following chapters illustrate how popular media provides a communal context to explore the various intersections and interpretations of race and ethnicity, gender and gender diversity, social class, sexuality, religion, geographic origin, physical and mental (dis)ability, and age. I analyse how fan interactions can lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of social, cultural and political issues. This thesis proposes that by explicitly making connections between fictional worlds and real-life structures, fans consider the limitations and possibilities of both.

Most of the thesis focuses on the positive aspects of intersectional fandom contexts. However, the final 2 chapters offer examples which question the view that they offer a utopian experience for everyone. I describe how even in fan spaces that deliberately emphasise the inclusion of diverse identities, interactions can be imperfect, unresolved and contentious.

The thesis concludes that much like public pedagogy, feminist and activist spaces, intersectional fan communities don't have to be perfect to be valuable. Diverse fan perspectives and priorities are constantly in flux, and therefore able to respond to different contexts across time and space. I finish by illustrating why it is important that an intersectional education in all these contexts is an active, ongoing, lifelong process – with an openness to constantly learning/unlearning, and with room for hope and joy.

The thesis demonstrates that whereas people's imaginations are formatively influenced by mainstream media and society, collective and public discussions in the context of fandom spaces can reshape the architecture of these imaginations.

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Glossary of Media Fandom Terms

Archive Of Our Own/AO3 – One of the most prominent fanfiction websites in Western media fandom

Fanfiction – Stories inspired by/set in fans' favourite fictional worlds which may feature canonical and/or original characters

Fan texts – Any kind of fan works – stories, art, songs, protest signs, podcast episodes among others – which are drawn from/respond to media

Femslash – Fanfiction featuring relationships between two female characters – who may or may not be heterosexual in canon

Mod – Short for moderator; fan volunteers in different fan communities who have the power to ensure that all content adheres to that particular community's standards

Patreon – An online platform which allows fans to financially support their favourite artists and creators through monthly subscriptions. An increasing number of fan podcasts have their own Patreon accounts

Potterverse – The canonical fictional world of *Harry Potter* which includes but isn't limited to the original books. The Potterverse includes related media like movies, the prequel *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise, spin-off books, and online articles about the world written by J. K. Rowling among others

Queerbaiting – A practice where media creators hint at queer subtext between characters but never follow through via canonical confirmation

Racebending – A practice where fans change the canonical race of fictional characters in their fanfiction and fan art. Case in point: black Hermione Granger

SFF – Catchall term for science fiction and fantasy

Slash fanfiction – Fanfiction featuring queer relationships among characters who may have been identified as heterosexual in canon. Slash fic overwhelmingly features male characters, resulting in the term/genre of femslash

Whoniverse – The canonical fictional world of *Doctor Who* which includes but isn't limited to the original show – old and new. The Whoniverse includes related media like the spin-off shows, books, comics, and audio dramas among others.

Chapter 1 Introduction: The Journey From Platform Nine and Three-Quarters

It was in early 2019 that I stumbled upon the world of fan podcasts. I had submitted an abstract for the REIYL conference (Researchers Exploring Inclusive Youth Literature). The abstract introduced the PhD research project I was going to be working on over the next 2 years. At that stage, I knew I wanted to study intersectionality and public pedagogy in online fan communities; but I didn't know which spaces to focus on. One of the conference organisers, Breanna J. McDaniel, recommended I listen to an episode of *#WizardTeam*, a *Harry Potter* fan podcast (Davis and Jordan, 2017). This episode featured an interview with Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, a fan-scholar whose research delved into race, racism and fandom (Thomas, 2020). I was thrilled to discover a fan podcast which enthusiastically dissected the *Harry Potter* books through a black American lens. I began researching fan podcasts more broadly and realised the public pedagogical and intersectional potential of these spaces. These two lenses went on to inform my research questions (see Chapter 2).

I found several fan podcasts which were not only fascinating as fan texts but also as sources of intersectional literacy. However, much like most research about intersectionality, fandom and public pedagogy, the podcasts mainly emerged from North America and the UK. For my own project, I wanted to diversify the discourse both within and beyond Western contexts. Then came another methodological decision inspired by someone else's idea. One of my supervisors suggested that rather than creating academic data in the more traditional form, I could create a fan podcast of my own. And *Marginally Fannish* was born.

My primary research data comprises of *Marginally Fannish* podcast episodes, the text transcripts for these episodes, and blog posts with my autoethnographic fieldnotes and reflections – all of which are available on my [research website](#).

The research/fan podcast became a way to include a diverse range of fan voices who were situated beyond purely academic and Eurocentric contexts. I recorded a total of 22 episodes over 10 months in 2020 to study how fans – including myself – used the fictional framework of popular media to learn about each other's real-world experiences and perspectives. Each episode conversation lasted between 1 hour to 1 hour 20 minutes. My 18 co-participants and I came from a wide range of worldviews and backgrounds – both marginalised and privileged in different contexts. Our different episodes explored various aspects of intersectionality in some of our favourite media and their fandoms. I introduce my co-participants in Chapter 2.

Fan podcasts are an increasingly popular but under-researched form of fan texts. This thesis analyses how fan podcasts act as sites of public pedagogy and intersectional literacy. In the following chapters, I explore how fans use globally popular media to co-create knowledge about intersectional identities. Fans' collective and critical analyses fill some of the gaps in more formal discussions of intersectionality. In these spaces, knowledge emerges collaboratively via access to

diverse opinions and multiple perspectives. Consequently, in the podcast as well as in this thesis, I was/am both a researcher and a participant. Additionally, this thesis doesn't just rely on traditional academic sources of information. I also draw on my co-participants' expertise as well as from a broader range of online multimodal fan scholarship. Together, these sources help me describe how fans engage in a valuable form of intersectional education in informal, digital spaces.

1.1 Fan podcasting as accessible scholarship

Advances in technology enable everyday people to create, publish and share a wide range of digital media to global audiences. This allows people to contribute to culture in different ways – including through blogs, videos, photos, illustrations and podcasts. Podcasts are digital audio files which are created and uploaded online. Anyone can then stream or download these files and listen to them on smartphone apps or computers. Podcasts are relatively easy to record and require minimal technological and financial resources (Meserko, 2014). The surge in smartphone usage and attendant apps makes it easier to find podcasts and listen to them at one's convenience (McGregor, 2019; Mollett et al., 2017). Since there are lower barriers to creating podcasts, they offer room for more niche topics and diverse formats than mainstream radio (Sterne et al., 2008).

Podcasting is often touted to be an alternative to mainstream media, but even here, hierarchies emerge. Cis women, trans and nonbinary people face more barriers than men when it comes to podcasting despite it being heralded as an equitable, democratic media (Kosman and McGregor, 2016a). The field of podcasting tends to be dominated by massively successful podcasts produced by giant corporations and media companies (Berry, 2015; Bottomley, 2015; Chamberlin, 2018; Wrath, 2016). While podcasts offer scope for marginalised voices, research has found that the typical independent podcaster tends to be older, white, educated, male, upper middle-class, and largely from the US (Bottomley, 2015; Markman, 2012; Weiner, 2014). Most creators of cultural products online usually don't gain access to more resources; creative labour on the internet often benefits people who already have capital and status (Sugihartati, 2017; Wortham, 2017). Most independent podcasters don't podcast full-time, though an increasing number of them are experimenting with new business models to make podcasting economically viable (Markman and Sawyer, 2014). This lack of financial stability perhaps explains the lack of diverse voices able to devote resources to creating podcasts regularly.

Participatory cultures can push against established power structures by offering marginalised populations a space to voice their perspectives. But they can also lead to new systems of inequality in terms of access to technology and skills. The "participation gap" affects some populations more than others and thereby restricts the diversity of ideas in online spaces (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2016).

Like most media on the internet, creating a podcast isn't automatically empowering though it does offer a new site for public expression (Jarrett, 2009). Growing access to tools and platforms allows fans to create their own podcasts which specifically cater to their own interests and priorities. Thanks to podcasts, fans act as cultural commentators by expressing their opinions and critiques, and

engaging in dialogue with each other and their listeners (Meserko, 2014; Salvati, 2015). Fan podcast hosts and guests bring their different expertise and experiences to the episodes. This inclusion of multiple viewpoints can increase the diversity of perspectives and interpretations. In such contexts, knowledge-making becomes a collaborative process.

When I first decided to study fan podcasts for my PhD project, I chose to limit the fandoms to *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who*. Logistically, this made sense – I could narrow down the fan podcasts I needed for my preliminary research. Moreover, owing to the project's autoethnographic focus, I wanted to highlight my own relationship with fandom and popular media – both in *Marginally Fannish* episodes and in this thesis. I've been a fan of the *Harry Potter* series since I read the first book as a 10-year-old, and I fell in love with the rebooted *Doctor Who* show as a 20-something. Consequently, I could draw on both my scholarly and fannish identities and develop more in-depth, nuanced and contextualised insights (Duffet, 2013; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 2012a).

The project's collaborative nature also meant that I needed popular fandoms which I could use as a shared reference point with potential co-participants. While both series were produced in the UK, they are globally popular and have massive fandoms. I hoped this popularity would attract fans/co-participants from diverse backgrounds. Having said that, I didn't want this focus to exclude potential co-participants' different interests and priorities. Subsequently, co-participants were welcome to bring their own preferred media and fandoms into the conversation.

Most *Marginally Fannish* episodes did end up featuring *Harry Potter* or *Doctor Who* discussions. But my co-participants and I frequently referenced or recommended other media we loved which happened to be relevant to the intersectional themes/identities we were exploring. After I finished recording, I discovered podcasts featuring intersectional discussions about other media I love like *The Baby-Sitters Club* series and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Ultimately, I don't think the specific fandoms/fan podcasts themselves were as important as what fans did via their conversations. In this thesis, I'm most interested in exploring how fan podcasts use the framework of their favourite fictional worlds to talk and learn about different identities.

Podcasting enables conversations with a more diverse group of people who may not have access to academic spaces and resources. According to Hannah McGregor, an educator as well as co-host of the *Witch, Please* podcast, podcasting breaks down barriers between who gets to create and disseminate knowledge. She argued that elitist gatekeeping mechanisms in formal educational institutions ensure that only a specific group of people controls knowledge and ideas. She believed that making knowledge accessible via open access scholarship was a form of distributing power (in Blount and Grey, 2019a). Accessible scholarship in fan podcasts doesn't just rely on academics; knowledge can be created and shared by non-academics podcasting too. For Lark Malakai Grey, co-host of *The Gayly Prophet* podcast, his education largely came from talking to people and from the internet. He didn't think his lack of college degree made his voice and ideas any less important (ibid).

Podcasts can make scholarly knowledge accessible beyond academic journals and conferences in informal and engaging ways (Barber, 2016; Chamberlin, 2018; Mollett et al., 2017; Richardson, 2017). Richardson and Green (2018) argued that by allowing people to access and share knowledge, podcasts offer intersectional solutions to those scholars who are disabled, working-class, unable to travel or have lower-value passports. Podcasts can also encourage those situated outside academia – like Lark above and many of my co-participants – to contribute, making knowledge-building more democratic (Day et al., 2017; Kinkaid et al., 2019). Podcast episodes both generate qualitative data as well as allow the hosts and guests to collectively analyse different ideas. As a result, podcasts can diversify knowledge creation and dissemination by including alternative voices and multiple viewpoints.

One of my major motivations for publishing the data online in the form of podcast episodes was to share the public pedagogical potential of fan podcasts and other fan texts with different kinds of audiences – academic, non-academic and fannish. My podcast audience, though still very small, began to reach people beyond my own personal networks. The podcast as a whole has been listened to more than 2000 times. The number is miniscule in terms of podcasts but it's still more reach than some traditional academic articles and books receive. Presumably, most people who listened to the podcast weren't professional academics. Although the podcast grew out of a formal doctoral project, our episodes travelled to people beyond primarily academic audiences.

Even though this was a PhD research project, I'm still uncomfortable about calling myself an academic. I have a fairly fixed notion of academic knowledge – one which I'm trying to unlearn. Much like Lark, a lot of my knowledge is derived from the internet. This is why I wanted to privilege both traditional academic and more non-traditional fannish voices as equally valid sources of scholarship in the project. At the same time, there's a tension in my arguments throughout this thesis – one which partially stems from my imposter syndrome within academia. I repeatedly refer to the innovative knowledge-making processes displayed in fan spaces which more formal educational spaces can learn from. However, I also try to lend them an air of legitimacy by constantly comparing them to traditional academic practices. My process of unlearning internalised ideas of what kind of knowledge is valid is an ongoing one throughout the thesis.

1.2 The shared language of popular media

Fan podcasts use the fictional framework of popular media texts to create alternative spaces of education and politicisation. Using popular culture conversations acts as a way to invite more people into scholarly conversations and include diverse marginalised perspectives (McGregor, 2021). The hosts of *Witch, Please* and *The Gayly Prophet* framed fan podcasting about popular media as public and accessible scholarship. They believed that podcasting about shared fictional characters and worlds offers a way to make complex theories and knowledge more approachable to a broader range of people who may not otherwise be able to access these ideas (Blount and Grey, 2019a). Marcelle Kosman, the other *Witch*,

Please co-host, contended that conversations about popular topics like *Harry Potter* reach and influence a lot more people beyond academic bubbles (Kosman and McGregor, 2017). As Lark Malakai Grey said, “*Harry Potter* is this universal language that you can use to connect with people” (Blount and Grey, 2019b).

For many people, popular media texts form a modern mythology and folklore which they use to make sense of the world. This is evident in different contexts – educational, political and personal.

Fan conversations about popular media become issues of public interest and can raise awareness about different perspectives (McGregor, 2021). While fans may not necessarily articulate theoretical terms in ways many academics are expected to, their insights draw on diverse experiences and backgrounds and can offer a different engagement with and demonstration of theory (Kosman and McGregor, 2016b; 2017).

Fans and faith leaders from different religions have proposed that for an increasing number of people, popular media stories have taken the place of institutionalised religion in how they engage with and make sense of the world (Molinsky, 2018a; Newitz and Anders, 2020a; ter Kuile, 2020). For some people, popular media fandom offers a space to come together in ways that religious institutions and community centres do (ter Kuile, 2020). I explore this theme in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Protesters across the world – advocating gun control in the US, striking against university tuition increases in the UK, and gathering against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India – brandished protest signs which drew analogies to popular culture characters and events from *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* among others (Reinstein, 2018). These protesters employed a fictional world and its characters which most people would recognise in order to critique the real world’s shortcomings (Jenkins, 2012b; Molinsky, 2020; Slack, 2010).

Click and colleagues (2017) believe that fandom and politics intersect because these characters and elements resonate with everyday audiences; fans appropriate them for their own political messages and use people’s familiarity with the source text as a shorthand to signify their position. Many people who don’t have this same sense of connection with fictional worlds are dismissive of this kind of political understanding and activism (Jenkins, 2012b; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012). However, for centuries, people have used religious texts in much the same ways where they use the people and events to figure out how to live in the contemporary world. For some people, religious stories play a huge role in their lives; for others, it’s stories like *Harry Potter* which shape imaginations (ter Kuile, 2020; Zoltan and Potts, 2016; Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2016a; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2020)

1.3 The intersectional potential of fictional frameworks

As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) pointed out, the danger of the single story is that it presents limited ideas of what it's like to be a person belonging to a certain identity:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Mainstream media perpetuates these single stories rather than allowing room for multiple representations. Savage (2013) argued that while popular media texts and culture are often believed to have only negative socialisation effects, this overlooks those instances in which different forms of meaning-making occur. The text isn't always received as intended by the author(s). Media can reify existing ideologies; but people can also challenge them. There is no monolithic experience of engaging with cultural texts, especially ones which are shared globally across different contexts (ibid). Online spaces provide creative and collaborative opportunities to experiment with texts and challenge established rules and norms of literacy, culture and creativity (Pennington, 2017). This thesis documents and analyses alternative kinds of audiences, knowledges, activisms, languages and contexts in the public pedagogy spaces of fan podcasts (Brass, 2013).

In the following chapters, I write about how fan podcasts that privilege intersectional perspectives – gender, race, sexuality, social class, among others – can make feminist ideas more accessible. They do this by using popular media as a shared language to discuss perspectives about both media representations and the real world. I describe how fan conversations use fictional characters, themes and events as a cultural shorthand to articulate arguments about diverse identities. The fictional framework of media like *Harry Potter*, *Doctor Who*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* or *Star Wars* offers opportunities to discuss real-world oppressions and injustices. Parallels from popular media can make these issues more accessible to those who may not have previously considered them. A further act of creative resistance is evident when fans insert a diverse range of identities into the canon – a canon which didn't otherwise explicitly represent them.

In both the podcast and this thesis, my co-participants' perspectives are supplemented by a curated selection of fan podcasts, many of which also included a diverse range of voices and perspectives in their own episodes. These acted as important sources of intersectional scholarship which informed and inspired our understanding of different intersectional identities.

Apart from *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who* fan podcasts, my co-participants and I also referred to some general fandom podcasts. I decided to focus on episodes which were either hosted by more than one host or featured guests because of my interest in dialogue as a form of collaborative knowledge-making. Additionally, owing to this project's focus on intersectionality, I largely chose episodes where either the hosts or the guests belonged to a background which was marginalised in Western mainstream media and culture.

The table features the fan podcasts we cited in our conversations. In the episodes we looked at, the podcast hosts/guests adopted different intersectional lenses as they explored either specific media/fandom examples or overall media/fandom genres. You can find descriptions for these fan podcasts [on my PhD blog](#).

General Fandom Podcasts	Harry Potter Podcasts	Doctor Who Podcasts
Be The Serpent	Alohomora	Verity
Black Girl Nerds	The Gayly Prophet	Woke Doctor Who
Breaking The Glass Slipper	Harry Potter And The Sacred Text	
Buffering The Vampire Slayer (Buffy The Vampire Slayer fan podcast)	Pottercast	
Fansplaining	Reading, Writing, Rowling	
Imaginary Worlds	Witch, Please	
Our Opinions Are Correct	#WizardTeam	
Queer As Fiction	Women Of Harry Potter (an offshoot of The Sacred Text)	

Through examples of collaborative podcasting, this thesis aims to challenge and expand notions of what counts as research, how it should be conducted, and the ways in which it should be shared (Day et al., 2017). I describe how creating episodes not only develops skills such as data gathering and analysis but also enables fans to actively participate in reclaiming and dismantling mainstream narratives (Carrillo and Mendez, 2019). By expanding the range of lives people encounter, I propose that fan podcasts offer multiple and complex opportunities to counter single stories and engage with diverse identities.

1.4 A brief note on the thesis structure

Due to the nature of my project, its methodology, and my research philosophy, this thesis takes a slight detour from the map outlined by a traditional doctoral format. Here, I briefly introduce the structure of the thesis and the rationale behind my choices.

Like most theses, this one is bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. The second chapter outlines the research questions and the collaborative research methodology employed throughout the project. However, instead of having separate chapters for the research literature, data and analysis, I've incorporated all 3 elements together in each subsequent chapter. My co-participants and I

contributed all 3 in our podcast episodes. Consequently they are explored throughout the thesis.

Beginning from Chapter 3, every chapter:

- 1) gives an overview of the relevant literature – drawing from both traditional academic and informal fannish sources
- 2) includes data in the form of quote extracts from me and my co-participants
- 3) features 2 kinds of analyses – analyses which emerged collectively through conversations with my co-participants and my individual analysis framed through the lenses of public pedagogy and intersectionality; the 2 kinds of analyses aren't divided into separate sections but are interwoven throughout the chapter

The first time a co-participant is mentioned in a chapter/section, their name appears in **bold** to help readers identify them. I signal the episode that quotes come from by writing MF (Marginally Fannish) Episode (insert number here).

Since I was just as much a participant as a researcher in this project, I include a fair amount of my own personal experiences throughout the chapters. An autoethnographic approach features the researcher's subjective position and self-reflexive interpretation as a part of the findings (Duffet, 2013; Evans and Stasi, 2014). Since internet experiences are individualised, the autoethnographic approach helped me articulate my influences and interactions (Hine, 2015). At different points, I describe my reflections and readings – ones which may not reflect my co-participants' opinions and experiences. This thesis document tells one kind of story. Ultimately, the narrative it presents as well as the research questions themselves reflect my own priorities and interests. Another researcher, co-participant or reader may choose to highlight, analyse and present different aspects of the data and tell a different kind of story.

In the introduction to his book *How To Write A Thesis*, Umberto Eco (2015) described how researchers are often inspired to develop new ideas in surprising ways by people who may not have explicitly outlined these connections themselves:

Many times over the course of my readings, I had attributed to others ideas that they had simply inspired me to look for. And many other times I remained convinced that an idea was mine until, after revisiting some books read many years before, I discovered that the idea or its core had come to me from a certain author [...] Not just an individual but an entire culture participates as ideas sometimes travel freely, migrate, disappear and reappear.

Eco encouraged researchers to acknowledge these intellectual debts since some ideas may never have occurred had the researcher not encountered a particular source at a particular time. Inspired by this invitation, in the following chapters, I cite my co-participants as well as non-academic literature just as I do more traditional academic literature – since they all played an instrumental role in expanding my thinking.

I didn't want to position academic literature as superior to fandom literature nor did I want to position my individual analysis and commentary as superior to those of my co-participants. My co-participants' knowledge complemented my own. While I was in overall control of the project, we collaboratively created knowledge through our conversations. In preparation for our episodes, we decided what literature to refer to and which intersectional themes to explore. Such a variety of sources exposed me to multiple interpretations and opinions.

While the traditional PhD document relies on a solo-authored format, knowledge-making and sharing is increasingly collaborative and digital (Paré, 2017). The *Marginally Fannish* podcast demonstrates this; unfortunately, I wasn't permitted to present episodes in lieu of a thesis document. As a compromise to this individual translation of a collective process, this thesis attempts to include my co-participants' voices in the chapters as much as possible in order to highlight their contributions and insights in their own words. I use a lot of direct quotes because I want to include as many voices as possible to counter-balance my own as well as leave room for readers to create their own interpretations.

Both feminist and participatory research foregrounds those engaged in the research project by shifting the centre from where knowledge is said to generate (Rosenberg, 2000). In this interactive research, my co-participants and I came to the episodes with our own ideas, experiences, theories, interpretations and insights. There was no one-way transfer of knowledge – I was engaged in critical pedagogy as much as my co-participants (Harris, 2010). My thinking became much stronger thanks to this conversational and collaborative knowledge-making. I wanted the thesis to reflect this process so that different knowledges were equally respected. By not placing academic literature/my own analysis in a separate, exalted position over my co-participants'/other fans' different ways of knowing, the slightly unconventional structure attempts to democratise hierarchies of knowledge-creation within academic contexts.

1.5 Introduction to the chapters

In Chapter 2, I outline the context of the collaborative research, the rationale for my methodological influences and choices, and my exploration of podcasting as a research method. I also introduce the people and ideas that helped me on my research quest and discuss the ethical issues and design challenges I encountered.

In Chapter 3, I foreground a public pedagogical framework to describe how fans collectively negotiate knowledge through their interactions in fan spaces. I explore how fan podcasts democratise the process of creating and sharing knowledge, how fans collaboratively create a dynamic and flexible curriculum of media, fan texts and analytical lenses, and how fan critiques act as public pedagogy.

In Chapter 4, I explore the different ways in which fans are able to balance both love and critique when it comes to their favourite media. I discuss how emotional investment facilitates this critical analysis. Following on from my earlier point about the shared language of popular media in educational, protest and religious spaces, I expand on the connection between imperfect texts in both fandom and

religion. I show how people demand better representations of their diverse identities in worlds which mean a lot to them.

In Chapter 5, I focus on intersectionality to talk about how fan podcasts co-create intersectional literacies. I demonstrate how the framework of popular media allows fans from both marginalised and dominant cultural backgrounds to engage with each other's diverse interpretations. I write about how fans use discussions about their favourite fictional characters and worlds to shed light on different real-world intersectional experiences and priorities. I also show how such conversations expand the range of lives people encounter and offer lessons in other ways of seeing/being in the world.

In Chapter 6, I highlight critical literacy to describe how fan texts offer opportunities to unlearn socially conditioned assumptions and learn new ways of understanding the world. I explore how fan conversations can raise people's consciousness about a wide range of issues and how fan texts allow fans to identify and interrogate their gaps in knowledge about both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. I also discuss how these processes allow fans to reflect on their preconceived notions by acquiring insights into a diverse range of experiences.

In Chapter 7, I illustrate how fans challenge mainstream norms by practising an innovative combination of public pedagogy and intersectional literacy. I describe the different ways in which fans diversify canon by retelling and reclaiming existing narratives, inserting themselves into stories, and restorying people's imaginations. I write about how fans' creative agency allows people to see old things with fresh eyes and how participation in such communities can have concrete consequences on people's lives and identities.

In Chapter 8, I show how intersectional interpretations in the public pedagogical spaces of fan communities can herald a collective process of decolonisation. I describe how sharing stories and spotting patterns of erasure and dominance can help fans decolonise their minds about their own identities. I outline the different ways in which fans analyse cultural imperialism in some of their favourite media and fandoms. I also write about how the framework of media representations provides an exposure to diverse cultural perspectives and an understanding of unfamiliar cultural contexts.

In Chapter 9, I emphasise the importance of a methodology of discomfort in public pedagogical and intersectional projects. I elaborate on how even deliberately-constructed inclusive spaces can feature failures of imagination and a lack of intersectional solidarity. While an emphasis on intersectionality may have been at the forefront of some minds, others wanted to privilege specific identities. I also write about what one can learn from these imperfections, uncertainties and tensions. I discuss how debates about intersectional issues – even ones which don't arrive at perfect solutions – can add nuance and complexity to people's understanding about diverse identities.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I conclude by describing both the negative and positive aspects of fan conversations in spaces full of people from differently marginalised and privileged backgrounds. There isn't a shared understanding about who gets to

be a fan and whose story is granted legitimacy in fandom. These spaces are neither a progressive utopia for everyone nor a dystopian nightmare without an end in sight. I bring in the concepts of hopepunk and radical imagination to complicate the utopia/dystopia binary in fandom (as well as in public pedagogical, feminist and activist) contexts. I describe how fighting for a better world than the one that currently exists is a never-ending work in progress. I explore how progress or a fully equitable future isn't guaranteed, but hopepunk fans nevertheless work towards equality. I also describe the importance of imagining a future you're fighting for – no matter how idealised – to provide both inspiration and guide. I write about how, along the way, people make mistakes, learn from them, resist cynicism and create room for hope and joy.

Chapter 2 A Beginner's Guide to Marginally Fannish: Co-Creating a Methodology

2.1 Introduction

My favourite thing about the internet is the sheer amount of things it has allowed me to learn. I first discovered it when I was 13 years old. Since then, online spaces have played a huge role in how I engage with knowledge and build my understanding of the world. Whereas early educational institutions left me unstimulated and unfulfilled, online conversations offered me control of my own education and provided a way to fill in the gaps left by more formal contexts. The internet has allowed me to learn from people whose lives and perspectives don't mirror my own. For me, learning has always been a communal activity. This is why I've tried to incorporate collaborative rather than individualistic processes throughout all aspects of my project's methodology. This collective knowledge-making is also a feminist impulse. Much like my engagements with the internet, I first encountered feminist ideas as a teenager and they continue to impact how I engage with the world as an adult. I couldn't separate my research from my feminism which is why its influence is evident in my methodological choices.

As I began my journey, two research questions provided a map:

- How can fan podcasts act as sites of public pedagogy?
- How may these sites offer opportunities to express and access intersectional perspectives?

This chapter outlines the context of the research and the rationale for the direction it took. It also introduces the people and ideas that helped me on my research quest and what I learned along the way:

- The first section reviews the different methodological influences which shaped my project's hybrid methodology. I also describe the sources of literature that my co-participants and I curated together for our podcast episodes, and which I used throughout the project and thesis
- The next section presents my co-participants. I explore how we collaboratively created an intersectional field site as well as decided on what intersectional themes we wanted to focus on
- The following section elaborates on how we used podcasting as a research method. Here, I explain how we planned our episodes and how our conversations represented both data and analysis. I also write about how I further analysed this collaborative data-cum-analysis while writing the thesis
- Finally, I discuss the ethical issues I encountered throughout the project and the limitations I discovered in terms of my research design

2.2 The hows and whys of collaborative research

In order to design this project, I borrowed elements from the fields of feminist public pedagogy, fan studies, critical pedagogy and autoethnography. This helped me centre conversations with my co-participants as we co-created knowledge via our podcast episodes. Our episodes were supplemented by a fannish curriculum which we put together by drawing on a wide range of sources. For the thesis itself, I employed both traditional academic as well as informal fannish sources to inform and expand my thinking.

2.2.1 Methodological origins

The feminist strand of public pedagogy emphasises the importance of alternative spaces beyond institutionalised contexts, where people's narratives subvert dominant ideologies and stereotypes (Sandlin et al., 2011). By featuring collective forms of knowledge-creation and knowledge-dissemination, feminist public pedagogy projects privilege the intellectual contributions of marginalised groups of people who demonstrate diverse forms of activism (Dentith et al., 2013).

As Hannell (2020: 6.4) observed, "Fans routinely engage in alternative modes of feminist knowledge production." Moreover, Hansal and Gunderson (2020) believed that a researcher's fannish feelings and enthusiasms are a rich resource for creating knowledge. Even though I read their work well after the data-creation period was under way, I recognised my project's trajectory in their recommendations. Echoing their suggestions, this thesis:

- employs a more "fannish methodology" to reflect on these emotions
- uses a combination of fannish and research interests to develop questions and interpretations
- critically analyses how these are connected to larger social, cultural and political structures

Right at the outset, I wanted to find a methodology which allowed me to collaboratively create knowledge with my co-participants rather than rely on my individual interpretations. As a feminist fan studies researcher (Hannell, 2020), I was uncomfortable with the imbalanced power hierarchy between me as "the researcher" and my co-participants as "the researched". Consequently, I drew on interdisciplinary academic literature to develop a hybrid methodology; one which is also inspired by fandom's collective knowledge-making culture. I borrowed elements from online ethnography (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2015; Pink et al., 2015; Robinson and Schulz, 2009), collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005), autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2006; Evans and Stasi, 2014; Kahl Jr, 2011), and feminist participatory and dialogic research methodologies (Hannell, 2020; Burdick and Sandlin, 2013; Dentith et al., 2013; Stacey, 1988). This project's methodology fits within a feminist public pedagogy framework since it sought to challenge the participant-observer model of ethnographic research (Beck, 2011). Additionally, including my co-participants' narratives aimed to minimise the overemphasis on my opinion, something autoethnographers are frequently critiqued for (Hine, 2015).

A feminist collaborative ethnography also emphasises dialogue as a research tool. Conversations more complexly represent diverse experiences and multiple perspectives as both researchers and participants create knowledge together (Lassiter, 2005). Paulo Freire (2018) believed in dialogue as a form of both knowledge and liberation. According to him, conversations could enable people to develop critical literacies, raise consciousness and self-reflect. As per his recommendation, my co-participants and I were co-investigators who examined our different realities via conversations. Instead of relying on a one-way transmission of information, we brought together different perspectives, experiences and intelligences, and generated themes based on that (ibid). This collective intelligence is evident in other fan spaces as well. As Henry Jenkins (2006: p.4) described it, “None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills.”

Cottom (2016) proposed that online posts and interactions among participants can be considered “digitally mediated autoethnographic narratives”. Through this lens, fan podcast conversations can be seen as autoethnographies that highlight those viewpoints which may be missing from mainstream academic conversations. I employed autoethnography to make our ideas as approachable as possible beyond the contexts restricted by academic jargon (Bochner and Ellis, 2006; Duffet, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011; Evans and Stasi, 2014; Kahl Jr, 2011). Since our podcast episodes were publicly accessible, my fellow fans could share their perspectives in their own words rather than rely on me for translating them via my own interpretations (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Bennett, 2014; Freund and Fielding, 2013; Lassiter, 2005). This draws on the practices of previous feminist researchers and projects which aimed to minimise the gap between researchers and participants, drew on experience-based knowledge, and explicitly made connections between the personal and the political (Hannell, 2020; Dentith et al., 2013; Stacey, 1988).

In different *Marginally Fannish* episodes, my co-participants and I analysed how our diverse identities were portrayed or erased in some of our favourite media. We also explored different themes and cultural experiences as we compared and contrasted our own interpretations and backgrounds (Ellis et al., 2011; Freire, 2018). According to Indira (2020), providing access to such multiple and complex perspectives can offer a powerful alternative discourse that includes people on the margins and the ways in which they make meaning of their lives. By sharing our digitally mediated autoethnographic narratives (Cottom, 2016), we didn’t aim to arrive at a single truth; instead, our episodes represented our multiple experiences and attempts to understand each other’s perspectives.

While I wanted to try and create a more democratic relationship between my role as the researcher and my co-participants, hierarchies remained. At the end of the day, I still had overall control of how the project was designed, executed, interpreted and presented (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Evans and Stasi, 2014; Stacey, 1988). As Buckingham (2009) cautioned, participatory and creative methods aren’t completely capable of enabling participants to express their own voice or for researchers to understand what participants think. Such methods don’t

automatically lead to authentic or complete representations of the participants' beliefs.

I am acutely aware that much like other fan and researcher interpretations, my observations in this thesis are quite subjective. Whereas my co-participants' perspectives significantly influenced my own, this may not have been true for some or most of them. Mark Duffet recommended a dialogic approach to include fans' insights which may be different from those of the researcher (in Brooker et al., 2017). Including other voices in my research in this way meant that we could generate both the data and the analysis, and our knowledge and interpretations would share space online. The publicly accessible nature of the conversations means that potential audiences can come to their own conclusions and reflections.

2.2.2 Curating our fan curriculum

Marginally Fannish episodes were structured as conversations rather than interviews. For me, the downside of interviews was that they would privilege my singular interpretation since my priorities and interests would guide the conversation through the questions I chose to ask (Gajjala et al., 2018; Fortun et al., 2017). In instances where I was a part of the dominant culture and had little to no knowledge of the intersectional themes and identities we were going to discuss, I might not even know what questions to ask. The conversational format was supposed to solve that problem.

However, I thought that even conversations needed some sort of structure and facilitation. During a meeting with my supervisors, an idea to co-create the episodes emerged: discussion groups rather than interviews. Consequently, before recording our episodes, my co-participants and I exchanged fan and/or media texts based on the particular intersectional themes we were going to explore. These acted as discussion prompts in our own episodes. Other fan podcasts like *Breaking The Glass Slipper* and *Be The Serpent* have also referred to employing similar approaches where the hosts share relevant resources with each other before recording. Much like a lot of other fan podcasts' episode notes, *Marginally Fannish* episode transcripts included links to these resources. This signposted a bibliography/curriculum of sorts – one which was put together collaboratively by me and my co-participants.

Since my project was focusing on fan podcasts, most of my suggestions were podcast episodes. I immersed myself in fan podcasts following online ethnographic guidelines (Burrell, 2017; Condie et al., 2017; Evans and Stasi, 2014; Hine, 2015; 2017; Kozinets, 2015). **Anna M.**, one of my co-participants, ended up contributing to this part of the project. Prior to recording our episode together (MF Episode 3), she recommended that we listen to an episode of *Breaking The Glass Slipper*. When I looked it up, I discovered it was a podcast that featured intersectional feminist discussions of science fiction, fantasy and horror media – just the kind of thing I was interested in. I listened to sample episodes, shortlisted those podcasts which best suited my needs (see Chapter 1), then emailed the creators to introduce my project and request their permission to use their podcasts in my research. Of the

14 podcasts I contacted, I received consent from 11 and didn't hear back from the rest.

In online spaces, the line between public and private data is quite blurred (Hine, 2015; Knobel, 2003; Rutter and Smith, 2005; Townsend and Wallace, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). I was initially uncomfortable about including fan podcasts and other fan texts if I didn't have explicit consent to use them. At the same time, it would have been unfeasible to gain consent from every fan text creator my co-participants and I referred to. Due to the nature of these texts and the media landscape we inhabit, I consider them to be publicly available media – unlike say a Facebook post from a personal profile. These texts are freely available online on different platforms and were published for an internet audience rather than a personal one. In *Marginally Fannish* conversations, we used these fan texts as discussion prompts to frame and explore our own experiences and opinions in greater detail rather than subject them to critique or analysis. I concluded it was ethically appropriate to use these texts without approaching their creators for permission.

The fan texts, media and themes my co-participants and I focused on in different episodes became a method of curating our curriculum – something which a more traditional interview format may not have had room for. While analysing media representations, we frequently summarised key arguments from the different texts, drew parallels between their different arguments, and synthesised their points to draw connections to our own experiences and ideas. It was an interest-driven and inquiry-based curriculum which we created collectively. This participatory method aimed to involve my co-participants in the decision-making process and highlight their voices and priorities in the research alongside my own. My participants could create counternarratives to engage collectively with knowledge and culture in ways which mattered to them (Dittmar and Annas, 2017; McLaren, 2010; Quayle et al., 2016).

However, this method of curating our curriculum also had its downsides. There was no perfect one-size-fits-all approach which suited all my co-participants. Personally, I thought that exchanging texts better reflected the co-creational underpinnings of the project, more than an interview would have. However, I learned that what worked best for me did not work for others. In some cases, co-participants didn't have texts to share. Not all co-participants went through the fan texts I recommended. Additionally, while I may have preferred this co-creational format over a traditional interview-based one, it did mean a lot more work for my co-participants. An interview where they just had to turn up to answer my questions may have been easier and required less of a time-commitment. The conversational method meant they had to first find suitable texts to suggest and then go through my suggestions in return. Different people had different approaches to engaging with knowledge – something one sees in both traditional educational as well as online fannish contexts. Even when a co-participant didn't go through texts or suggest texts for me, we were still able to have an interesting and rich conversation.

2.2.3 What kind of literature is appropriate for an academic project?

During my master's research, I was notorious for reading too much academic literature. This was partly because I felt a sense of ignorance and inferiority coming from an academic background in India that didn't require as wide a range of reading as the British university system did. This imposter syndrome remains with me towards the end of my PhD research. Academic scholarship significantly influenced the shape of my doctoral project. Apart from the influences mentioned above, it introduced me to public pedagogy and intersectionality – concepts I hadn't encountered before. At the same time, I'm also someone who reads constantly – both for information and entertainment. I did not want to only rely on traditional academic sources of literature since that didn't reflect all the ways in which I engage with knowledge.

In order to prepare for our episodes, my co-participants and I drew on diverse sources to better understand different identities and issues. We collaboratively put together the literature sources for each episode. Before recording, we exchanged a wide range of multimodal texts with each other – fan podcast episodes, Reddit threads, Twitter threads, articles and essays, book extracts, interviews, blog posts, TV show episodes, movies, fanfiction, videos, zines, YouTube videos and Tumblr posts. These sources weren't restricted to media and fan texts but also included news about current events and discoveries. Apart from fan sources, some co-participants suggested looking at academic papers. Others suggested their own writing which offered additional first-person perspectives. This literature spoke to our multiple interests and priorities which went beyond the media we were discussing. Beyond this, I was reading academic books and papers as well as online articles, memoirs, anthologies, graphic novels etc. – which explored different intersectional identities. I was also listening to other fan podcast episodes, rereading *Harry Potter* and rewatching *Doctor Who*.

While I initially felt guilty about terming my non-academic reading/viewing/listening as research, I realised these feelings stemmed from a misguided belief that only reading academic literature in the form of journal articles and academic books counted as “real research”. Non-academic discussions and critical interpretations equally informed my thinking. An intersectional lens aided by fandom conversations helped me form new theories and ideas, identify biases, and view events from different perspectives – much in the way reading more traditional academic papers about different media and phenomenon had. The combination of non-academic and academic research helped me think about gaps and problems and articulate my understanding about different identities.

All these different sources taught me about lived experiences I was ignorant of, enabled me to question my preconceived notions, and added much more nuance and depth to my ideas. The different ways in which I engaged with knowledge while making the podcast influenced my writing of the thesis too. I ended up citing this multimodal literature not only in the podcast episodes but also in the following chapters. Working on this project and writing the thesis disrupted and expanded my ideas of what counts as appropriate literature and whose voice matters in academic contexts.

2.3 Marginally Fannish: A history

I was lucky that a relatively diverse group of co-participants agreed to participate in this podcast project. Together, we constructed an intersectional field site – both through our podcast episodes themselves as well as via our choice of fan-made curriculum. We also strove to explore a broad range of themes, some of which are overlooked in academic contexts of intersectional scholarship.

2.3.1 Introducing my co-participants

I began recruiting potential participants in December 2019. I shared recruitment posts on social media – Twitter, Instagram and Facebook – where I was open and transparent about the intersectional aims of my project (Beninger et al., 2014; Fathallah, 2016; Knobel, 2003). I relied on snowball sampling by sharing posts with friends and acquaintances on social media. I encouraged people to share this information with their own networks. In the social media posts, I included my research interests and a provisional list of intersectional themes. Since participation in the project would entail a publicly accessible conversation in the form of online podcast episodes, I directed interested fans to [my research website](#) which had more details about the specifics of participation so that they knew what they were getting into (Knobel, 2003; Salmons, 2017).

Our conversations took place entirely online which allowed my co-participants to control the time, place and pace of interacting with me and allowed me to reach and include participants from different countries (Hart, 2015; Kozinets, 2015). Admittedly, this meant that my project only reached those fans with access to digital spaces (Robinson and Schulz, 2009). However, the contemporary online landscape features an increasing diversity of voices, some of whom I was hoping to reach. I also emailed 4 people I had briefly met in person who I thought may be interested in participating based on our conversations; of these, **H** and **Aisha** agreed (MF Episodes 8 and 18). Everyone else got in touch with me after encountering my posts either on my own profile or through people who had shared my posts. Owing to the limitations my social network and the reach of my recruitment information, many identities and interests were absent in the podcast whereas some were overrepresented. Twitter was by far the most successful in reaching out beyond the people I knew. Although not everyone who expressed an interest in participating followed through, Twitter still turned out to be the best way to increase the social and geographical diversity of my co-participants.

I wanted to invite a broad range of perspectives which are often overlooked in intersectional considerations. This enabled me to include both Indian and international fans whose experiences aren't always visible in academic discussions of intersectionality and fandom. My 18 co-participants hailed from a wide range of backgrounds and were both marginalised and privileged in different contexts. Most of my co-participants spoke to me in single episodes to focus on specific themes, media and fandoms. They decided which intersectional theme(s) they wanted to discuss based on their identities and interests.

While thinking about different formats for the podcast, I realised it would be valuable to include somebody who didn't just appear on individual episodes but was a more long-term part of the project. Having somebody else talk on multiple episodes and analyse multiple themes would counterbalance the emphasis on my own interpretations. At the same time, I suspected that for most of my co-participants, a 10-month commitment would act as a barrier to participation. To resolve this issue, I took inspiration from some fan podcasts for whom podcasting was also about friendship. In the case of **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, fandom and talking about the different things we love has played a significant role in our friendship right from the very start (see MF Episode 1). Not only did they offer an alternative Indian perspective to my own but I was also confident that they would be as excited to participate as I was. They acted as co-hosts on 6 episodes as we explored different intersectional identities in some of our favourite media. They enjoyed it so much that they're now waiting for me to finish my PhD so the three of us can launch season 2 of *Marginally Fannish*.

This table briefly introduces all participants and the episodes they spoke in. The details here draw on biographies they provided for the episodes. I've also included their pronouns at the time of recording. The biographies here are incomplete and subjective since I chose what to include here. In subsequent chapters, I introduce participants with demographic information which is most relevant to the sections they appear in. You can find more details about the participants by referring to the episodes [on my website](#).

Participant	Bio	Episode(s) appeared in
Parinita Shetty (she/her)	Children's book writer; grew up in Mumbai immersed in Indian culture and society but consumed Western media and culture too; now lives in the UK where she went from being a part of the dominant culture to suddenly becoming a person of colour Other demographic details discussed in different episodes include: able-bodied; neurotypical; atheist but comes from a dominant caste Hindu background; grew up lower middle-class in India; cisgender; heterosexual; relatively young (early 30s)	All 22
Aparna Kapur (she/her)	Children's book writer; editor of picture books	Episode 1 – More Inclusive: The Journey of Three Indian Fangirls

	Similar demographic details as Parinita (except she lived in India and grew up middle-class)	<p>Episode 2 – Failure of Imagination: Representations of Race in Media and Fandom (Part 1 and Part 2)</p> <p>Episode 6 – Different Bodies and Different Brains: Depictions of Disability and Ageism in Media</p> <p>Episode 13 – You Want to See Yourself in that Story: The Impact of Religion and Regional Origin</p> <p>Episode 19 – So What Are We Missing? - Exploring Representations of Marginalised Genders in Media and Society</p> <p>Episode 22 – This Is Not the Only Story: Expanding Mainstream Ideas of Sexuality and Social Class</p>
Sanjana Kapur (she/her)	<p>Children’s book writer; writer and editor of comic books which retell historical and mythological tales in India; parent</p> <p>Similar demographic details as Aparna</p>	Same as Aparna
Anna Milon (she/her)	Russian-born London-bred doctoral researcher studying paganism and pagan representation in fantasy; an eclectic solitary pagan	Episode 3 – Just Let Me Hug a Tree in the Woods: Wicca, Paganism, and Religion in Fantasy Media
Alison Baker (she/her)	Senior lecturer in education at the University of East London, England; writing her PhD thesis about white working-class children in children’s fantasy fiction; lower middle-class; first-	Episode 4 – A Lot of Gold in Gringotts: Representations of Class and Considerations of Gender

	generation female university student in her family	
Anna Raymondou (she/her)	22-year-old obsessive fangirl from Greece; grew up watching TV shows and movies from the US and the UK	Episode 5 – It’s Like She’s Not Even There: Misogyny, Masculinity, and Different Cultures
Aditi Krishnakumar (she/her)	Grew up in India; now works in the finance industry in Singapore; children’s book writer; loves fandoms on Tumblr	Episode 7 – There’s Never Chicken Tikka Masala at Hogwarts: Different Cultures in Fantasy Media
H (he/him)	An undergraduate student studying English literature in Japan; did a study abroad year at the University of Leeds where he started to develop an interest in media interpretations; faced racism in the UK and became interested in exploring issues of race and racism in media	Episode 8 – Whose Stories are Being Told: Centering Racial Diversity in Mainstream Hollywood Movies
Diana Floegel (they/them)	A doctoral candidate whose work focuses on queer people who write slash fanfiction; they found their first representation of queerness while reading slash fanfiction online as a high school student in the US	Episode 9 – Destabilise Heterosexuality as a Default: Queer Representation in Media and Fandom
Robert Shepherd (he/him)	Was diagnosed with dyspraxia and autism at the age of 10 and now writes about living with both in Scotland; wrote an essay about Ryan, one of the Doctor’s companions in <i>Doctor Who</i> , and the importance of representations of dyspraxia	Episode 10 – Reclaiming Stories: Representations of Dyspraxia and Autism in Doctor Who/Fandom
T. G. Shepherd also known as Lisa (she/her)	A middle-aged Canadian writer and martial artist who has been training in martial arts since the age of 17	Episode 11 – She Has to Fight Smart: Representations of Women Warriors in Media and History
Lorrie Kim (she/her)	A second-generation Korean-American bisexual woman who began reading the <i>Harry Potter</i>	Episode 12 - The International Imagination: Exploring

	books as an adult; married with 2 kids; been speaking at <i>Harry Potter</i> conferences since 2008	World Politics in the Fantastic Beasts Films
Deb Dimond Young (she/her)	Teaches at the University of Northern Iowa in the US; currently working on a PhD in rhetoric and professional communication; discovered fandom as an adult; now shares fannish activities and spaces with her two daughters	Episode 14 - We Don't Know What to do with Them: Representations of Older Women in Media
Ziv Wities (he/him)	Orthodox Jewish and lives in Israel with his wife and three children; is a programmer; is also Assistant Editor at Diabolical Plots and Associate Editor at PodCastle	Episode 15 - A Fascinating Tension: Multiple Interpretations of Religious Themes and Ideas in SFF
Tam Moules/Tamsin James Rose (they/them)	A freelance academic with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature; lives in England	Episode 16 - The Queer Paradise: Exploring Diverse Gender Identities in Speculative Worlds
Marita Arvaniti (she/her)	Began a theatre career in Greece; now a PhD student in Scotland whose research examines the lasting effect theatre had on the birth and evolution of contemporary fantasy literature; polyamorous and working-class	Episode 17 - See Different Possibilities: Alternative Relationship and Economic Structures in Fandom
Aisha (she/her)	A <i>Harry Potter</i> fan from Dubai; has always identified as a reader; loves Japanese anime and manga	Episode 18 - We've Been Featured! Finally! - Questioning Cultural Norms in Mainstream Fantasy Books
Rita Faire (she/her)	From the Philippines; now a doctoral researcher and associate lecturer in Edinburgh; is researching picturebook co-edition practices in Europe	Episode 20 - Because We Couldn't See Ourselves: Cultural Representations and Cultural Imperialism in Western Media/Fandom
Milena Popova (they/them)	A queer Bulgarian immigrant who grew up in Austria and now lives in England; has been a fan	Episode 21 - Where Else Are You Going to Work Out Who You Are?: Sexual and Gender

	for nearly 30 years and has been a fan studies scholar for 6 years	Diversity in Media/Fandom
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2.3.2 Co-constructing an intersectional field site

Marginally Fannish doesn't demonstrate an ethnography in the traditional sense. I didn't visit an existing environment to study what happened there. Instead, my co-participants and I purposefully created an environment through our podcast episodes. The creation of that environment itself influenced all the people involved – including myself. We were a self-selecting audience – those who were interested in intersectionality or already thinking about issues of representation were more likely to talk about these ideas. However, just because it was a conscious construct doesn't mean the ideas and conversations became any less real or valuable.

Hine (2005; 2015) asserted that the internet is used differently by different people based on their individual cultural contexts and concerns:

Ethnographers should expect multiplicity: there is not just one Internet, not just one experience of online phenomena. Instead, we will find diverse practices of meaning-making around a fragmented Internet which is device dependent, culturally embedded, constantly developing, and consists of multiple platforms. We will therefore need multiple ethnographies for the Internet and multiple ways of forging research objects from fragmented phenomena. (Hine, 2015: p. 88)

She cautioned researchers to beware that using the internet may not mean the same to research participants as it does to the researcher. Participation is a continuum and there are different degrees of media engagement and agency (Bury, 2017; Ito et al., 2009; van Dijck 2009). My co-participants and I engaged with our favourite media and fandoms in different ways – some were more active in online fan communities as audiences; some created fan texts; some participated in offline fandom communities; some studied fandoms as researchers; some loved certain media but weren't active in fan communities at all. Everyone drew on their experiences in our conversations and provided detailed insights into different engagements with beloved fictional worlds.

Hine (2017) also proposed that researchers bring field sites into being by following their interests and choosing which paths to follow. Based on this project's research focus, my co-participants and I deliberately co-constructed an intersectional field site by deciding which texts and contexts to focus on (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Burrell, 2017; Kozinets, 2015; Recuber, 2016). These multiple sites included specific fan podcast episodes and other online fan texts which my co-participants and I shared with each other prior to recording our episodes. *Marginally Fannish* episodes themselves acted as field sites which brought disparate sites together. All these online spaces acted as research field sites, research tools as well as sources of literature for generating and analysing our data (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012).

2.3.3 Exploring and expanding intersectional themes

While researching scholarship about intersectionality, I found that most papers explored the intersections of race, gender and class (and sometimes sexual orientation). However, I felt like there was something missing; that intersectionality had the potential to explore many more aspects of identity that weren't being addressed in the academic literature.

Meanwhile, I was also reading books, anthologies, memoirs, online articles and listening to fan podcasts which explored diverse aspects of feminism, marginalisation, systemic oppression and activism. This non-academic writing - both nonfiction and fiction - that I engaged with before, during, and after the data co-creation process hugely influenced my ideas.

The diverse identities I encountered helped me rethink the norms within intersectional scholarship. These perspectives began expanding my thinking about the possibilities of the intersectional framework and how it could be applied not only in my own project but to all areas of life. In the end, it was my non-academic reading which made me better attuned to the silences in academic discussions of intersectionality.

In these non-traditional archives and intellectual communities, fans expand canons and challenge hierarchies of knowledge which dictate where and how ideas should be explored, leading to new ways of seeing and understanding the world (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010; Halberstam, 2011; McLaren, 2009; Richardson and Green, 2018). Subsequently, in this thesis, I explore the ways in which conversations happening in these critical public pedagogical contexts not only provide a valuable source of intersectional education but also collectively explore some of the gaps within academic discussions (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010; Dentith et al., 2014; Sandlin et al., 2017).

The different contributions and insights I discovered helped me fine-tune my own understanding in terms of the intersectional themes I wanted to explore. These included: race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, class, sexuality, age, physical and mental (dis)ability, religion, and regional/national origin. Some of these themes turned out to be more popular with co-participants than others; most were interested in exploring more than one theme. However, while I tried to be as inclusive of diverse experiences as possible, I was aware that my own limited contexts might leave other identities invisible. To expand my list, I invited co-participants to suggest themes which resonated with their own interests or experiences. Examples of the new themes include:

- Wicca and paganism
- Violence against women
- Different cultures in fantasy worlds and fandoms
- Race and racism in mainstream Hollywood movies
- Representations of women warriors in media and history
- International politics and the rise of fascism in the *Fantastic Beasts* films

- Representation of older women
- Jewish faith traditions and representations of religion
- Polyamory in fanfiction and in the real world
- Asexuality awareness in fandom spaces

The original 10 intersectional themes provided a useful framework, especially for episodes with **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, my co-hosts. Having said that, while researching for and recording podcast episodes with different co-participants, we realised that there were parallels between many of the themes and people's experiences with different identities. It wasn't until I was writing this thesis and analysing my data as a whole that I really appreciated the intersectional nature of the project – that the different themes acted as valuable starting points for our conversations rather than as end goals in and of themselves. Throughout this thesis, rather than focusing on specific themes to make arguments about different identities, I'm focusing on the intersectional framework. Admittedly, while this emphasis on intersectionality may have been at the forefront of some of our minds, others wanted to privilege specific themes – something I expand on in Chapter 9.

2.4 Researching via podcasting

My co-participants and I planned our episode themes, literature and format together before recording our conversations. Our episodes acted as sites of both data and analyses as we explored different intersectional themes in some of our favourite media and their fandoms. While this collective analyses emerged through our conversations, this thesis supplements that with my own individual analysis which aimed the lenses of public pedagogy and intersectionality to our conversations.

2.4.1 Collaboratively planning episodes

Mayne (2016) acknowledged that the researcher's presence unavoidably influences participants to an extent. In the context of my project, this influence was both mutual and a deliberate aspect of my methodology. My co-participants and I informed each other's perspectives on different topics through the choice of our fan texts and our various conversations. Once we decided which themes we wanted to talk about, I created and shared an editable Google document with them so that we could add our fan texts and access each other's. We also jotted down our ideas for potential discussion topics in this document.

My co-hosts and I found it helpful to meet before recording our pilot episode. I decided to repeat this pre-recording meeting with all future co-participants. Here, we were able to discuss the format, themes and schedule of our episode and test the tech. More importantly, it helped us grow more comfortable with the content of the episode and with each other, especially in instances where we didn't know each other beyond our limited email correspondence.

My co-participants and I needed some basic equipment: a smartphone, a laptop, or a desktop computer with a microphone headset. Skype – and Zoom in one instance where a co-participant's country didn't provide access to Skype – made recording

conversations easy. Like me, most of my co-participants didn't have any podcasting experience prior to this project. We learned to podcast collaboratively and experientially. While I did do some cursory online research, the best lessons came through trial and experimentation. Episode 1 acted as a pilot episode where I learned some simple guidelines which helped with future episodes.

2.4.2 Conversations as a tool and product of inquiry

Multiple types of data make room for a multiplicity of voices and experiences (Gajjala et al., 2018). My co-participants and I produced knowledge through our encounters with each other as well as with other fan texts (Pink et al., 2015). Our episode resources and research allowed us to understand diverse lives and worldviews (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012). This was bolstered by our own different subjective experiences, knowledges and interpretations.

Planning our episodes offered us the opportunity to explore topics we were interested in, which we could then share in our conversations online. Even with those co-participants who were friends before the project, we hadn't discussed most of the topics we talked about in our episodes. I learned a lot about issues I was previously under-informed or completely ignorant about. My co-participants' insights and contributions allowed me to fill in knowledge-gaps and view things from different perspectives. In turn, I offered them my own interpretations and experiences which differed from theirs.

Our reflexive practice not only emerged individually but also in our conversations with each other before, during and after our episodes as we negotiated our interpretations together. In some instances where we were a part of the dominant culture or simply unaware of different contexts of the themes and identities we were exploring, these conversations and fan texts became a way to broaden our understanding, address some of our blind-spots, and challenge some preconceived notions – something I'll expand on in the following chapters.

I didn't want to position my own interpretation as more valid or legitimate than those of my co-participants. While my interpretation does play a central role throughout the project and thesis, I wanted to highlight my co-participants' voices too so that there was a multiplicity of perspectives available. Our different interpretations were informed by our different backgrounds, experiences and contexts. This publicly available data in the form of podcast episodes tries to challenge my individual (auto)ethnographic perspective by including multiple voices and collaborators (Fortun et al., 2017).

2.4.3 The different kinds of analyses

In this thesis, I apply the analytical lenses of intersectionality and public pedagogy to *Marginally Fannish* conversations as well as to the literature – both academic and fannish – that we referred to. However, analysis was an ongoing feature throughout the duration of the project. Owing to the way in which the podcast episodes worked and the premise of the project itself, our episodes were both research data and offered collective analyses. My co-participants and I analysed fan texts and fictional media together by drawing on our multiple knowledges,

skills, experiences and interpretations. In subsequent chapters, I aim to represent their perspectives; use the framework of public pedagogy and intersectionality to offer my own understanding of how they interpreted their experiences and social contexts; and unpack the implications of this form of knowledge-making (Guest et al., 2011).

My co-participants and I employed flexible and critical thematic analysis while creating our podcast episodes even though we didn't articulate this term (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Johnson et al., 2016). The act of choosing media, fan texts and intersectional themes not only displayed personal priorities but also involved a degree of analysis and deliberate reflection (Gajjala et al., 2018). In this analysis, our political stances were evident as we explored issues of representation, dominance and marginalisation of diverse identities. We adopted the lens of specific intersectional themes to question how different media and fan texts privileged some lives and erased others. We engaged in close-reading to analyse and spot patterns in media representations and connected different themes with each other. The themes we chose to focus on allowed us to form theories about different social cultural and political issues and share our insights with each other (see Chapter 3).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis makes knowledge accessible to non-academic audiences in participatory projects since it allows people to summarise complex topics and develop unanticipated insights. This was apparent in our podcast conversations which led to a much more dynamic form of knowledge. We were often both surprised and inspired by each other's points. These surprises meant that we were coming up with new ideas or remembering relevant experiences during the conversation without planning it beforehand. Dialogue was a key aspect of this process. Our conversations ended up co-creating knowledge by drawing on multiple sources – the literature, our discussion and our own individual experiences and knowledges.

Apart from our analyses, the podcasting process also enabled both individual and collective self-reflexivity. My co-participants and I analysed our subjective positions, interpretations, and assumptions as we discussed fictional representation and media texts. We did this by drawing connections between media and our own lives and sharing these interpretations with each other. While discussing how different identities were represented or erased, we disclosed personal aspects from our own lives and used our emotional responses to better understand the cultures we were talking about (Ellis, 1999; Joinson, 2005). Talking to people from different backgrounds allowed us to draw connections between the personal, political and cultural in ways which theorised personal experiences to understand larger issues of privilege and oppression. In this way, our episode autoethnographies investigated and analysed our subjective personal experiences in order to understand larger patterns in media and the society it reflects (Abdi, 2017; Bochner and Ellis, 2006; Ellis, 1999; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). Our collective-meaning making processes created a more nuanced and complex picture of our engagement with media.

Of course, while my co-participants and I tried to be mindful in our conversations and analyses, we weren't self-reflexive all the time. We didn't always analyse how our social contexts limited our understanding of certain issues nor did we always recognise our blind-spots. Our discussions were often incomplete and imperfect (see Chapter 9). However, this happens in more traditional and individualistic processes of academic analyses as well. Academic interpretations and understandings – as well-intentioned and widely-researched as they might be – are still limited by the researcher's own social, cultural and political positions and the preconceived notions which come with that. Despite its imperfections, our collective analyses and reflexivity had a meaningful impact on the project. Both wove through our conversations and emerged through the stories we shared with each other. These narratives helped us develop theories together as well as combine theory with practice (Abdi, 2017; Indira, 2020).

My individual analysis also began during the 10 months of co-creating data. Transcribing episodes for the website helped me make connections and reflect on my various choices. It also gave me ideas for blog posts and insights which I employed in future episodes. I used my autoethnographic blog posts as a space to write down my initial impressions, frustrations and theories, and decide what to focus on next (Hine, 2015). Even while I was in the midst of the data-creation stage, writing these field notes allowed me to take a step back and analyse the data as well as my choices, assumptions and emotions (Hine, 2017). This allowed me to contextualise my observations and individual experiences with those of the fans I was listening to/whose work I was reading. The process helped me reflect on my interpretations and document how my thinking changed over the course of the project in light of new information and fresh encounters (Abdi, 2017). I was able to articulate my research decisions, rationale, personal reflections and insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Due to the sheer volume of data I was dealing with, it also helped me narrow my focus onto those aspects which were more relevant to the intersectional and public pedagogy focus of my project. Some of these initial ideas went on to become focal themes in this thesis.

For the further analysis required while putting the thesis together, I used deductive thematic analysis to study all the research data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). I began (re)familiarising myself with my primary data by reading all my episode transcripts and blog posts. I then revisited my research questions and the associated literature to fine-tune my analytical lenses as I sifted through the massive amounts of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). When I returned to my data, this helped me to find and highlight themes which responded to the intersectionality and public pedagogy frameworks. I made detailed notes of examples and counter-examples within the data which fit within these themes. Throughout the process of writing drafts of the thesis abstract, table of contents and chapters, I kept revisiting these themes, examples and literature to frame and reframe my analysis.

This constant return to the different sources supplemented by my monthly conversations with my supervisors meant that my thinking and analysis was an ongoing process even after I had finished recording the podcast. As I wrote my first drafts throughout 2021, this process helped me unpack my ideas in order to clarify

the narratives I was trying to present and how they explored the larger social, cultural and political contexts in which these conversations occurred. This kind of thematic analysis allowed me to include my co-participants' multiple perspectives in ways where I could identify similarities and differences between our interpretations and discover new insights (Nowell et al., 2017).

Indira (2020) noted that even though researchers acknowledge that there are multiple sources of knowledge, only certain kinds of knowledge tend to be privileged within academic spaces. This thesis attempts to demonstrate and highlight our collective analyses side-by-side with my academic analysis. Our fan podcast conversations expressed our understanding of different social and cultural issues in ways which may be unconventional in traditional academic contexts. While our narratives were messy, partial, incomplete and subjective, we tried to create as meaningful and nuanced an analysis as possible (Abdi, 2017; Ellis, 1999).

2.5 Ethical considerations and research limitations

Although I tried to anticipate all potential ethical concerns when I initially designed the project, I still had to navigate unexpected issues as and when they cropped up. I also had to contend with problems in my research design which I hadn't planned for. Encountering these obstacles allowed me to learn from my mistakes.

2.5.1 Negotiating ethical issues

Mathieu et al. (2016) recommended that researchers should be reflexive and transparent about their negotiation with online ethics – both with participants and within their research report. Henderson et al. (2013) believed that writing in detail about ethical considerations contributes to the complex conversations about ethics in online data and allows others to learn from them. I had to employ context-dependent situational ethics through constant dialogue with my co-participants – and even with myself – in order to negotiate the different ethical issues I encountered (Halford, 2017; James and Busher, 2015; Mathieu et al., 2016; Mayne, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). This meant that I had to deliberate over ethical issues throughout the project, not just in the beginning during the institutional ethical approval process (Halford, 2017). For example, while writing my autoethnographic field notes in response to different episodes and conversations, I was aware that they were going to be public and in some instances, chose to privilege co-participants' privacy over transparency.

In my project's collaborative ethnographic approach, my co-participants played an important role in the co-creation of knowledge. I wanted to attribute insights and contributions to them rather than focus on anonymity in a way which only privileged the more traditional sources of knowledge of academic literature. At the same time, I wanted to give them a choice about whether or not they'd like their voices and perspectives to be attributed to them (Mayne, 2016).

I made it clear to co-participants that our podcast episodes would be publicly available online to promote open research (Fortun et al., 2017). While my ethical

advisory panel was initially sceptical about the need for making our conversations public, once I explained my project's aims and philosophy, they were very supportive. I also clarified that co-participants could get in touch with me in case they wanted to exclude any part of our conversation, or if they changed their mind about the podcast and wanted to withdraw.

3 co-participants did ask me to edit out small extracts from our conversation before they were published. In the case of 1 participant who opted to adopt a pseudonym, she revealed some identifiable details of her personal and professional identities in our conversation. Since we didn't use any audio cloaking software to disguise this participant's voice, there was the risk that someone she knew might listen to her on the podcast and recognise her. In this instance, we decided to edit out specific and identifiable descriptions and discussions.

In online research projects, anonymisation and privacy are difficult to guarantee due to current and future technological advances (Dawson, 2014; Ginnis, 2017; Henderson et al., 2013; Townsend and Wallace, 2017). Another co-participant got in touch with me a year after our episode had been published. He was uncomfortable about the content of his contribution and wanted to adopt a pseudonym. He also requested I delete some other identifiable details in the transcript. However, he was comfortable with the audio episode itself remaining unedited. This was presumably so that people searching his name online wouldn't stumble upon the conversation. While I was happy to comply, I reminded him of the risk that our episode may have been accessed previously by someone he knew at any point in the preceding year; a risk he acknowledged that he was at ease with.

When it came to editing episodes, before I launched the podcast, my partner **Jack** offered to edit the episodes. I was initially unsure of the ethical implications of delegating. However, I quickly learned how time-consuming the pre- and post-production processes were and was grateful for his help. I informed my co-participants beforehand that while I would be marking the edits, Jack would be the one carrying them out.

I was also keenly aware of the emotional labour involved in talking about personally sensitive topics. I made sure to discuss what we were comfortable sharing in the pre-recording planning meetings and what we were comfortable publishing after the episode recording. Many of my co-participants come from groups whose perspectives and experiences are marginalised in mainstream media and culture. In some instances, topics we discussed were upsetting. Some of my participants – including myself – have also had difficult personal experiences which we drew on while discussing media representations. Since these conversations formed the crux of my project, all I could do was check in with my participants and make sure they were okay both before and after our conversation – particularly if we had had a difficult one.

Even though I clarified that participants should only share what they're comfortable with, sometimes this information was deeply personal and brought up hurtful memories and experiences. I modified episodes based on my participants'

recommendations. With **Robert** in Episode 10, one of the fan podcast episodes I had recommended ended up resonating with his own experiences quite uncomfortably and reminded him of childhood trauma. He then suggested including a content warning for our episode where we talked about both our personal experiences with family abuse and trauma. **Milena** in Episode 21 was also mindful that the content of our conversation might trigger traumatic memories for people belonging to different marginalised cultures; they suggested a content warning as well. These recommendations made me much more aware about the need for such warnings not only in other episodes but also in other academic and non-academic contexts.

2.5.2 Challenges in research design

As I reflected on different parts of my data creation and analysis stages, I realised that while I'm happy with many aspects of my project, I'm less happy about the mistakes. However, these mistakes resulted in a different kind of pedagogy. While my errors made me feel embarrassed and uncomfortable, I loved the opportunity to learn from them. According to a "methodology of discomfort" (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010), imperfection is a crucial part of our knowledge-making process. As a researcher, this uncertainty and constant reflexivity helped me identify gaps in my research design. My mistakes helped me question my assumptions, reflect on my limitations, learn from new perspectives, and imagine new possibilities. While this section focuses on the project's methodology, I explore its relevance in my project data in Chapter 9.

Kahl Jr. (2011) proposed it is important for autoethnographers to clarify their social and cultural location in order to contextualise discussions and understandings of power and oppression. Each *Marginally Fannish* episode began with my co-participants and I introducing and contextualising our different experiences with the theme(s) we were exploring in the episode. We coupled this with other aspects of our work or fandoms. I invited co-participants to share any details of their demographic identities that they were comfortable discussing so that we could step beyond monolithic or essentialist encapsulations of our identities and share a multiplicity of experiences.

This turned out to be problematic for at least one person. **Robert** found it difficult to explain what it's like to live with a disability because he had never experienced anything else. He didn't know how other people's experiences might vary from his norm. Although Robert was the only one who explicitly articulated his discomfort, other co-participants who didn't voice their reservations may have felt this too. When I suggested that we should all explain our own experiences with the episode themes, I hadn't realised how presumptuous I had been. While such contextualisation can raise awareness and educate, it also unfairly places the onus on the marginalised person whose explanations must cater to the dominant norm.

Since my methodology was dependent on dialogue, conversations between my co-participants played an important role. However, I hadn't anticipated linguistic barriers. One of my participants, **H** in Episode 8, wasn't comfortable with English since it wasn't his first language. I wish I had taken more time and steps to

incorporate his linguistic needs. Our episode had me monopolising the conversation – where it ended up more as a lecture than a dialogue, with fewer inputs from H than I would have liked. This has helped me be more mindful of different language needs and accessibility issues with digital projects in general. This is one of the reasons I provide a text transcript of every episode.

Another drawback was that since it was a conversation rather than an interview, I inadvertently derailed some of my co-participants' perspectives. In Episode 3, when **Anna M.** began to discuss how modern Wicca tries to be more inclusive of different identities, I disrupted her point by bringing up how pagan and political movements can still be exclusionary. I didn't notice a problem with my inputs while chatting. However, in hindsight, I realised that rather than actively listening to Anna's point and exploring the discussion she raised, I crowbarred my own disputes in. While I do think that interesting conversations can emerge through conflicting viewpoints, it would have been interesting to explore the political and environmental aspects of paganism – something I was ignorant of and Anna had more expertise with.

When I published Episode 16, I received a polite email from someone who had read the transcript of the episode and critiqued an aspect of my role in it:

I was disappointed that more of the podcast wasn't devoted to Tam's thoughts on nonbinary and gender-diverse characters in the works you discussed, since Tam has lived experience of these issues. – Email correspondence

The person analysed the transcript and found that while I had spoken a total of 5,905 words, my co-participant **Tam** spoke for a total of 2,298 words. While initially embarrassed, I genuinely appreciated the thoughtful feedback. Thinking about the critique and writing a response to the email not only allowed me to consider the limitations of my method but also potential solutions.

The lack of specific interview questions meant that co-participants were free to share as much or as little as they wanted and also meant that some were chattier than others. I wasn't sure how comfortable Tam was with sharing their lived experiences on the episode and I didn't want to push them into saying anything they hadn't brought up of their own accord. At the same time, I have the tendency to talk a lot and rush to interrupt in bursts of enthusiasm or to fill in silences – something I struggle to find a balance for. This was especially problematic in instances like Episode 16 where as a cisgender woman talking to a nonbinary person, I inadvertently ended up talking over someone from a marginalised group. People also have different communication styles - for some, interruptions are rude whereas for me, interruptions are a form of active listening where I'm demonstrating that I'm paying attention. The email critique made me want to take more concrete measures to find a way to manage this so that different personalities/communication styles didn't hamper the conversation.

In episodes with **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, we divided segments amongst ourselves so that all 3 of us were in charge of facilitating a certain part of the conversation. This allowed each of us a chance to share our opinions and perspectives about different

topics. For future iterations of this methodology/podcast, this may be a good plan for all co-participants. Dividing segments in this way would hopefully allow more reticent participants a chance to talk more and help me make room for silences. Silences can be an important part of the thinking process for many people and I'd like to learn how to grow comfortable with them (Baurain, 2011; Spyrou, 2016).

Admittedly, my ideas for rectifying these issues are quite incomplete and imperfect. However, writing about my mistakes and my attempts to learn from others could not only help make my own work more accessible and democratic but could also influence other projects. This could have implications on how knowledge is collectively and publicly created and disseminated – either via podcasting or other methods – with room to include a broader range of voices and practices.

2.6 Chapter summary

Technically, the *Marginally Fannish* podcast and transcripts demonstrate my thesis; admittedly, they might far surpass the word count for a standard thesis document. They answer my research questions, elaborate necessary arguments, make the format more accessible to and inclusive of audiences outside academia, and enable self-reflexive analysis and critical commentary – all engaged in collaboratively with my co-participants (Andrews and England, 2012; Dix, 2016; Harris, 2010; Harrison, 2014; Stansbie, 2012; Zak, 2014). However, owing to academia's insistence on solo-authored work for a PhD thesis, I'm attempting to translate our conversations and analysis for an academic audience. More specifically, I'm trying to provide a theoretical framework – that of public pedagogy and intersectionality – to contextualise the podcast conversations. If willing and able, I'd urge anybody who's interested to refer to [these podcast episodes](#) knowing full well I may not be able to do them justice.

This chapter described how and why a fan podcast provided a research method, a field site, sources of literature, primary data as well as analysis – all of which might be more traditionally recognisable as academic elements. Just like in more formal academic contexts, the research/fan podcast also threw up dynamic ethical and design challenges. Viewed through the lenses of public pedagogy and intersectionality – concepts I'll explore in greater detail in the following chapters – a fan podcast can act as a valuable social learning context – one which educates the researcher just as much as anyone else.

Chapter 3 “It’s Very Liberating To Think”: Collective Knowledge-Making In Fan Podcasts

3.1 Introduction

I’ve always been a fannish person. Even as a kid, I remember falling utterly in love with media – books, TV shows, movies – in ways I didn’t always see my friends doing. When I discovered online fandom as a teenager, I felt like I had finally found my people – people who loved some of my favourite things just as much as I did and wanted to talk about them endlessly. I discovered fans who loved fictional media so much that they even wrote their own stories and created art about their favourite worlds – inspiring me to do the same (a sitcom version of Voldemort and the Death Eaters that I have tragically since lost). What I didn’t realise at the time but have since come to appreciate is how participation in these communities taught me to think. Not *what* to think – memorising and regurgitating pre-determined information like my school insisted on – but *how* to think – in ways which drew on the shared passion and collective intelligence of my fellow fans.

I’ve often felt like an imposter in the British higher education system, not knowing whether I was doing or thinking the correct things. I didn’t have the same kind of uncertainty in fannish spaces where the learning-how-to-think happened without me even realising it – perhaps *because* I didn’t realise it. I just wanted to talk about the things I loved and listen to others share their own opinions and interpretations. How was I to know that these conversations around my favourite fictional media, both then and now, would reshape the ways in which I engage with knowledge and the world?

This chapter outlines how a fannish curriculum provides an invaluable education:

- In the first section, I explore how fan communities in general and fan podcasts in particular democratise the process of creating and sharing knowledge in informal spaces online. Thanks to this self-directed and interest-based form of education, fans are able to encounter new ideas and develop their own theories
- Next, I describe how fans collaboratively create a dynamic and flexible curriculum of media and fan texts. By choosing which media and elements to focus on as well as the thematic and analytical lenses that most resonate with them, fans create an inclusive curriculum-in-progress which can respond to a diverse range of contexts
- Finally, I write about how fan critiques act as public pedagogy. Fan criticisms of how certain identities are represented or misrepresented in media provide learning resources. By challenging cultural representations, fans highlight persistent tropes and stereotypes about marginalised groups of people. People who encounter fan criticisms can learn to synthesise multiple sources and perspectives in order to acquire new insights

3.2 Democratising knowledge creation and dissemination

People who didn't always have access to the skills and tools required for cultural production now find it easier to contribute to their culture online (Kelley and Jenkins, 2013). This has resulted in a greater diversity of voices in digital spaces. People belonging to marginalised groups can draw on their own experiences and represent them using digital media. This can counter the erasure of their perspectives in mainstream spaces (Gainer, 2010). Digital platforms make it increasingly easier for fans from all over the world to access, create and share multimodal fan texts inspired by their favourite fictional worlds. Such activities are reshaping how people engage with media and society (Ratto and Boler, 2014).

People use these online platforms to create informal communities that enable members to come together, share their experiences, and exchange ideas with each other (Jenkins et al., 2016). Such online participatory contexts – where people both access and create their own media based on shared interests – result in social and collaborative learning environments (Knobel and Lankshear, 2010). Pennington (2017) proposed that such developments in textual experiments require a re-evaluation of traditional notions of literacy, creativity and culture.

According to Rossing (2015), artists, writers, performers and other cultural workers can act as pedagogues by creating alternative discourses. I believe this can also include fan writers, artists and cultural commentators. Fans engage with their favourite texts in multiple ways. Online fan spaces act as sites of public pedagogy where participants develop multiple skills through their active participation in the community, rereading of the source text, reading other fan texts, and interactions with each other (Black, 2009; DeLuca, 2018; Gounari, 2009; Lammers, 2013). When fans gather to talk about the worlds and characters they love, they discuss, analyse, critique and debate interpretations based on their own prior experiences and knowledge (Coker, 2012; Coppa et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2012a). Once you're a member of a fan community, you're exposed to different ways of thinking and diverse perspectives. Through their interactions with others, fans gain a host of skills, resulting in an informal, social learning experience (Jenkins, 2006).

Public pedagogy scholars believe that learning isn't restricted to a formal educational setting like a school or a university (Biesta, 2012; Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015; Sandlin et al., 2013). Fandom and academic spaces have more in common than one might assume. Fan practices of creating and reading different kinds of media enable fans to develop and practice multiple literacies outside formal academic institutions. Matt Hills (2013) suggested that being a scholar and a fan both involved looking at theories with fresh eyes and questioning established cultural norms promoted by mainstream media. The co-hosts of *Witch, Please* contended that fandom spaces allow fans to insert their own perspectives into their favourite texts in order to make the media better align with their values. Although this occurs in informal spaces, it isn't very different from what happens in academic settings with different scholars focusing on specific texts and contexts (Kosman and McGregor, 2016a).

Fan spaces abound with examples of self-directed and inquiry-based education. Fans research a wide range of sources – both fictional and real-world – in order to fill gaps in their knowledge. The *Doctor Who* episode “Demons of the Punjab” was set during the Partition of India – a violent period of history that my Indian co-hosts – **Sanjana** and **Aparna** – and I had grown up learning about. However, the three white co-hosts of *Verity!* were unfamiliar with this historical event. They used the show as an opportunity to educate themselves by looking for different South Asian responses to the *Doctor Who* episode as well as historical resources about the Partition. They then used their own podcast to share the knowledge they had learned about real-world histories of British imperialism and lamented the absence of these narratives in British history classrooms (Stanish et al., 2018). Fans encounter new ideas, understand unfamiliar perspectives, come up with their own theories, and develop critical reflections.

Knobel (2017) proposed that online fan spaces are often at the intersection of creativity and literacy where both these processes are social and collaborative. Unlike in formal school settings, fans’ love for different fictional worlds and characters encourages them to learn through a process of exploration rather than aiming towards a clearly defined goal set by someone else (Ito et al., 2009). In fan spaces, multiple literacies develop in non-linear ways which reorient traditional understandings of learning and communication (Kafai et al., 2011). These spaces go beyond the kind of knowledge-making processes which are common in more traditional educational institutions (Kellner and Kim, 2010; McLaren, 2010). Contrary to the kind of autonomous learning which is expected in schools and unlike notions of a sole public pedagogue, knowledge in digital spaces isn’t an individual accomplishment (Curwood et al., 2013). Much like feminist constructions of public pedagogy, many fans engage in a collaborative learning process where knowledge is negotiated together (Sandlin et al., 2017). Through their conversations, fans create and share knowledge by drawing on their individualised resources and literacies in ways which are usually overlooked in classroom settings (Smythe and Neufeld, 2010).

3.2.1 Self-directed, interest-based education

When it comes to filling in knowledge gaps, it’s difficult to know where to begin when you can’t even identify what beliefs you’ve internalised and where the gaps lie. Fan-created media provides possibilities for a critical education by expanding people’s understanding. **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, my Indian friends and co-hosts of multiple episodes, had a more regular presence on the podcast than other participants. In most instances, the 3 of us belonged to the dominant group in terms of the diverse identities we were exploring. In different episodes, we spoke about how we gleaned most of our narrow and often flawed understanding about different identities through media representations. They often portrayed these groups in essentialist and stereotypical ways. Participating in a fan podcast to discuss media representations offered us the opportunity to research, analyse and discuss some of these issues:

On the general research that this podcast has brought in my life [...] I just love the conversations that we’re having on a daily basis [...] It’s very

liberating to think [...] just after college now. – Sanjana (MF Episode 2 Part 2)

Sanjana loved the fact that preparing for episodes by engaging with other fan perspectives and fan texts provided her with an opportunity to learn and talk about things she hadn't had a chance to do since she was in university. By constantly emphasising the importance of such learning and unlearning, Sanjana pointed at how such conversations can help fans and audiences identify and challenge some of the ideas we had been conditioned to take for granted by mainstream media and society (see Chapter 6).

Similar ingrained ideas also exist in other contexts such as perceptions about what kind of knowledge is considered to be valid. **Anna R.**, a young Greek fan, was excited to be a part of this academic/fan podcast. However, in our planning meeting, apart from her excitement, I could also sense a feeling of incredulity that she had been chosen to participate in an academic project. I rushed to reassure her that I was eager to be able to learn from her perspectives as someone who spent a lot of time in the online fandom for the TV show *Supernatural*, a space I wasn't very familiar with. We decided to focus on representations of gender and different cultures. To prepare for our episode, Anna ended up recommending not just fan essays and a fan podcast episode but also a couple of academic papers. Through her choice of texts, she showcased how fans research diverse sources to fill knowledge gaps and acquire new information and ideas.

It wasn't until later that I wondered whether the inclusion of academic papers stemmed from the same feeling of intimidation that I had sensed. When I did go through the texts, I found the fan-authored essays "Ron Weasley Vs Ron Weasley" (Rauscher, 2018), "Ginny Weasley, The Girl Who Deserved More" (StudentBlogger, 2018) and "Supernatural: A History of Violence Against Women" (Exorcising Emily, 2015) much more interesting than the academic articles. Even in our own episode conversation, we ended up drawing more on the points made by the fannish essays than the academic ones. These essays engaged in close-reading of fictional characters, provided examples from the text, cited a range of sources, and identified problematic patterns as they developed an argument about media representations at large – things our conversation (as well as other *Marginally Fannish* episodes and fan podcasts) managed to do as well (MF Episode 5).

Of course, this tension between the legitimacy of academic texts versus fan texts is one I could very much identify with. I take the educational potential of fandom seriously, especially because of the role it's played in my own life. I've grown up on the internet and online fan contexts have played a huge role in helping me learn and unlearn a wide array of things. Through my interactions with fan texts and encounters with fan perspectives, I've been able to engage in a DIY form of education where I followed my passions which unexpectedly led to learning opportunities. At the same time, as I briefly explored in Chapters 1 and 2, this firm belief in fandom's possibilities sits uncomfortably with my own feelings of being an imposter in academia. I think the kind of learning happening in fan podcasts is important and academic research will be richer for including it. However, I also keep trying to over-justify the parallels between fandom and academia, partly

because of my own internalised ideas of what knowledge needs to look like in order to be taken seriously.

This chapter and the thesis overall focuses on the educational potential within fandom spaces – the kind of education which isn't just restricted to formal academic institutions. However, accessing both fannish and academic spaces comes with a certain amount of privilege as **Marita**, a working-class fan and PhD researcher, pointed out:

It's sort of similar to me to how people talk about academia. Because I'm self-funded and I work. And for the last year I tried to do my first PhD year full-time while at the same time working full-time because I needed to be making over £900 per month in order to just be able to pay my tuition and my rent. And it is for the love of the work because I love what I'm doing. With fandom as well, it is for the love of the content and for the love of the community etc. But it is still work. – Marita (MF Episode 17)

Like me, Marita had been a part of online fandom since she was a teenager and it continued to play an important part of her life as an adult. She had also chosen to be a part of an academic context to pursue work that she loved. In both instances, she underscored the expectation of doing the work for free – or even paying for the work in terms of time, labour or money. The love for the fandom and the research sustained this expectation. As important as the self-directed, interest-based and intrinsically-motivated work can be in both contexts, these expectations can act as barriers for people who can't afford to participate for free. Marita's point reminded me to temper my enthusiasm for fandom with the acknowledgement that not everybody has the resources to be able to access these spaces. Class implications dictate who gets to participate both in fandom and academia.

3.2.2 Encountering ideas and developing theories

My reservations about constantly making comparisons between fan texts and academic texts notwithstanding, many fan texts, including podcasts, *do* resemble academic conversations. Fans research, cite, synthesise, summarise, analyse, and build arguments in much the same way academic texts do, though they present it differently. For *Marginally Fannish* episodes, these processes were baked into the format of the podcast – although the fan podcasts we looked at did this in different ways too. After deciding a theme to focus on, most of my co-participants and I looked for fan texts we could recommend to each other which resonated with our own interests and perspectives. In our episodes, we drew on different sources in order to develop our own theories and interpretations. **Lorrie**, a *Harry Potter* fan, analysed the book series and its prequel the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise and provided rationale for why she thought that J. K. Rowling was telling the same story in different ways:

In my opinion, it's actually the same story. It's just that Harry Potter is a fairy tale and that's why when Harry goes looking for his own story, he always finds something. He wants to find his mother and father, he finds them. He finds the people who give them back to him. When children are angry and murderous in Harry Potter, an adult comes and saves them

from becoming murderers. They don't actually kill, they get stopped in time because adults are there to do their jobs. In Fantastic Beasts it's the same but the children actually commit murder and adults are just as ineffective as we know them to be in real life. – Lorrie (MF Episode 12)

On repeated viewings of the movie and further analysis, she found that while sexual assault against women was coded in *Harry Potter* in ways where people may not read it as assault, it was more starkly explicit in *Fantastic Beasts* where it intersected with colonial violence. Lorrie believed these differences signalled the intended audience for both media – while *Harry Potter* was clearly meant for children, the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise was mindful of adult *Harry Potter* fans and explored the same themes in more adult, less child-friendly ways. By synthesising information from multiple sources, Lorrie analysed the characters and plotlines by engaging in close-reading, spotted patterns and cited examples in order to provide a reasoned argument.

Encounters with fan texts and other fan perspectives can draw attention to new theories and terms which in turn bring new connections to the fore. As **Aparna, Sanjana** and I researched the themes and media we were going to be discussing in each episode, these terms and ideas influenced our interpretations and understandings of both media and the real world. While preparing for our episode on representations of race in Western media and fandom, we listened to the “Racebending and Whitewashing in Media” episode of *Black Girl Nerds* (Broadnax, 2019). What stood out to Aparna in their conversation was their point that representations of Jesus have been whitewashed in both media and society. This prompted Sanjana to apply the concept to an Indian context where Hindu gods and goddesses are whitewashed in Indian TV adaptations, comic books and images. Or, as Aparna pointed out, blue skin is used to denote dark skin:

Sanjana: All our gods have been portrayed – like whatever live-action stuff has happened – is all like by these white-looking men. Whereas Krishna literally means dark. It's as dark as the dark clouds.

Aparna: But we don't make them dark, we make them blue. (MF Episode 2 Part 2)

As a comic book editor, Sanjana shared the related struggles she had with the illustrators she worked with who were reluctant to depict any heroic figures with dark skin, implying that dark skin was only reserved for villains. While the podcast we listened to focused on whitewashing in racialised contexts, in India, skin colour has regional, class and caste-based connotations. By making connections between diverse contexts, Sanjana showcased how fans adapt ideas they encounter about different identities to better illuminate issues closer to home. Fandom conversations became a way to explore ideas and terminologies in order to develop a contextual understanding of them. While these understandings were still quite subjective and may not be universally applicable, navigating them provided learning opportunities for the 3 of us.

In Aparna's case, while researching for our episode about representations of disability in media, she learned about negative tropes which she hadn't been familiar with as an able-bodied person:

The more you notice how disability is represented in media, it's always exaggerated and it's always the extreme. Just during my reading, I came across this thing of how disabled people are always put in one of 3 categories. In that either they're celebrated for doing something completely normal [...] or there is too much pressure to be extraordinary [...] And the third is to just generate sympathy for the protagonist because they have somebody in their circle of friends or family who has a disability of some kind and then that makes them look like a more empathetic character. – Aparna (MF Episode 6)

At the beginning of the episode, Aparna shared how researching for it had led to the realisation of how little she knew about the topic. She hadn't thought about these ideas before because disability hadn't directly impacted her life. However, other fans' perspectives about disability helped her understand different experiences. People from different backgrounds share their experiences and perspectives within the framework of fandom, allowing others to learn from them – a more democratic process of creating, sharing and accessing knowledge. For Aparna, this access helped her reflect critically on her own ideas. Drawing on the collective intelligence of fandom can help fans build a more complex understanding of issues in ways they may not have previously done.

3.3 Curating media and themes to co-create a flexible curriculum

Stories in mainstream media are important because they shape ideas about different cultures (Gatson and Reid, 2012). The ways in which popular culture represents people and issues both reflect and shape dominant ideologies and stereotypes (Giroux, 2004; Rossing, 2015; Wright and Wright, 2015). Popular media narratives privilege the experiences of some groups and exclude countless others. This plays a powerful role in influencing how people – from both dominant and marginalised groups – think about themselves and others.

Ideas and representations in popular culture texts need to be analysed and, if necessary, contested since they “form a curriculum about race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Happel-Parkins and Esposito, 2015: p. 8). These in turn cement stereotypes about marginalised communities and create a version of the world where certain worldviews are dominant. For many people, their only access to these marginalised communities may be through the media they are exposed to. We learn about identities and cultures we may not encounter in our daily lives through media portrayals. Based on this, we build ideas about the world we live in.

Giroux (2004) proposed that public pedagogy is a process which occurs across a variety of settings and contexts in an ongoing process of debate, dialogue and critical engagement. According to him, educators can train people to critically analyse the media and culture they consume as well as produce their own cultural products which challenge dominant representations and stereotypes. However, a critical pedagogue isn't always necessary to put these processes into motion. Some public pedagogy scholars believe that audiences aren't completely passive and there are plenty of opportunities to resist dominant narratives (Sandlin et al., 2011; Sandlin et al., 2013; Savage, 2010). People can come together to identify and challenge problematic social, cultural, political and educational scripts (Burdick

and Sandlin, 2010). The feminist strand of scholarship disregards an individualistic notion of public pedagogy where a single educator is responsible for transferring resistant skills and knowledge to the public. Instead, these scholars believe that people can be agents in their own education by collectively negotiating meanings and contributing different forms of expertise (Sandlin et al., 2017; Savage, 2010).

Knobel and Lankshear (2010) highlighted the value of the social and collaborative form of learning which occurs in informal communities formed around individual interests. Savage (2010) argued that people can create knowledge through their interactions with each other and with culture based on their own lived experiences. While schools traditionally focus on learning as an individual accomplishment, writing online involves interacting with others and remixing other people's ideas, words, and images in acts of collaborative communication and knowledge-creation (Curwood et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009; Smythe and Neufeld, 2010). According to Bruns (2008), such processes in online spaces allow people to combine disparate elements of information, knowledge and ideas in order to develop creative, critical and collaborative skills.

Online fan communities enable members to engage in collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006; Lévy and Bononno, 1997; Lévy, 2013). Fans encounter new ideas and interpretations through collaborative meaning-making processes. When fans of popular culture texts use new media technologies to write and share their own media online, literacy becomes communal rather than individual (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Podcasts offer an alternative to “the politics of the citation” witnessed in traditional academic writing by expanding the range of voices and issues which are included – especially those which are underrepresented in mainstream discourse (Carrillo and Mendez, 2019; Richardson, 2017). In *Marginally Fannish* and other fan podcasts, fans have expanded conversations to include a more diverse range of identities. Fans of globally popular media can highlight an array of issues by drawing on a broader range of topics which matter to them. Drawing on a diverse group's identities and priorities can expand notions of what counts as valid knowledge and who gets to produce it. In this way, podcasts can disrupt taken for granted assumptions and stereotypes about communities, thereby giving voice to marginalised experiences (Carrillo and Mendez, 2019).

3.3.1 Choosing texts and analytical lenses

Sandlin and colleagues (2011) proposed that public pedagogy allows participants to be coordinators of their own curriculum. In *Marginally Fannish* (as well as other fan podcasts and fan texts we referred to), the topics we chose to focus on, the examples we used, and the direction our collective analysis took revealed our different priorities and backgrounds. We curated which media and themes to highlight and drew on multiple sources of literature to develop our analyses. This offered a counter-curriculum to the messages promoted by mainstream media.

When I first envisioned discussing religion on *Marginally Fannish*, I hadn't even considered Wicca or paganism because it was so far removed from my sphere of knowledge and experience. I'm not a religious person. What little I do know about

religion is limited to the mainstream religions I encountered in Mumbai (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Jainism) and in Western media (Christianity and, to a much lesser extent, Judaism). **Anna M.**, an eclectic solitary pagan, suggested that we explore the representations of Wicca in mainstream fantasy media. We spoke about the *Harry Potter* book series and the TV show *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Her choice of theme and media drew on her own spiritual experiences:

The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina are an endless fount of frustration for me [...] I feel that by calling a religion that is so explicitly against Christianity witchcraft, as they do in the show, they're promoting some quite entrenched and quite erroneous ideas about what witchcraft, Wicca, paganism actually is [...] I don't think I've ever met a pagan who was actively dismissive of Christianity as a fake or false religion. Sure as a social structure, it has its own problems but so do all religious and spiritual movements. – Anna M.

Through the framework of fantasy media, this analytical lens allowed me to learn about a real-world religion and helped me understand the different ways in which it was marginalised:

The attributes that the Church of Night in The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina uses are often very misogynistic, often very aggressive. No, we do not actually eat children. No, there are no blood sacrifices. Just let me hug a tree in the woods somewhere. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

Through her critique of the representations promoted by a popular show, Anna also corrected popular misconceptions by sharing examples from her own life. Had I discussed the show with another co-participant, we would probably have chosen to focus on another theme and analysed different elements in order to develop arguments which most resonated with us.

Such a combination of themes, media and analyses can draw attention to wider patterns of misrepresentation and erasure in both media and society. Before our episode exploring the representations of older women in SFF media, **Deb** and I listened to “The Women Who Waited” episode of *Woke Doctor Who*. In it, the hosts analysed the TV show to examine how in a media and sociocultural landscape which seems to value youth, older men have more agency, status and power than older women (Eugenia and Toya, 2019a).

As a middle-aged *Doctor Who* fan, Deb was invested in analysing how the intersections of age and gender were portrayed in the show. She focused on the examples of 2 female companions in *Doctor Who* – Sarah Jane Smith and Amy Pond – who appeared as both young and older versions of themselves in the show. Sarah Jane first appeared as a young companion in the initial run of *Doctor Who*, and then returned for an episode in the reboot. Amy aged up 36 years in an episode where she was trapped in an alternate timeline. Deb pointed out how in both cases, ageing was associated with bitterness, jealousy and anger. She drew a connection between these emotions and how older women are perceived in general by both media and society:

It was interesting on the podcast Women of Harry Potter (Zoltan and Nedelman, 2019a), Stephanie Paulsell said that, "The best thing about turning 50 as a woman is that you become invisible to men." And you see that so much in these characters [...] When we see women who are over 50, we tend to see them as either angry and bitter or daffy and crazy [...] Or we don't see them at all. They just disappear entirely. – Deb

To bolster her point, Deb drew on another fan source – one we had listened to for our episode. She focused her analysis on some of her favourite media – *Harry Potter*, *Doctor Who* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, her points about absent older women in SFF media helped me realise that such patterns existed in some of my favourite media too like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, a show I had recommended multiple times – both on the podcast and off – as presenting a queer-inclusive and female-dominated progressive fantastical world:

But now thinking about it, in terms of age, they're all young. Parent figures are completely absent. There are a few here and there but they're not at the centre of the story [...] Which in a world like She-Ra where they give room to a lot of different kinds of stories [...] and all their stories get a lot of centre-stage – except old people. – Parinita (MF Episode 14)

Fans offering their own suggestion of themes based on their own identities and interests can help others encounter perspectives they may not have analysed before. By choosing which media and themes to examine, Deb highlighted issues which prompted me apply the lens to other media too. Much like in Anna's case above, focusing on *Doctor Who* with another co-participant who had different concerns – race, religion or disability, for example – would probably have resulted in different insights. Consequently, fan conversations signpost a dynamic and flexible curriculum-in-process – one that can be adapted to a range of contexts and interests.

3.3.2 Building a diverse curriculum with positive recommendations

Of course, it's not all critical. Fans love their favourite media and characters and like to talk about why they love them. Through the texts and media we recommended to each other before our episodes and the examples we brought up during our conversations, my co-participants and I were able to share a selection of media which spoke to our hopes, interests and identities. By recommending representations of different identities, we articulated what we liked about different characters and plotlines and what we'd like to see more of in media. The list of positive representations represented a form of curating an inclusive curriculum where fan interpretations outlined what made them valuable.

Lisa, for whom fighting formed a core part of her identity, loved the comic book character of Mockingbird for being a woman who was both smart and a fierce warrior. In our conversation, she shared different reasons for why she felt such a deep emotional connection to a fictional character who became her first aspirational media figure:

It gave me the chance to go, "Hey look, there's someone who looks like you who you could actually be" [...] And that was one of the first times that I

was faced with the idea that maybe you can be a hero. Maybe there's more. Or maybe your path is not to be a mother and a housewife. Because I was born in the 70s and gender roles were still very specific even then in the middle of all this sexual revolution. – Lisa (MF Episode 11)

While elsewhere in the conversation Lisa described all the different traits she loved about the character, here she analysed why the representation meant so much to her and how it had such a great impact on her own life. Mockingbird opened up her mind to other possibilities of being a woman in the world – something Lisa hadn't encountered in other media or in her real life. Fans have different reasons for loving characters. Apart from outlining the different characteristics which stand out to individual fans, such interpretations can also illuminate why these representations are important in the larger media landscape.

Fans engage in a form of public pedagogy by highlighting narratives which subvert mainstream expectations and representations. While **Deb** complained about how older women were treated in *Doctor Who*, she also pointed at the example of River Song who subverted the roles middle-aged female characters were otherwise relegated to. She described how the character challenged ideas of what older women are expected to do both in media and society:

We often think of women, particularly women who are middle-aged and older [...] they're not sexual beings [...] River [is] the sexiest character in Doctor Who by a landslide. She kisses as a weapon [...] She has multiple husbands and wives and an implied array of other partners that we don't necessarily see. She can rock a sequin gown like nobody's business. [...] She is clearly a woman who is very confident and comfortable in her body. And relishes in it in many different ways including sexuality. And that's just so unusual. She forces herself into the centre of attention and revels in that attention once she's there. And again, that's not something that we typically associate with female characters in general but particularly middle-age and older female characters. And so River's just the best. – Deb (MF Episode 14)

By highlighting how River subverted tropes and expectations, Deb also outlined what these stereotypical notions were. She then used the example of one of her favourite characters to discuss the shortcomings of these tropes by appreciating the representation which disrupted mainstream ideas of what an older woman is supposed to do and look like.

The framework of discussing 1 or 2 themes per episode allowed us to structure our thoughts and analyse the themes in detail as well as focus our ideas and cite examples which were most relevant not just to the episode themes but also to our own priorities. We often brought up writers and projects which resonated with us and whom we appreciated for doing the kind of work we wanted to see more of.

Personal identification with the identities, as in the cases above, wasn't always necessary. Fans have a host of reasons for loving their favourite characters. Discussions about characters belonging to identities fans don't inhabit can also result in insights about different issues. For our episode, **Anna R.**, a female fan, and I decided to focus on gender in some of our favourite media. While we spent most

of the episode discussing women's representations, one segment explored masculinity. Anna pointed at how the TV show *Supernatural* both upheld traditional markers of male representations in SFF media – and also subverted them:

I think Supernatural is a very masculine show in the way that you have these dudes who drink beer, they will listen to rock music, and they have a great car and they kick ass. And I love that. But it's not very often that you see men expressing their feelings. And sure, they struggle a lot and they hide a lot of things from each other. But there has been, in my opinion, many great moments that they have let themselves be truthful and vulnerable and share what they feel. And I think that's something you don't really see. – Anna R.

Even though I'd been watching the show since I was 16 years old, I hadn't considered how the show framed masculinity. Anna's point prompted me to bring up a video essay I'd previously encountered called "The Fantastic Masculinity of Newt Scamander". The video proposed that unlike most other brash and violent fantasy heroes, Newt Scamander, protagonist of the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise, was empathetic, kind and emotional. Consequently, he offered a positive representation of masculinity (Pop Culture Detective, 2017). Talking to Anna, I connected both points as I thought out loud:

You see a very specific kind of hero in most of the media that we consume. So it's not just with women's representations, it's with men's representations as well. There's just one way to be a man, I guess. Or a heroic figure. – Parinita (MF Episode 5)

Through our analysis, we were able to dissect how although there are more versions of how to be men as compared to how to be women in mainstream media, they still perpetuated a very singular idea of what it means to be a successful man. This, in turn, influences boys and men in the audience. Anna pointed out that ideally we shouldn't be surprised when media shows us vulnerable men. But because of the dominant narratives, we're provoked to point out the few examples which do exist.

In the fan podcasts we listened to as well as on *Marginally Fannish* episodes, positive examples of diverse representations signified the kinds of stories and characters we wanted to see more of. Our recommendations brought together multiple interests. Different fans offered unique interpretations, adding to the collective pool of knowledge that people have access to. These recommendations created an alternative space beyond the one offered by mainstream media. Sharing our analyses of what we liked about specific characters and media helped us collectively envision a world – both fictional and real – where such representations were more normalised.

3.4 Fan critiques as public pedagogy

Critical literacy involves analysing texts to understand the author's position and intent, why the text was written from a particular perspective, and why certain perspectives were included or excluded (McLeod and Vasinda, 2008). Dialogue

between different groups of people encourages the development of critical literacies (Endres, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2009; Luke, 2012; Patterson et al., 2016; Shor, 1999). In digital spaces, people collectively create interpretations through their interactions with each other (Burgess et al., 2006). According to Gounari (2009), the fact that this happens in the public sphere beyond formal educational contexts makes critical literacy both more accessible and more empowering as people become agents in their own education.

Fan texts are ripe with subversive potential. Through their fan works, fans are able to respond to media and critique its decisions (Molinsky, 2017a; Thomas, 2011). As Luke noted, critical literacies go beyond institutionally approved canonical and literary texts. Analysing popular texts can not only identify the forces which allow the cultural exclusion and marginalisation of groups but also work on inclusive practices that engage with “the histories, identities, and struggles faced by groups marginalized on the basis of difference of gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation” (Luke, 2012: p. 7-8). Fans from groups which are underrepresented or misrepresented in popular media use their personal experiences and political opinions to highlight their perspectives (Garcia, 2016; Pande, 2017; Rosenblatt and Tushnet, 2015).

In the public pedagogical sites of online fan communities, the diversity of fans means that fans encounter ideas which they may otherwise not have considered. Fans from both dominant and marginalised groups can learn from these new encounters and discuss issues from different viewpoints (Jenkins, 2006; 2012a; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018; Meggers, 2012). Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) urged educators to embrace relational knowledge which emerges through interactions amongst people from diverse backgrounds. He argued that bringing together these differences in identities leads to a richer pedagogy.

Podcasts offer opportunities for collaborative literacy by including diverse voices and multiple perspectives of both hosts and guests (Bianchi-Pennington, 2018; Day et al., 2017; Kinkaid et al., 2019). Many fan podcasts regularly featured guests who brought their own knowledges to inform the conversation. People’s different skills and interpretations brought forward new readings and understandings. In a survey of fan podcast listeners, *Witch, Please* co-host Hannah McGregor found that collectively revisiting favourite media allowed fans to actively reflect on their interpretations. It also allowed people to encounter them anew, where they could notice new details and develop different interpretations of characters/events. The collective and public engagement with these texts allowed people to arrive at more complex and nuanced understandings – ideas they may not have otherwise considered (McGregor, 2019).

Fan critiques aren’t just directed at mainstream media texts but also at other fan texts. Fan podcasts can offer learning experiences for the hosts when listeners critique or challenge something they have said.

Women of Harry Potter is an offshoot of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. Here, the co-hosts Vanessa Zoltan and Arianna Nedelman deliberately chose different female characters within the books to analyse and celebrate in ways which the original

podcast format didn't leave room for. However, several episodes into this project, they received a call from a listener who criticised the fact that the hosts hadn't discussed how 2 of the male protagonists – Harry Potter and Ron Weasley – had treated 2 female characters of colour – Parvati and Padma Patil – as disposable in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Vanessa and Arianna admitted that they hadn't even noticed this and attributed this to their bias as white women who focused on other white female characters. They appreciated that the listener's critique had brought this to their attention. In response, they kicked off a mini-series which featured 3 female characters of colour in the books and invited fans of colour as guests to talk about their own perspectives of these characters (Zoltan and Nedelman 2019b; 2019c; 2019d).

Such feedback can highlight hitherto unknown blind-spots. For Marcelle Kosman, the other co-host of *Witch, Please*, responding to listener critiques has been both a challenging and enlightening experience – one which caused her to interrogate her own privileges and biases (McGregor, 2019). By talking back to dominant media – both mainstream and fannish – fans call for more authentic and three-dimensional representations of marginalised identities (McArthur, 2016). By being public about both the critique and their ignorance, both the *Witch, Please* and *Women of Harry Potter* hosts created an opportunity to educate themselves and others.

Booth (2015) proposed that fandom acts as an important space for learning. Fan spaces offer opportunities for people to think critically, to share complex and nuanced conversations and interpretations, and to challenge established norms and values. Such critical pedagogies may not be intentionally structured as an educational pursuit but they are valuable nonetheless (ibid). As I describe below, this was evident in *Marginally Fannish* episodes too. Hellekson and Busse (2006) believed that much in the way academics do, fans must be willing to constantly renegotiate their interpretations in light of new information. For me and my co-participants, encountering diverse viewpoints within the context of online fandom helped us re-evaluate our interpretations not only of the fictional text but also our own experiences. Pande (2017) found that fans engaged in self-reflexive and critical examinations of their own biases while discussing issues of representation in media and fandom. Recording episodes and engaging in dialogue with diverse groups of people helped us develop and demonstrate critical thinking, provided opportunities for self-reflexivity, and allowed us to question our own beliefs, assumptions and worldviews (Feria-Galicia, 2011).

3.4.1 Learning from fan criticisms

Throughout the course of researching and recording podcast episodes for *Marginally Fannish*, access to different interpretations helped me better articulate my own opinions. The process sometimes even changed my views about something in light of new information or perspectives. I had loved the movie *Wonder Woman*. It was the first time I'd watched a superhero movie which centred a woman's perspective. However, **Lisa**, a female fan and fighter, was not overly impressed by the film. She acknowledged that it had played an important role for many women – like me and a few of my co-participants (MF Episodes 2 - Part 2 and

5) – who had left the movie feeling empowered. But to Lisa, the character felt like it was written for and from the male gaze:

Almost the entire creative team were men. The writer was a man, the producers were men. A lot of that movie is extremely male-gazey in the sense that it again centres the man's perspective of what the Amazons are. And as I said, it makes her very non-threatening to dudes. [...] I did not see myself as a fighting woman anywhere on that movie except on Themyscira. That's where I saw myself. And then once they left the island, I just saw someone who was being led around the nose by the guys. Wonder Woman did it first, Black Panther did it right. Because the women in Black Panther were fully-realised human beings who were warriors in very different ways. – Lisa (MF Episode 11)

Lisa displayed critical literacies by not only analysing *Wonder Woman* but by also comparing and contrasting it with another movie – *Black Panther* – that featured women warriors. She decoded the narrative to understand the author's position and intent. In the process, she proposed why the text was written from a particular perspective, and why certain perspectives were included or excluded. She also provided an example of a more positive representation to highlight the gaps in *Wonder Woman's* portrayal.

By providing access to different perspectives, fan critiques and analysis act as public pedagogy. Lisa's criticisms offered me an alternative perspective and influenced my own reading of the movie. Thanks to our conversation, I realised other shortcomings in terms of how the movie exceptionalised a lone woman hero rather than featuring a community of women. In turn, I shared my changed opinion in another episode (MF Episode 19). I was able to acquire more insight and more effectively question established cultural and social norms after we discussed topics together. Revisiting favourite texts, characters and worlds informed by Lisa's perspectives helped challenge and expand my own.

Apart from personal priorities, fan analyses also respond to larger cultural arguments and events since their interpretations and understandings don't occur in a void. Navigating such issues in a public sphere can act as another source of education about different identities. This was especially relevant during the period my co-participants and I recorded *Marginally Fannish* episodes. We were making the podcast in the wake of J. K. Rowling's tweets and statements in 2019 and 2020. A significant proportion of *Harry Potter* fans (among other people) perceived these messages to be transphobic (Gardner, 2021; Romano, 2020). All the fan podcasts I initially chose to include in my field site, as well as some other fan texts I discovered later, distanced themselves from these statements and reiterated their support for the trans community (Anelli et al., 2019; *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, 2019; 2020; Molinsky, 2020). I explore how this impacted my understanding of feminism, transness and transphobia in Chapter 6 and the emotional ramifications on fans in Chapter 9. Here, I want to focus on how this informed our interpretation of canonical elements in the Potterverse.

Critical analysis is an ongoing process which shifts and expands in light of new information. J. K. Rowling's out-of-canon tweets informed how some fans reread

textual elements that they had previously considered innocuous. **Lorrie**, a fellow cisgender *Harry Potter* fan, and I met to plan our episode about the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise, a prequel to the *Harry Potter* series. Over the course of our planning, Lorrie shared her discomfort about revisiting the Boggart scene in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* in light of Rowling's messages.

In the scene in question, a classroom lesson involves Professor Remus Lupin teaching Harry and his classmates to face a Boggart and learn how to defeat it. A Boggart is a magical creature that turns into your deepest fear. The only way to defeat it is to confront it with laughter by transforming your fear into something funny. Neville Longbottom's biggest fear happens to be Professor Snape – a bullying Hogwarts teacher – something his Boggart dutifully turns into. In response – and aided by Lupin's suggestions – Neville transforms his Boggart so that Snape ends up wearing Neville's grandmother's clothes. The readers are positioned to find this as funny and bizarre as the protagonists do.

While Lorrie and I didn't get an opportunity to explore this in our episode conversation (MF Episode 12), she did share a blog post she had written which expanded on her feelings:

Rowling's tweet changes my reading. It makes me think that it was the author's prejudices, more than the character, that were responsible for the gratuitous direction that Lupin's teaching takes. – Lorrie (Kim, 2019a)

When I brought up this interpretation with another co-participant, **Tam** also found an alternative interpretation in this scene – an interpretation which specifically responded to Rowling's messages:

I mean it now seems very telling that the first place she went with that was man in a dress. The fact that she thinks that's inherently humiliating and hilarious. – Tam

In light of these – and other fans' – interpretations, I shared my own realisation that this scene didn't just have transphobic implications but that it was also quite dismissive of gender nonconforming people (MF Episode 16). This wasn't something I had noticed during my prior (multiple) rereads of the book series. However, when I reread the books while recording the podcast, I realised that there were numerous examples where men in dresses were the butt of jokes, something I wouldn't have picked up on unless fellow fans had guided my attention to these themes.

Like me, Tam, a nonbinary SFF fan, was immersed in spaces where reactions to Rowling's tweets were an ongoing feature. In light of these discussions, we were able to turn a more critical gaze to the *Harry Potter* books. In our episode, we interrogated other transphobic implications within the series. Tam pointed at the limited use of the Polyjuice Potion in the books, a magical concoction which helps people physically transform into someone else for a limited time:

The ability to change appearance and change gender but the fact that you can only copy someone else. You can't use it to become a new person. You have to use it to become a copy of someone who already exists. It's

interesting because it could very easily be written in a way that is trans-inclusive and is positive. But instead it's like people have a sort of inherent essence and if they ever stop taking their medicine, they will revert back to that essence. It's very gender essentialist. – Tam (MF Episode 16)

As the 3 of us pointed out, our readings were explicitly influenced by Rowling's tweets. Lorrie and Tam used the context of these messages to outline the different ways in which transphobia was upheld in the series canon. Fictional elements which may not have been analysed before became a way to collectively decode texts and raise awareness about larger social issues.

3.4.2 Insights emerging via conversations

In some instances, talking about different elements in favourite media resulted in new ways of understanding characters or narratives. Such critical insights emerged through collective analysis. **Anna R.**, a *Harry Potter* fan, was conflicted about the canonical portrayal of Molly Weasley in the books. On the one hand, Anna thought that Molly's maternal tendencies were something Harry needed to make up for the abuse he met at the hand of his adoptive family, the Dursleys. On the other hand, she pointed out that Molly was constantly stuck in the domestic sphere which meant that she wasn't recognised as a powerful witch in her own right:

She's clearly a very talented witch because first of all, she can handle 5 children so that makes her a hero already in my eyes. And later on she has that amazing scene [where she kills Bellatrix Black, one of the primary antagonists who was about to attack Molly's daughter Ginny] [...] And I was like if that's what happens when she's angry right now [...] imagine what else she could have done or how useful she could have been in a battle and not stuck behind making I don't know sausages and whatever she was making all the time. – Anna R.

In response, I pointed at an episode of *Women of Harry Potter*. I cited the hosts' analysis of Molly Weasley as well as my own knowledge of real-world examples of activism and resistance in India. These counter-examples challenged the gendered notions of heroism where a fighter is considered a hero whereas a caretaker isn't. Such ideas imply that only traditionally male versions of heroism are valid. Instead, the episode highlighted how Molly's more traditionally feminine actions – caretaking, counselling, cooking – were equally worthy of being celebrated since they also contributed to the resistance movement (Zoltan and Nedelman, 2019e). When I drew attention to this perspective, Anna agreed and even bolstered the point with her own contribution which expanded her reading of the character and the importance of Molly's more domestic attributes:

As you said, you can choose not to go to the battle-front or whatever like Mrs. Weasley stayed back. But don't dismiss her and not appreciate what she does just because it's something that she will do every day for you because she's your mum or your wife or whoever [...] There has been times you know Ron or someone will be snappy towards Mrs. Weasley because she's being herself and she is watching out for her kids. They're like, "Oh

we have more important things to do.” Yeah right. If you don’t eat, I’d like to see you try do any of those things. – Anna R. (MF Episode 5)

Anna and I not only responded to each other’s perspectives but also referred to other ideas we had come across in fan texts, news, current events and other sources which informed our opinion. We synthesised this information and placed it in conversation with our own experiences as we built a more nuanced understanding of the character we were discussing and the larger real-world norms she reflected. By drawing on multiple sources – including our different perspectives – we co-created new ways of understanding a topic.

Different episodes where my co-participants and I discussed specific media and themes provided opportunities to make unexpected connections between our topic of discussion and our prior knowledge. One person sharing their experience often triggered the memory of another. In our episodes, **Aparna, Sanjana** and I usually listed some of our favourite fictional examples of the different identities we were exploring. While planning our episode on representations of social class, Sanjana brought up a representation she had liked in the *Magnus Chase* book series by Rick Riordan, a portrayal I had appreciated as well. But it was only when we were actually recording our episode that I saw a problem with this recommendation:

Sanjana: Another example [...] is Magnus Chase who’s homeless. Even his friends subsequently are. That never gets done. I’ve never met the main character of the story being homeless. I’ve never encountered that. That was done nicely.

Parinita: But you know saying that, when I was thinking about this some more, because even Percy Jackson – he comes from a single mother household and not too much money [...] But within the books themselves, that’s very brief, both Magnus and Percy’s lack of money. Because after that, once they discover their magical heritage, the lack of money doesn’t really act as a problem. It’s similar to Luke and Rey in Star Wars where they start off as these poor people and they come from impoverished backgrounds but when they come into their heritage, they realise that oh they have all this power. They have all this access – both family and otherwise. (MF Episode 22)

To prepare for this episode, we had exchanged some fan texts which critiqued the depiction of ruling classes in different science fiction and fantasy worlds (Kosman and McGregor, 2020a; Stubby the Rocket, 2020; Toase, 2020; Tropedia, no date). These texts went on to influence my thinking about different social classes during our conversation. During the episode, when Sanjana recommended the representations of poverty which had provided her with a helpful new perspective, my rebuttal drew on the points raised by the fan texts we had read. They helped me problematise our choices and gain a better understanding of class issues in different contexts.

My point about poverty being used as a temporary narrative device prompted Sanjana and Aparna to critically analyse the fan reactions to one of their other choice of recommendations. They pointed out how Buffy in the TV show *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer had to take on a minimum wage job to look after herself and her sister after their mother died. This led to a conversation about which identities and experiences were deemed acceptable and which weren't:

Sanjana: What was interesting was the way in which fans reacted.

Aparna: Yes!

Sanjana: To Buffy having to work and waitress and make ends meet.

Aparna: People are very dismissive of that season [...] In that, "Oh we have to see her personal problems." Like teenage angst is okay but seeing her have to deal with daily problems that we are dealing with [...] we don't want to hear. (MF Episode 22)

A singular critical pedagogue wasn't necessary to help us critically analyse norms. The umbrella of diverse media representations allowed us to explore, analyse and critique different kinds of perspectives and structures – both in media as well as fandom. Different fan conversations shed light on previously unremarked on aspects within the fictional world. Our collective analysis of different identities brought different ideas to the forefront. Accessing other people's perspectives helped hone our own. In turn, this prompted critical reflections and resulted in a more nuanced understanding of diverse identities.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter illustrated the collective knowledge-making processes evident in fan spaces, specifically in the context of fan podcasts. Fans' love for their favourite fictional worlds and characters offers opportunities for a critical education. By encountering diverse viewpoints, people are better able to unpack mainstream media representations. While this kind of education and the kind which occurs in more traditional institutions may share some positive similarities, there is also a tension within and between these two contexts. Nevertheless, fans from different backgrounds apply recognisably academic approaches to their favourite media texts and make them relevant to their diverse contexts. By closely analysing their favourite media as well as citing, synthesising and summarising diverse sources of information, fans provide reasoned rationale for their theories and arguments.

Fans put together their own curriculum-in-process by choosing which media to dissect and what components to analyse within them. Since popular media tend to attract fans from a diverse range of backgrounds, these elements can speak to a wide range of interests. When fans inhabiting specific identities draw on their own experiences and knowledges to analyse how these identities are represented, they can more easily spot and highlight patterns which together tell a very specific kind of story about their backgrounds – both positive and negative. By spotlighting those representations which subvert otherwise limited tropes, fans draw attention to a more complex picture of different identities.

Since fan spaces include a broad range of criticisms, people can access these in order to form, expand and even change their own opinions about different media. New information about a fictional world, fictional characters or their creators can

result in new forms of analysis and interpretations. Conversations among fans with different interpretations and opinions can influence participants' own thinking and encourage new insights to emerge. A wide range of resources and strategies can be found in fannish contexts, all of which contribute to a dynamic and creative learning environment.

Chapter 4 “Looking At Things With A More Critical Eye”: Balancing Love And Critique In Fandom

4.1 Introduction

I haven't always appreciated criticisms about my favourite media. When I was younger, I thought that the things I loved were perfect and nobody was allowed to say anything negative about them. The only criticisms I encountered then seemed to be from anti-fans – people who loved to hate popular media. A few years ago, I began encountering fan texts – Tumblr posts, Facebook threads, other social media commentary – where the fans obviously cared very deeply about our shared favourite fictional worlds and characters. They used their knowledge and passion to critically analyse gaps left in the source text and came up with their own explanations and critiques. I found these ideas fascinating; no less because they made me interrogate elements I'd never questioned before.

The more I read these fan texts, the more I realised how much fun such explorations of imperfections could be. They didn't take away from the original source material but expanded it and made it better. It was just another expression of fannishness. More recently, I've loved being able to learn about different fans' real-world experiences through the ways in which they critique shortcomings in the text. These criticisms have allowed me to expand my own thinking about media representations. Why shouldn't there be a black or desi or mixed-race Doctor in charge of the TARDIS? How would disabled students navigate Hogwarts? Why can't an all-women superhero team save the universe? The questions these critiques encouraged me to ask made my experiences as a fan much more enriching.

This chapter explores the different ways in which fans are able to balance both love and critique when it comes to their favourite fictional worlds and characters:

- The first section discusses the importance of emotions in critical analysis. Fans become comfortable with critiquing their favourite media in different ways. Being emotionally invested in characters and their own diverse identities aids them in this process
- In the next section, I further explore what makes these critiques possible. While the texts and characters fans love may be imperfect, it's these imperfections that enable readings which expand both the diversity of the world and people's imaginations. I write about what most resonated with me and some of my co-participants about the parallels between what fans and religious people do to make sure their different canons speak to their own concerns and priorities
- Finally, I focus on showing how fans demand better from their favourite fictional characters and worlds. In their journey towards critique, fans come to their own conclusions regardless of authorial intent. In-depth analyses of beloved characters helps fans develop interpretations which extend these characters beyond official canon. By bringing a diverse range of priorities to the fore, such explorations bring new knowledge to light

4.2 Emotionally invested in critical analysis

In the 21st century, media is nearly inescapable in many parts of the world. This amount of media exposure unwittingly influences people in different ways. Buckingham (2015a) argued that audiences are not always critical and reflective about the media they consume. People who possess critical literacy skills are better positioned to identify these media manipulations. According to Wohlwend and Lewis (2011), critical literacy encompasses both an analytical and playful stance where the readers are resistant but also draw on their emotional responses and connections. They proposed that participation and interaction based on intense emotional connections can uncover ideologies within the texts.

In online fan spaces, fans participate in communities around shared interests, create and read multimodal texts, and encounter people from different backgrounds with multiple knowledges (Ito et al., 2009). Critical literacies develop in different ways through such interactions. The act of creating fan texts implies a love for the source text. But another reason many of these fan texts exist is because fans find something important missing in their favourite fictional worlds; something they're determined to explore themselves (Jenkins, 2012a; Rosenblatt and Tushnet, 2015). Multimodal fan texts can playfully challenge dominant representations and beliefs and raise critical questions and reflections.

Many fans can balance their love of the text with critique about elements that disappointed them (Diffrient, 2010). A survey of fan podcast listeners found that many of them enjoyed critiques of media they loved, reinforcing the belief that it is possible to both love and criticise a favourite text without diminishing the impact of either (McGregor, 2019). As I show below, my co-participants and I found opportunities to critique our favourite media texts without this dampening the pleasure we received from the original text. Gainer believed that such engagements "open space for pleasure as well as critique, and even the pleasure of critique" (2007: p. 113).

Tisha Turk pointed out that while criticism and enthusiasm are often framed to be on opposite ends of the spectrum, fans can love a text or be heavily invested in a text and use this connection to critique it (in Coppa et al., 2017). Pangrazio (2016) proposed that the emotion evoked by texts isn't a weakness for critical disposition. Rather, this emotion makes the text more meaningful for the individual concerned; this emotional connection can be a powerful method of critique in digital contexts. According to Hansal and Gunderson (2020), love for something can provide quite a realistic motivation for critique, particularly for those people who have been otherwise marginalised or misrepresented in the media, fandom, or academic field they love. The co-hosts of *Woke Doctor Who*, for example, asserted their right to criticise both *Doctor Who* and *Harry Potter* because of their fannish investment in both worlds (Eugenia and Toya, 2019b). One of the reasons my co-participants and I didn't shy away from critiquing the limitations of our favourite media, especially when the representations didn't match our own desires, is precisely *because we loved the text and wanted it to be better*. The critique emerges in the context of deep emotional investment (Hansal and Gunderson, 2020).

The *Witch, Please* hosts have frequently spoken about the pleasure of critique. They believe that cultural criticism involves identifying problematic elements of favourite texts. As feminist critics, they have to contend with the fact that while watching or reading their favourite media, they can't turn off the part of their brain that identifies problematic representations and storylines. The problems don't necessarily make the texts bad; they just make them worth discussing (Kosman and McGregor, 2016a). Similarly, for me and my co-participants on *Marginally Fannish* – imperfect representations didn't stand in the way of loving or recommending them; we were able to balance both love and critique.

Of course, it goes without saying that whereas the people mentioned in this chapter do enjoy the critical aspects of fandom, this is not a universal experience (see Chapter 10). The fan experiences and priorities I write about – both here and in the rest of the thesis – may not reflect many other people's relationships with their favourite media or within fandom.

4.2.1 Growing more comfortable with critique

Fans love their favourite media and delight in talking about the things they enjoyed. In such contexts of enthusiasm and fannishness, critical analysis isn't a skill which emerges comfortably, if at all. When **Rita** first entered online fan spaces as a teenager, critical analysis and engagement were rarer than they are today. Subsequently, she didn't spend a lot of time thinking critically about the media she loved:

When you start critiquing these literatures that you grew up loving, you just ... I don't know either it really shatters you and depresses you for a while. Or you – no, it's not an or – what follows is you start looking at things with a more critical eye in the future. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

She acknowledged that critiquing favourite media – especially ones which played a formative role in your childhood – can be quite difficult. At the same time, she pointed out that acquiring this critical gaze equipped her – and other fans like me – to better unpack the messages in different media as an adult.

For most fans, this comfort with critiquing beloved worlds and characters doesn't happen instantly; rather it is an ongoing process which, for me and some co-participants, began in fandom. It took me awhile to be able to appreciate the critical insights which challenged and expanded texts – and my own thinking. More recently, discussions on fan podcasts have been crucial in enabling me to critically analyse my favourite media. This critical orientation, where I can question received information in canon as well as the author's intent, is something I'm still learning through fandom. **Aparna** and **Sanjana**, my friends and co-hosts, shared their own fannish journeys where they went from uncritically loving their favourite media to now wanting to critically analyse it:

As a fan I've generally evolved a little bit in the last few years. And I've started being more critical of the things I love instead of just looking at them with blind adoration. – Aparna

[...]

A lot of the times when we read stuff, we just – we love it at first sight because you fall in love with the characters without actually looking at anything else. And it's a lot of fun to go back and reread and then find little things that you probably missed at first glance. – Sanjana (MF Episode 1)

Both of them hoped that participating in the podcast would allow them to continue balancing this love and critique. Throughout our episodes, encountering critical fan perspectives developed our abilities to revisit our favourite books, movies and TV shows and be able to identify their flaws. Accessing other people's perspectives allowed us to form a more informed opinion and articulate our own thoughts and ideas.

A balance of love and critique was also something **Anna R.**, a young media fan, only gradually acquired:

It took me a while to be able to criticise the things I loved and obsessed about because I thought that I had to like everything that I read or I saw. And take what I'm seeing as something that's right. And eventually I got to a point of accepting and understanding why other people are calling things out that are not okay. And I think I'm growing as a person from that experience alone. – Anna R.

She described how her participation in online fandom allowed her to grow more comfortable with critiquing the media she loved – something she didn't initially think of doing, but something which ended up adding to her enjoyment of her favourite media. One of Anna's fan text suggestions for our episode was the essay "Supernatural: A History of Violence Against Women" (Exorcising Emily, 2015) which documented all that the female characters in the TV show *Supernatural* had gone through over its long run. While Anna loved the show and made a lot of meaningful connections in its online fandom (see Chapter 7), she couldn't help but become enraged by its treatment of female characters:

I started seeing this pattern of how women were treated. I'm not saying that it's that they died in the show, because everyone dies. The main characters have died like a thousand times. So that's not my issue. It's the way they die every time. – Anna R.

Anna's love of the show encouraged her repeated viewings of it which in turn helped her identify problematic patterns. She shared her outrage of a character's disability being weaponised against her:

Eileen is one of my favourite characters and the way she was killed in [...] season 12, it was so brutal and so awful because she's a deaf hunter. And by mistake, she kills someone. And they send a hellhound after her. A hellhound is a dog from hell that you cannot see, you can only hear. And what you send something that cannot be seen to a deaf woman who cannot hear it to take her apart. And it was a 10 second death scene. You didn't even see it. That made me so angry. – Anna R. (MF Episode 5)

Her emotional investment in the character and show resulted in more intersectional considerations and critiques. While reading the essay and discussing these issues with her, I realised that when I had watched the series when I was

Anna's age, I hadn't been able to articulate these problems since I didn't critically engage with media then the way I do now. The collective intelligence of fandom helped make up for our initial lack of understanding. Encountering explicit critiques of favourite media influenced our thinking about them as well as other popular culture texts.

4.2.2 Criticism through connections with characters and identities

For some fans, their emotional attachments to their favourite fictional characters is born out of a deep connection to their own identities. This acts as a crucial motivator which allows them to interrogate messages in media and demand better forms of representation. **Diana**, a white queer fan, drew on their own experiences as they described the "bury your gay" trope in media (Brigida and Foster, 2018):

There will be oftentimes 1 or 2 queer characters in a larger sea of cis-hetero characters. And oftentimes you'll be made to love them or appreciate them or even you're just super excited because there's a glimpse of queerness. And then they are killed – oftentimes very violently. And so that's where this bury your gays idea comes from. – Diana

Diana used the lens of their identity to identify problems in mainstream representations. This analysis also drew attention to which characters – and which identities – were considered important and which ones were considered disposable in fictional media. On account of being a queer person, Diana was able to recognise these patterns since they were personally invested in seeing their identity reflected in multiple and nuanced ways in media.

As someone who is cisgender and heterosexual, I wouldn't have thought about this trope had other fans not highlighted its prevalence. In turn, this allowed me to apply this lens to representations of other identities too. When discussing how other identities were represented or even while watching/reading new stories, I now can't help but notice how many characters of colour are similarly sacrificed to propel the stories of white characters in Western media; female characters killed at the expense of male characters; and disabled characters killed to contribute to non-disabled characters' narrative arcs. In our episode, Diana was also thinking along similar lines:

It's interesting to me that bury your gays got a lot of attention and has a specific name too when there are also documented trends of characters of colour who are killed off as well. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Even though fans may be invested in their particular identities, this identification doesn't necessarily stop there. Being able to understand how negative tropes harm a segment of the population can raise awareness about similar harm done to other marginalised groups of people. Of course, as Diana highlighted here, even in this context, the struggles of some marginalised identities receive more attention than others – something I explore more in Chapter 9.

Lisa, a fan and a fighter, cared about how female fighters were represented in SFF media. She strongly identified with characters who were portrayed as warriors – some of whom, like the comic book superhero Mockingbird, had had a huge impact

on her sense of self (see Chapter 3). However, Lisa was frustrated by the stereotypical route most representations seemed content to take:

There's this holy trinity of tropes for female fighters which is the cold, ice maiden [...] There's the willowy femme fatale who kills by stealth [...] And then there's the man but without the male genitalia character. And those seem to be the 3 that you get all the time. You don't get a lot of fully-realised women that I would recognise like I have fought that person or I know that person. A lot of my female friends are women warriors. – Lisa

Lisa wanted to recognise complex and nuanced characters in the representations she saw in ways which reflected the multiplicity of experiences she knew from her own life and community. Her personal priorities and knowledge became tools which enabled her critical insights. Subsequently, Lisa was able to challenge the simplistic narratives such representations offered. Much like Diana and Anna above, this analysis wasn't restricted to her own identity. As a white woman, she brought up instances of how female warriors of colour were stereotyped in different harmful ways:

There's huge issues with race around this because of the way that black women and black women warriors are often portrayed [...] Often people who are not white are either portrayed as sneaky or underhanded [...] And then women of darker skin colours like Latinx women and black women, East Asian women are very often seen as brutish. With this issue, you get so many intersectional problems. You get the intersection of sexuality and gender and race and class and culture – it's this huge stew. – Lisa (MF Episode 11)

By highlighting diverse instances of marginalisation which were based on her own observations, knowledge and identities, Lisa presented critical insights about such representations and demanded better from media texts at large.

4.3 The limitations and possibilities of imperfect texts

In the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, the hosts and the listening community commit to reading the *Harry Potter* books as a sacred text much as religious people might (re)read their religious texts. While neither of the then-hosts – Casper ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan – were religious, they used the framework of the books and practices from different religions to ask hard questions from the text and to reflect on their own lives and societies (Dennis, 2018). The co-hosts proposed that there was a difference between sacred and perfect texts. A perfect text left no room for questions and debates; its emphasis on a single truth meant there was no room for readers to develop and expand it. On the other hand, a sacred text allowed people to acknowledge the imperfections within it in ways which invited different truths and interpretations. According to them, a sacred text was generative i.e. it invited more responses and texts, and was therefore never complete. They treated *Harry Potter* as a sacred, imperfect text which was open to diverse perspectives and multiple interpretations (Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2016b).

Drawing on their explanation, I began to see all media texts as imperfect and appreciated the possibilities their imperfections left room for. No text can be the perfect everything to everybody. The very representations some love, others will hate – even among fans hailing from similar backgrounds (see Chapter 9). Imperfect texts invite fans to engage in in-depth analysis about characters and gaps in the text. Talking about what different fans consider to be imperfections can help people consider things they hadn't previously thought about. Conversations about problematic elements can be invaluable sources of critical education.

Exploring the gaps in imperfect texts allows fans from a diverse range of backgrounds to make the texts their own. It's the different ways in which fans – including my co-participants and I – interpret and respond to texts which highlight what issues matter to them/us. What do fans like? What do they dislike? What do they want to see more of? What do they want to be better? These answers vary. It's this variety – the multiple perspectives and diverse opinions – which enable fans to bring their own priorities to the forefront and learn from each other. This critical engagement is born out of love for their favourite fictional characters and worlds.

I'm not religious. However, I did have at least 2 co-participants who were – **Anna M.** and **Ziv** – with whom I was going to explore religious representations in media. My lack of knowledge about religious perspectives meant that I was initially at a loss when it came to fan text suggestions for them. I didn't know enough about either paganism/Wicca or Judaism to be able to make the appropriate recommendations for them. At the same time, I was listening to the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* and *Imaginary Worlds* podcasts, among others. I turned to their episode list to see if there were any which would help aid my understanding of religious perspectives. I found that a few of their episodes drew parallels between religion and fandom in ways which resonated with me as a non-religious person. These episodes influenced my thinking and choice of fan texts with both Anna and Ziv. I decided to recommend fan texts which made sense to my own perspectives as an atheist fan and hoped that both of them would fill in some of my gaps in religious knowledge.

In these podcasts, different episodes pointed out that most mainstream religious texts – like most popular SFF texts – were written by a dominant group which privileged specific lives and perspectives. Consequently, canon – both religious and fannish – privileges certain experiences and marginalises others. Which voices are at the fore is a social, cultural, historical and geographical construction. Now we have more religious scholars in different faiths who are looking for those voices which were silenced and marginalised in canonical texts and bringing them to light (Leigh et al., 2018a; Molinsky, 2018a). While tradition often has negative connotations for historically excluded groups of people, there's an increasing number of people on the margins who are reclaiming tradition by reading themselves into stories which previously erased their experiences (Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2019a). Whether it's fandom or religion, this practice sees canon as dynamic rather than static – open to new understandings and expansions.

The *Imaginary Worlds* episode "The Canon Revisited" featured Rabbi Ben Newman, who discussed how the Torah, a key text of Judaism, was the original canon for

Jewish people. He contended that the Torah had many contradictions and inconsistencies because the stories in it were written by multiple people with different philosophies and interests. Historically, Rabbis – i.e. Jewish faith leaders – explored the gaps in the stories and came up with their own interpretations and explanations – these stories are called the Midrash (Molinsky, 2017b). A similar theme was picked up by Rabbi Scott Perlo in his *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* episode. He pointed out that in Judaism, there continue to be debates even among religious scholars of what counts as canon and what doesn't (Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2018b). In a similar vein, Iraqi storyteller and drag queen Amrou Al-Kadhi (2020) has written about their own experiences with fellow queer Muslim people who form reading groups to analyse passages from the Quran for queer possibilities.

The episode "Faiths in Fantasy", featured the creative ways in which Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith leaders put SFF texts and religion in conversation with each other. They also discussed how people used popular culture stories to make meaningful connections with their own lives – similar to how religious people engage with their religious canon (Molinsky, 2018a). Much like me and my co-participants, faith leaders and other religious people who appeared on fan podcasts to talk about these parallels were a self-selecting audience who drew on the intersection of their religious and fan identities. Their fellow adherents may not share these attitudes or interpretations.

Many fan texts – including the fan podcasts I referred to for this project – actively attempt to explore those voices and perspectives which have been silenced or erased in the fictional world as well as real-world religious, social and political structures. In the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* episode "Special Edition: Owl Post and Broderick Greer", Broderick, a member of the Christian clergy, drew parallels between how people from marginalised backgrounds speak back to the Bible, a key text of Christianity, and how this is similar to what fans do with fannish canons. He wondered, "Who [in our culture] is imagined out of stories and who needs to reimagine themselves back into them?" Both in religion and in fandom, inserting their own perspectives into the discourse surrounding the texts becomes a way for people from marginalised groups to talk back to canon in order to make it their own (Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2018a).

4.3.1 Canonical opportunities in fandom and religion

As I mentioned above, the parallels between religion and fandom aren't something I first noticed. It was a theme which cropped up in many of the fan podcasts I listened to, most notably in *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. I'm an atheist with a religious mother. I often struggled to understand how religious people made sense of the world. Stumbling upon these fan-developed theories and parallels provided me with a language to explain my own perspectives through the lens of fandom while talking about religion.

It was also my attempt to find something in common with my religious co-participants. While **Anna M.** was a religious fan and viewed the world through a different lens than I did, some of the parallels between mainstream religions and fandom resonated with both of us. For me, what stood out most was the idea of

people having multiple interpretations of canon – either religious or fannish – based on their own diverse identities. I loved the fact that these diverse perspectives could help people learn about other ways of engaging with the world. Anna was drawn to the idea that placing religion, fantasy and fandom in conversation with each other could result in some compelling questions:

You've got things like people being inspired by Tolkien [...] to have their own religious groups. And things like Jedis and people seeing philosophies portrayed in Star Wars as religions. I think that even without these explicit examples of adapting fantasy into faith, we already believe in fantasy much more than we think we do. Firstly because fantasy leads us to faith. If you think about Doctor Who and how much faith his or her companions place in the Doctor. If you think about the trope of the Chosen One, who is infallible, and we as readers place our faith in that character. Because we know the formula. We know that in the end, they are going to overcome whatever difficulties are thrown their way. Is that enough to supplant more conventional religions? I don't know. But it's an interesting question. – Anna M.

Bringing the themes of religion and fandom together offered us an opportunity to better understand each other's way of viewing the world. The fictional framework provided an imagined context in which to explore these ideas within the fan podcast space. The fan texts we recommended provided a starting point for our conversations about religion and fandom. Fans – including myself – drawing parallels between religion and fandom prompted Anna to articulate the connection between conservative and progressive practices in both religion and fandom. Additionally, as an eclectic pagan in England, she drew on her own religious experiences and knowledge to highlight how different pagan movements were adapting traditions much in the way fans were doing with canon:

At the moment, since sort of the 90s, there are a lot of conversations around how a lot of the pagan traditions are very gender essentialist [...] Luckily enough, certain Wiccan groups and communities and certain other pagan communities are finding ways to work around that. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

Anna pointed out that by expanding the traditions that their own religious movement had taken for granted, groups of pagans were making the religion more open to and inclusive of different identities – again, in ways similar to what groups of fans were doing online.

While I was more familiar with fandom spaces, drawing parallels between fandom and religion encouraged Anna to analyse similar practices within religious contexts. I focused on how fans were reclaiming both canon and tradition while Anna pointed at similar occurrences in the pagan space. A focus on imperfect texts allowed us to analyse both religion and fandom – drawing on the different elements and contexts we both most connected with.

I had a similar experience with **Ziv**, an Orthodox Jewish fan. In our episode, I suggested similar texts and themes owing to my position as a non-religious person talking to a religious fan. Making sense of the world through popular media stories

just felt right to me, a sentiment echoed by fellow atheist/media fan Aparna (MF Episode 13). When I encountered other fans drawing parallels between how religious people use their own religious canon to make meaning in similar ways, again, it very much spoke to my own experiences. While I didn't have a religious canon to turn to, the fictional stories which have been and continue to remain important to me help me understand the real world better too.

When I shared this perspective with Ziv, the idea made sense to him. While I offered an interpretation through a fictional/fannish lens, he added to it with his religious worldview:

I'm connecting with what you're saying about how the way that people analyse stories now – fiction – in order to figure out to a better extent if a character is good, in what way are they good? If somebody was good and then a bad thing happened, is that how things work? The way that people use fiction now in order to talk about morality is really interesting. And I think it's very, very similar to what is done in religion where stories and the interpretations of those stories are a lot of the basis for understanding what is good behaviour. – Ziv

He also drew on the themes from some of the fan podcasts I had suggested, namely how Judaism made room for multiple interpretations. As Ziv described Midrash, in Judaism, these interpretations were a way for people to understand and explain difficulties, discomfort and gaps in the original Jewish canon. This was similar to what fans do in that they interpret texts to better mirror their own experiences, worldviews and identities. However, Ziv also made sure to point out the difference between fandom and religious practices:

My immediate reaction to some of this is that there is still a very fundamental difference between trying to interpret something that you are assuming baseline is true or is meaningful or is divine versus something that an author has written and you know is very likely flawed or has mistakes or just hasn't been completely edited or all kinds of things like that. There's a fundamental difference. But I do agree that the approach of wanting to fix it has a lot of similarities. – Ziv (MF Episode 15)

While there may be similarities between how religious people and fans respond to texts they find meaningful, as Ziv outlined above, their primary assumption concerning these texts inevitably differs. What I found most interesting was how both fans and religious people use these texts. In both instances, some groups may find these texts perfect and beyond judgement whereas others form significant relationships with the text by drawing on the gaps and imperfections they find. It was people's collective interpretations more than the text itself that most resonated with me – the fact that a community of people working together makes these texts and characters meaningful. Both Ziv and I felt strongly about our own beliefs – religious and not. Our episode conversation offered us the opportunity to share our different ideas with each other. Discussions centred around fictional texts and the imperfections we found within them helped us develop a better understanding of how we made sense of the worlds we inhabited.

4.3.2 The upside of fallible fictional media

My co-participants and I spent a large portion of our episodes exploring the gaps in our favourite media – identifying what we considered imperfect/incomplete and then using that to expand the possibilities of the characters and narratives. However, some of my co-participants pointed out that even the imperfect representations themselves – without the kind of interpretations we were creating on the podcast – could be revolutionary. This was especially true for identities which have historically been underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream Western media.

The *Harry Potter* books are largely Eurocentric and populated with white characters. In this context, even a brief glimpse of diversity felt monumental for **Aisha**, a fan of the series from the UAE:

There was one Arab character in [...] the fourth book. There was an Egyptian referee by the name of Mostafa if I'm not mistaken. And it was so exciting that oh my goodness finally there is an Arab character in this whole wizarding world. It was so exciting for us that when me and my cousins got to this point [...] We've been featured! Finally!

In our episode conversation, we did spend some time analysing the Potterverse and its lack of cultural diversity (see Chapter 8). At the same time, since this was a book series Aisha had loved as a teenager and continued to love as an adult, it's something she was still emotionally invested in. Her first encounter with two examples of Arabic representations in a fictional world which meant so much to her was something she still remembered fondly:

I don't know if you remember because it's merely seconds – milliseconds. But when there was a snapshot of Ron's summer vacation in Egypt [...] Ron and his family were wearing Arab clothes. It was merely a second but I remember being really excited in the movie theatre. Finally there's a character who's wearing something similar. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

The inclusion of an Arabic name and Arabic clothes allowed her to recognise and imagine herself in a world she loved – a world which didn't otherwise offer her any representations which reflected her real world. This minimal and superficial diversity nevertheless unlocked meaningful engagements and possibilities. Such possibilities can then invite fans to express creative agency as they find ways to reclaim and reimagine tokenistic representations (see Chapter 7).

Lorrie, a Korean-American fan of the Potterverse, pointed out that no single text could perfectly encapsulate all the diversity which exists in the world. She didn't trust J. K. Rowling to create complex and well-developed characters of colour but acknowledged that she herself would face similar issues if she set out to write about cultures outside her own:

Any book from authors of any culture will show the perspectives of the author and their limitations. It's not like there's some other country or racial identity people can come from where everything is automatically superior and they know how to write every kind of person. – Lorrie

At the same time, Lorrie believed that the limitations of a single author could be overcome when more people contributed to telling the same story. As I explore in other chapters (see Chapters 5 and 9), despite the controversy surrounding the casting and story arc of Nagini in the movie *Crimes of Grindelwald*, Lorrie loved the character. The casting of Korean actress Claudia Kim as the character allowed Lorrie to find herself reflected in the Potterverse and enabled her to interpret Nagini as Korean:

One of the reasons why Nagini as acted, Nagini the character as co-created by the script writers and the actress reads to me as so Korean, is that she acts out the character so much non-verbally with micro-expressions that I recognise from Korean culture. And this is something you can't get in a novel. Or you can if the author is really in tune with that deep, nuanced identification with that kind of character, which we know J. K. Rowling can't do with a lot of people of colour. But if you hire an actress, who's a really good actress, she'll do it for you. – Lorrie (MF Episode 12)

On analysing the scenes with Nagini – both deleted and those present in the movie – Lorrie proposed that by bringing in her own Korean experiences and perspectives, Claudia Kim became a co-creator of the text. This, in turn, expanded the diversity of the text beyond what a single author would be able to do. According to Lorrie, adaptations of a single author's work had the potential to make up for the cultural limitations of both the writer and text.

In another episode, **Sanjana**, an Indian fan and writer, also illustrated how inviting multiple storytellers to tell the same story in different ways can make the texts and the world they represent more inclusive of diverse identities. This practice – both in religion and fandom – challenges a single person/group's authority over the text by collectively reclaiming and reimagining works which people have formed deep, meaningful relationships with. Sanjana drew on her own experience of working with comic books which focused on historical, mythological and religious tales. She had worked on a comic book retelling of Rama's story from the Ramayana, a key text of Hinduism. Her book drew on retellings from different Indian communities and tribes who had made the story their own by focusing on different characters and elements – ones which are backgrounded in the original source text – based on their own interests and identities. They reimagined these stories because the mainstream cultural story was oppressive to their own identity or erased their culture:

A lot of [our readers] wrote back to us saying, "How can you tell these fake Ramayanas? And how can you tell the story of these things?" Except that to everybody in that community, that is as real as it will get. Because it has little bits of their tradition [...] within that Ramayana. There's one – [...] I think it's Gond tribe – where Lakshmana is the main character. And he is the hero of the whole Ramayana. And he's this person who lives in the jungle, one with nature – which is basically how [the Gonds] are. And so they've taken this great epic and made it their own because they've put little bits of their tradition into it. And that's basically what a lot of the fandoms do for you. You take little bits of it and put little bits of yourself in

*it because at the end of the day, you want to see yourself in that story. –
Sanjana*

Sanjana drew a connection between how marginalised groups create counternarratives which respond to their erasure in mainstream portrayals. In these narratives, people exert agency in a society where they have very little power. As she pointed out, these retellings are not universally accepted by everyone in the dominant culture who have not had to employ the same kind of agency to recognise themselves in the stories they engage with – a rejection common in fandom spaces too (Fowler, 2019). Nevertheless, Sanjana highlighted how people in different contexts find ways to tell their stories.

The Ramayana forms a cultural touchstone for diverse populations in India. By sharing her own knowledge and experiences, Sanjana emphasised how retellings which place different perspectives at the forefront can help people look at old stories in new ways. Retellings can explore missing gaps and limited viewpoints of these existing stories. By bringing different perspectives to the forefront, they allow people – both writers and audiences – to actively think about taken-for-granted notions. By altering the focus on different characters, settings, and plots, these retellings can make different themes relevant to a range of social, cultural and political contexts. This example focuses on religion but I explore its prevalence in fandom in Chapter 7.

4.4 Demanding better from favourite characters and worlds

Being a part of a fan community can help fans develop critical and interpretative skills where fans collaboratively construct meanings which go beyond the information presented in the source text (Jenkins, 2012a). In such an environment, fans are not isolated and passive recipients of media and information but actively shape their interactions with the media and with each other (Bruns, 2008). The kind of learning which happens in fandom is creative, collaborative and playful – all of which promote critical thinking (Booth, 2015). Like other fans, my co-participants and I challenged the ideas and representations provided in the source text and explored cultures which are either underrepresented or superficially represented (Garcia, 2016).

Critical literacy involves active participation from readers as they investigate how established sociocultural ideologies of both the text and the reader impact the interpretation process (Bonsor Kurki, 2015). A critical public pedagogy analyses popular culture texts to reveal dominant ideologies and challenge the marginalisation of certain perspectives (Giroux, 2000). Queer media fans look for subtext in their favourite worlds and queer the canon in order to find themselves represented in media which otherwise excludes their experiences. The co-hosts of *Witch, Please* argued that queering the canon doesn't necessarily mean reading characters as gay; rather it is a form of resistance against the heteronormative structure of the text and the world. Such interventions seek to identify and highlight voices which have been erased (Kosman and McGregor, 2020b).

Conversations with different people can enable people to read the world critically and identify the ways in which media representations are created in and respond

to particular historical, social, cultural and political contexts (McArthur, 2016). A few fans of the *Harry Potter* series analysed the character of Hermione Granger and came to critique the imperialistic tone in her activism (I expand on this below). They went on to discuss how she could be a better ally to the house-elves instead of riding roughshod over their views and feelings. These fans emphasised that they expected Hermione to do better because they loved her character (Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Kosman and McGregor, 2015a; 2015b; Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2019b). Similarly, in *Marginally Fannish* episodes, our close-reading involved a critical as well as a creative engagement with the text and both worked together to enhance the meaning-making process (Kelley and Jenkins, 2013).

By analysing favourite texts through the lens of their own identities, fans can highlight diverse cultural perspectives and problems. In a *Women of Harry Potter* episode, guest Bayana Davis focused on Angelina Johnson, a black female character in the *Harry Potter* books. Bayana analysed incidents featuring this character to discuss the real-life politics of black womanhood. She noted that the only explicit example of real-world racism in the books occurred when Pansy Parkinson, a white character, sneered that Angelina looked like she had worms coming out from her hair. As a black fan, Bayana used her own cultural experiences to identify this reference to Angelina's dreadlocks and articulate the racially-coded language it reflected. Bayana pointed out that the narrative played off Pansy's comment as an offhanded insult; it didn't delve into the racist implications (Zoltan and Nedelman, 2019b).

How and what kind of critical literacy develops is based on the reader's personal contexts (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004; Luke, 2012; Peters and Lankshear, 1996). People's personal, social, cultural, political and historical backgrounds influence the ways in which they interpret texts (Bonsor Kurki, 2015; Curwood, 2013; Kellner and Share, 2006). The social categories you belong to such as your gender, sexual orientation, race and age play a role in how you understand texts. Fans can't help but insert their beliefs and ideologies into both the texts they read as well as the ones they create and share (Coker, 2012). My co-participants and I used fan texts to develop and share creative ideas and insights. Diverse readers bringing different knowledges together led to newer, more detailed understanding of both the fictional text and the social, cultural and historical contexts of the time the text was produced in (White and Hungerford-Kresser, 2014).

4.4.1 Analyses bringing new knowledge to light

As I've explored in this chapter, fans' love for their beloved fictional worlds means that they want these worlds to be better. Such analyses can help draw attention to the imperfect representations of diverse identities in ways which fans belonging to other identities may not have noticed before. **Tam**, a nonbinary fan, and I spent a large part of our episode extolling the virtues of the show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. Tam particularly loved the unprecedented inclusion of Double Trouble, a nonbinary character, in a children's TV show. However, they believed that the eventual story arc didn't do Double Trouble's role enough justice:

I felt a little bit betrayed by season 5 in terms of ... I don't know if it was just my overly high expectations but the fact that they were relegated to a background character almost. They show up for 1 episode and then a little moment in the ending montage. And I don't know – I just wanted them to have more of a role in the story. – Tam

Even though Tam loved the show and its radically progressive LGBTQIA+ representation, this criticism about Double Trouble signified their desire to view multiple priorities and interests being represented – rather than the focus just being on an admittedly progressive representation of a same-sex couple:

There's so much of the fifth series that is effectively espionage. They're sneaking around the planet trying to evade capture [...] I think it would have been quite easy to write them into a bigger role [...] I don't know if it was just that they wanted to focus on Adora and Catra for the final series. – Tam (MF Episode 15)

Such emotional investments in fictional characters can be particularly important to fans who don't see themselves represented in positive, nuanced and complex ways otherwise. Tam's critique also raised awareness about nonbinary perspectives. Until they brought it up, this erasure hadn't even occurred to me, highlighting my own cisgender blind-spot. I appreciated this education in the podcast episode itself, but I bring it up again here because accessing this viewpoint impacted me both as a researcher and as a participant. The autoethnographic focus of this project meant that I was deeply embedded in this project throughout the different stages. Talking to Tam and other co-participants made me actively aware of my different blind-spots, and addressing them is (hopefully) going to be a lifelong affair (see Chapter 10). By speaking about representations which are really important to them and outlining the reasons why, Tam's contributions helped me understand diverse perspectives in a new light.

In other instances, fans may share one aspect of a marginalised identity but not another, leaving them unaware of how these intersections manifest in media representations. **Deb**, a middle-aged fan, drew on her identities as a woman, a mother and a wife as she discussed representations of older women in SFF media. She pointed out that even her favourite texts were often unable to imagine older women beyond their roles as mothers or wives. Her analysis not only drew on her own experiences and observations but also some of the texts – both academic and fannish – she had encountered:

There's a wonderful book by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn (2011) called Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism On Screen that talks about this a lot. And she argues that older women are frequently absent from pop culture just because we don't know what to do with them, right? And kind of what they were saying in Breaking The Glass Slipper, right? That women or mothers in particular, are supposed to be this hindrance. They're those who are enforcing the rules, they keep you from having those adventures. And so we just don't deal with them. – Deb

The *Breaking The Glass Slipper* episode Deb was referring to was “Representations of Motherhood”, one which we had listened to before our conversation. In it,

writer, fan and mother Alette de Bodard pointed out the perception that mothers are hindrances means that they are often missing in stories (Leigh et al., 2019a). Both Deb and Alette wished that mothers had more agency in stories and weren't relegated to the background. Deb went on to synthesise these multiple sources with her own interests as she analysed the example of Lily Potter in the *Harry Potter* books to bolster her argument:

By dying protecting her child, she's the ultimate sacrificial mother [...] And it really is interesting that as Harry grows and learns more about his parents, James becomes fallible in Harry's eyes. He still loves him but he begins to learn that James is fallible. But he never learns that about Lily. Lily is always perfect [...] She will never change. She will never grow and so because of that, as a character, she falls into the same trope that we so often see with women in literature that they don't get a full life. They don't get a full character arc [...] [Lily] never gets this rich, complicated backstory that James does. Which is really unfortunate. – Deb (MF Episode 14)

By comparing and contrasting the treatment Harry's father and mother received in the narrative, Deb underscored the dehumanising outcome of representing mothers as perfect, a representation which has an impact on real-world attitudes. Deb's point led to a discussion of mothers in the real world who are also often overlooked in similar ways – a conversation which occurs in many different contexts like media, academia, among friends etc. Her complex analysis of characters and identities built a greater understanding of both fictional and real-world issues.

Fan critiques of texts they love demand better representations of marginalised identities, especially ones they're personally invested in. By inserting their perspectives into the discourse, fans share their desires and demand better from the mediascape they inhabit.

4.4.2 Bringing different priorities to the fore

Fans engage in close-reading of their favourite media and develop interpretations which extend fictional characters beyond canon. Throughout this process, they use the framework of fictional worlds to talk about different real-world ideas. Such conversations which draw on both real and fictional examples can help people understand both worlds better. **Alison**, a white English fan, commended Hermione Granger for challenging the oppressive house-elf system in the *Harry Potter* books. There, house-elves are slaves owned by magical families, something which shocks Hermione, who comes from a non-magical background. However, Alison pointed out the imperfections in Hermione's activism:

I think Hermione goes about it in a very white feminist way. She tries to trick the house-elves into becoming free by leaving little knitted hats and scarves around the place. And that's really wrong. [...] And without any kind of idea of like well you know if they lose their place at Hogwarts, where are they going to go? What's going to happen to them? And even when she sees what has happened to Winky, it doesn't stop her. It's a very uncomfortable thing for me to read. – Alison (MF Episode 4)

Alison compared Hermione's behaviour to white feminism, a term used in the real world to critique a limited form of feminism. White feminists in the West or dominant-caste savarna feminists in India are criticised for not engaging in intersectional considerations which acknowledge that other marginalised groups may have different needs, priorities and perspectives. Instead, they take on the mantle of speaking for all women without interrogating their privilege and without attempting to incorporate the voices of those less privileged than they are. In this instance, Alison's point led to a discussion about how in the books, Hermione tried to trick the house-elves into freedom and imposed her choices and morals on them without seeking their contributions or opinions about what they wanted. She centred herself in the activism rather than the oppressed group of people she was fighting for. Alison inserted her own priorities for more intersectional feminist activism in the real world into a favourite text and character.

In another instance, **Anna R.**, a fellow fan of the *Harry Potter* books, similarly turned her critical lens towards Ron Weasley, a protagonist she loved but also saw the imperfections in. Unlike in Alison's case, Anna didn't share the same identity as the character and her critiques drew from her own identity which the character in question was dismissive of. In preparation for our conversation, Anna and I had listened to the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* episode on masculinity in the *Harry Potter* books (Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2017a). Their discussion of the depiction of the Weasley brothers in the series prompted our own analysis of the ways in which Ron Weasley's elder brothers' assorted social, cultural and political capital exacerbated Ron's insecurities:

On the one hand I feel bad for Ron because he has this legacy of brothers before him [...] Apparently Molly [Ron's mother] really wanted a daughter. So then she went full on on Ginny [Ron's sister] and everything. So I understand. But then again, you have to work on your problems and yourself and [...] just because you feel bad, it doesn't mean you have to take it out on others. – Anna R.

Ron was one of Anna's favourite characters so she was more empathetic in her analysis of his behaviour. At the same time, she also outlined the reasons why it wasn't justified. In our episode, we analysed Ron's behaviour throughout the series and criticised examples of him taking out his frustration and insecurities on the different women in his life. As two female fans with different experiences with misogyny in our own lives, we drew parallels between Ron's example and its manifestations in the real world. I wondered if Ron's behaviour had been left unchecked, would it have eventually led to the more violent elements of the incel culture? (i.e. men who call themselves involuntarily celibate and congregate on online forums to discuss, sometimes harass, and occasionally plan to murder women [Crawford and Keen, 2021]). We brought together our knowledge from both the real and fictional worlds to analyse character motivations and behaviour:

I think what's a great thing concerning Ron is that he had people who stood up to him [...] I think that having someone – and obviously women because he had a few issues about them – stand up and not let that kind of behaviour go on further, I think it's very beneficial. – Anna R. (MF Episode 5)

Anna's love for the character led to our conversation about him. Using his representation as a frame, we were able to have a discussion about masculinity and misogyny. We analysed why toxic masculinity occurred in both media and society and highlighted a potential way it could be challenged. By wanting Ron to be a better example of maleness in the fictional world, Anna contributed insights about her priorities as a woman in the real world.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how some fans develop the ability to balance both love and critique of their favourite media. While this may initially be difficult, they can gradually journey from being uncritical consumers to enjoying a more critical engagement. Fans' own diverse identities coupled with their passion for their favourite fictional characters and worlds helps the process of critical analysis.

At first glance it may seem like there's nothing in common between this fannish practice and the ways in which religious people engage with their canonical stories. However, as a few fans outlined, there are transformational opportunities in both. In both instances, there are groups of people working together to challenge the narrative norms which ignore historically excluded groups of people. Similarly, in light of new understanding, some people adapt and expand both kinds of texts to make them inclusive of diverse identities and priorities. Both practices see canon as dynamic and flexible, always open to change based on shifting political, social and cultural contexts.

Fans who draw on their marginalised identities to critique how they're represented in their favourite media can open up these texts to new conversations and interpretations. By engaging in close-reading of narratives to extend them beyond canonical understanding, fans draw attention to different real-world priorities and concerns. Such analyses allows others to learn about a diversity of experiences, all while using the fictional framework.

Chapter 5 “A Different Way of Living”: Bridging Differences Through Popular Media Fandom

5.1 Introduction

I grew up in Mumbai, one of the biggest cities in India. I did find opportunities to interact with people from backgrounds that were dissimilar to mine. Even then, this diversity was still quite limited. It was the internet where I was able to meet people from a wider variety of backgrounds – either via conversations with them or simply by reading their first-person perspectives in blogs, social media and especially in fandom spaces. More recently, I’ve listened to fans inhabiting a more diverse range of identities share their experiences and perspectives on fan podcasts dedicated to some of my favourite media. These viewpoints within the context of online fandom have prompted me to re-evaluate my interpretations and understanding not only of the fictional text but also of the real world.

Although I’ve long identified as a feminist, I didn’t encounter the term intersectionality until I started researching for this project. While studying for a module about education during my master’s degree, I had explored various theories applied to an academic context – feminism, Marxism, cosmopolitanism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism. I liked some aspects of nearly all these theories, but their overwhelming focus on specific identities felt incomplete to me. I wasn’t able to articulate what was missing until I discovered intersectionality – a theory I expand on in this and subsequent chapters. When I started exploring intersectionality, I realised that although I’d never heard the term explicitly used in a fandom context (this has since changed), I *had* accessed intersectional perspectives online, especially in instances where fans – often irreverently – discussed how different identities were represented or erased in their favourite media.

This chapter demonstrates how the framework of popular media allows fans from different backgrounds to engage with each other’s diverse experiences and interpretations and collectively negotiate intersectional literacies:

- The first section explores how online fan spaces bring together fans from both dominant and marginalised cultures. Such interactions introduce fans to alternative perspectives, and allow them to both share and access different contexts of privilege and oppression
- Next, I write about how fans use discussions about their favourite fictional characters and worlds to shed light on different intersectional experiences. By raising awareness about those issues which matter to people from differently marginalised identities, fan podcasts can create a space of intersectional education
- Finally, I describe how such conversations expand the range of lives and experiences people encounter; ones they may not have the opportunity to access in other parts of their life. Fans draw social, cultural and political parallels to fictional characters and narrative occurrences. Such analogies draw attention to real-world histories and current events, especially those

of cultures which are marginalised in both mainstream media as well as fandom discourse. By bringing diverse priorities and perspectives to the forefront, these fan texts allow others to learn about different cultures and contexts as well as other ways of being in the world

5.2 Bringing together fans from dominant and marginalised cultures

The feminist theory of intersectionality investigates how multiple and complex social privileges and inequalities interact with each other (Cho et al., 2013; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Collins, 2015; Davis, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Romero, 2018). While Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is credited for coining the term intersectionality, the concept itself is much older and draws on the work and activism of generations of black women in the US. It traces its roots to the work of black feminists who analysed how not only gender but also race and class affect the lives of black women (Crenshaw, 1990; MacKinnon, 2013). Similarly, different groups of women from both the Global North and the Global South have long discussed how feminism excluded them from its deliberations of power and oppression (Davis 2008).

The internet has played a significant role in popularising the concept of intersectionality in non-academic spaces (Hancock, 2016; Kanai, 2019). People use online discussions and debates about popular culture to raise awareness about various intersectional issues. Based on Geerts and Van der Tuin's (2013) conception of intersectionality, communities create knowledge rather than lone individuals. Fans of globally popular media often have to negotiate diverse communities and differing perspectives as they interact with each other. Through their conversations and texts about how diverse cultures – both marginalised and privileged – are represented in their favourite media, groups of fans from different backgrounds create knowledge about intersectional identities. Kellner and Share believe that “understanding dissimilar ways of seeing is essential to understanding the politics of representation” (2005: p. 376). According to this view, understanding intersectional perspectives involves a process of collaboration and literacy. Through this project, I wanted to explore how online fan communities can promote this intersectional literacy by raising awareness of different intersectional issues.

Many of the fan podcasts I included in my intersectional field site actively worked to incorporate a diverse range of voices and perspectives. The popular media framework made the themes and discussions accessible to a larger group of people. In *Marginally Fannish*, I tried to recruit fans from a relatively diverse range of identities to be able to collaboratively create knowledge with them. Other fan podcasts like *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, *Imaginary Worlds*, *The Gayly Prophet* and *Witch, Please* frequently invited guests from different backgrounds. The *Witch, Please* co-hosts believed that such an inclusion of diverse perspectives ensured that their own ideas were troubled by different people's insights, and no one person was the arbiter of knowledge (Kosman and McGregor, 2016b).

In nearly all these instances, the hosts were marginalised in some contexts and privileged in others. Including a range of experiences and perspectives helped make up for their/our own limitations in knowledge. Of all the fan podcasts I chose to look at, Eric Molinsky, the host of *Imaginary Worlds*, inhabited the most privileged identities. Apart from having worked in public radio and other popular podcasts, he was a cisgender heterosexual white man in the US. However, in multiple episodes, he invited people who inhabited other identities – both marginalised and privileged – in order to learn from their experiences and share this knowledge with his audience. Similarly, by accessing the voices, histories and cultures of both marginalised and dominant groups, my co-participants and I used “the personal is political” framework to share and understand differences.

Since intersectionality finds its roots in USA-based black feminism, some scholars are sceptical about its usefulness in analysing other contexts. However Cho and colleagues argued that intersectionality’s widening scope has demonstrated that people have creatively interpreted the concept in order to use it in a wide range of projects. They contended that intersectionality is “posed more as a nodal point than as a closed system—a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities” (Cho et al., 2013: p. 788).

Your life is significantly better or worse based on where you live and on your gender, gender identity and expression, class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, geographic origin, religion, disability and age. Which intersectional categories gain prominence is based on social, political and geographical contexts. For example, I’m suddenly a person of colour and an immigrant in the UK whereas these two categories have no relevance in my life in India. Intersectional identities are fluid, contested and open to debate; they rarely have singular universal meanings and understandings (McCall, 2008; Okolosie, 2014; Romero, 2018). People may be oppressed in some contexts and privileged in others. The lens of intersectionality can thus be applied to different local and global contexts.

Geerts and Van der Tuin (2013) believe that intersectionality’s focus on the most marginalised categories erases the experiences of those who are partially or fully privileged. Intersecting oppressions and privileges shape most people’s experiences (Choo and Ferree, 2010; Nash, 2008; Śliwa et al., 2018). Ignoring how privilege intersects with oppression can lead to a less nuanced understanding of complex identities and social structures. An increasing number of people occupy digital spaces which intersect local, national and global contexts; this means they might simultaneously find themselves being a part of the majority as well as the minority (Purkayastha, 2012). As my co-participants and I discussed, women themselves are not only or always marginalised; in different contexts, we are partially or even fully privileged (Geerts and Van der Tuin, 2013). Through our different episodes, my co-participants and I considered intersections of privilege as well as marginalisation to view identities in more nuanced and complex ways.

5.2.1 A space to encounter alternative perspectives

Anna M., an SFF fan, believed that a diverse community around fandom could help take fans out of their echo chambers as they interacted with people from different backgrounds around a shared interest:

I think it's very valuable to have a community that is so diverse both nationally, ethnically, religiously but also in terms of education and lifestyle and professional careers, where those things also greatly impact outlooks on the world and ways we see current knowledge. And fandom is this unifying force that allows us to explore new ways of finding information while also always being able to bring it back to that community, bring it back to that thing that's familiar and that's safe and that we love. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

Echoing Anna's point, in *Marginally Fannish* and other fan podcasts, fans used the fictional framework to engage with each other and came to understand people's different contexts. Talking about globally popular media allowed me and some of my co-participants to identify and question some of our assumptions about different countries. Our episode on social class led **Alison**, an English fan, and I to discuss how mainstream British and Indian media perpetuated narrow representations of both our countries rather than allowing room for multiple stories:

Parinita: We have this idea that Western countries are extremely prosperous. And people don't have the problems that we have with money and poverty. And it was only when I moved here to the UK and spoke to people and read and educated myself, that I began to realise the different kinds of systemic economic problems that exist. And it's really helped me see both the UK as well as India in different ways.

Alison: Yeah and conversely [...] when we see India on the news, it tends to be when there are problems. So for example, with the rioting going on at the moment, and we did see a lot about the Delhi [...] gang rape case [...] We also do tend to see India and other developing countries through charitable ways [...] So we think of everybody as being very poor. And, of course, while there is huge poverty in India, there's also people who live very comfortable lives. And also people who are extremely wealthy. We tend to forget there's a middle class in India. (MF Episode 4)

Speaking to someone from a different background allowed us the opportunity to challenge the single stories that mainstream news and entertainment media often promoted about our countries. Our episode conversation offered us the chance to draw on our different contexts and experiences as we articulated these discrepancies and offered a more complicated picture both to each other as well as potential audiences.

While I'm an atheist, some of my co-participants – as well as some fans whose perspectives I encountered in other fan texts – were religious (see Chapter 4). Growing up, I chafed at the religious expectations of my Hindu family and community. In India, it's difficult to ignore the very real toll religious violence has had on the country both historically and currently. Religion plays such a pervasive

role in the social and cultural fabric of the country that I've never given a second thought to religious representations in my favourite media. However, for Ziv, an Orthodox Jewish fan, this was a tremendously important issue. In our episode, he pointed out that positive representations of Jewishness or of religious people overall were largely absent in mainstream SFF media. He proposed that this lack of engagement with religion in media emerged from non-religious people's blind-spots, akin to those of people from other identities:

I think in a similar way to the way a lot of marginalised communities and identities get left out because people are like, "Well, I could make the character gay but if it's not important to the story, that will be putting a lot of effort and it won't pay off in any way." And in a similar way putting in religion is as difficult or more difficult because it's literally a different perception of reality. Or a different way of living. – Ziv

At the same time, he acknowledged that even using the terminology of marginalisation wasn't equally applicable in all contexts. In Israel, where Ziv lived, he pointed out that Judaism wasn't marginalised:

Religious people have tremendous power, ultra-Orthodox people have tremendous power, the Rabbinate has tremendous power including who can get married or who can get divorced. It's not a marginalisation in most terms that we're used to speaking about. But in terms of visibility and portrayal or how much it's assumed to be within consensus or within the default in mainstream media it's very, very different. – Ziv (MF Episode 15)

By parsing out the nuances in his argument, Ziv highlighted how there aren't binary understandings of marginalisation or privilege. People are simultaneously oppressed and privileged in different contexts. This intersection shapes their interpretations in different ways. Much like I moved from being a part of the dominant ethnicity in India to suddenly becoming a person of colour in the UK, Ziv wasn't fully privileged or marginalised in all spaces. Whereas his perspectives and experiences were a dominant cultural force in his own country, when it came to global popular culture, they were often misrepresented or erased altogether. The framework of our conversation provided insights into different ways of seeing and being in the world.

5.2.2 Different contexts of privilege and marginalisation

I only became racialised when I moved from India to the UK as a postgraduate student a few years ago. Over the course of researching for this project, the intersectional focus helped me think more deeply about my contexts of marginalisation here as well as my contexts of privilege back in India. There, I may have felt more unsafe as a woman than I do here; however, as someone who grew up in Mumbai and belonged to the dominant religion and caste backgrounds, I had huge amounts of privilege. In the UK, I'm a visibly brown immigrant in a country where racist and xenophobic conversations have become more mainstream. Even then, being a university student, having English as my first language, and my comfort with Western media and culture in general accord me with a significant

amount of status. The intersections of privilege and marginalisation influenced my experiences in both countries.

Like me, many of my co-participants inhabited identities where they were marginalised in some contexts and privileged in others. **Diana** was a queer nonbinary fan who rarely saw these identities represented in media or their community:

I grew up in a family where I'm the only openly queer person. And grew up Catholic and in a fairly conservative area and so [queerness] was really nowhere. – Diana

At the same time, they were from the US, a country which tends to dictate the kinds of stories and cultures which are explored in Western media fandom. As a fan researcher, Diana learned from their participants who weren't from the Global North and struggled in Western media fan spaces in different ways:

I think that because fandom or mainstream fandom spaces are predominantly English language, people who are living outside of Western societies or outside of the Global North have to do a lot more work than folks who are, for example, native English speakers. Or who are more familiar with Western cultural tropes [...] [My participants said] they have to research if they want to write a story that's set in a certain place like how would that be legible or palatable to people who are native English speakers. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

While the theme of our conversation was queer representation in media and fandom, Diana also shared what they had learned from other fans' different regional and linguistic perspectives. They then signposted these different contexts of privilege and marginalisation on our episode for me and others to encounter.

In *Marginally Fannish* episodes, as with several other fan podcasts, fans brought different examples to the fore based on their different contexts and priorities. **H**, a fan of movies, recommended that we watch and discuss how race and racism were explored in a selection of Western-made films. This theme specifically drew on his own then-recent experience of encountering racism in a foreign country. Much like me, H found himself suddenly racialised when he moved from Japan to England for a year on a study abroad programme. Both of us went from belonging to the dominant groups in our respective countries to becoming a part of the minority. In our episode, H described his experiences on a film course in an English university. Here, for the first time, he was introduced to the idea of how Western media representations which privilege white men have an impact on global audiences, including H himself:

When I went to the UK last July, that was my first time being a minority [...] And I noticed I was feeling like some people around me might be looking down on me [...] I actually got discriminated against by a white British guy. But then I noticed why am I thinking like that way? So why am I feeling that I'm looked down on by other white people? And I thought media and what I watched and listened to in Japan for over 18 or 19 years might have created some kind of image and stereotype inside myself. – H

H analysed his own experiences and emotions as a male Japanese fan in England to describe the impact of Western media's representations on himself. He pointed at how the media he had watched in Japan played an important role in his understanding of self and his not-white body. Presumably this, accompanied by his experience of having a racist slur hurled at him by a white British man, led to his interest in understanding how media representations influence understandings of race.

Our episode allowed us to explore dominance and marginalisation in different contexts. In response to H's recommendation of movies to discuss in our episode, I'd suggested we listen to some fan podcast episodes which discussed the issues of Asian and Asian-American representations in Western media. Here, Asian-American fans spoke about how Western media has traditionally pushed singular, monolithic stereotypes of Asians in media. They shared their frustrations about not being able to see themselves reflected in nuanced and complex ways in Western media (Broadnax, 2015; Broadnax, 2016; Eugenia and Toya, 2018a; Molinsky, 2017c). These podcasts inspired our own discussion about how Western media's representations of Asian people didn't impact the two of us in the same way as it did Asians who grew up in Western countries. In Japan, H belonged to the dominant group and mainstream Japanese media offered him multiple representations of his identity. The same was true of me in India. H went on to analyse the different issues of marginalisation and dominance which occurred in a Japanese media context:

The images, the media, and books are created only by one particular race of people [...] So we have very complicated issues with ... this isn't true for everyone ... but there is a kind of ideology that Westerners and white people are superior. But at the same time, a number of Japanese people think Japan is the greatest country. The right-wing people and some people regard Chinese or Korean people as inferior to themselves. – H (MF Episode 8)

H pointed out that whereas media produced in Japan had multiple and complex depictions of Japanese people, other cultures didn't receive similar treatment. The ways in which Japanese media portrayed different cultures – including Japanese and white people – both reflected and shaped people's attitudes about themselves and others. Encountering fan perspectives helped hone our ideas of marginalisation and privilege in different contexts. Talking about media representations and misrepresentations provided us with a way to expand our understanding of the real-world identities they reflected.

Conversations with my co-participants provided us with learning opportunities about topics beyond our personal contexts and experiences. By drawing on the themes, media and fan texts which we used to frame our discussions, we explored a more complicated picture of different identities. Such encounters helped us learn about a broad range of perspectives. Subsequently, our conversations offered the space to explore the nuances and complexities of diverse experiences.

5.3 Illuminating experiences via intersectional conversations

Intersectionality's widening scope means that it has been employed for diverse projects and can be used to analyse power relationships in different contexts (Cho et al., 2013). Much of intersectional scholarship and discussions privilege black women's experiences – so much so that sometimes intersectionality is equated to black feminism rather than as a concept with roots in black feminist scholarship (Okolosie, 2014). Privileging race and gender in intersectional discussions can end up marginalising other identities and oppressions (Hancock, 2007; Okolosie, 2014). According to Okolosie (2014), in intersectional scholarship and activism, it is important to highlight differences, especially those which are absent from discussions of intersectionality.

Lykke (2011) argued against positioning intersectionality as a study of a clearly defined, fixed number of intersecting categories. Instead of merely examining different social categories, she recommended adopting a more inclusive and open-ended approach where different positions are in dialogue with each other to study how imbalanced power structures impact people. McCall (2008) admitted that intersectional researchers who study multiple groups rather than investigating a single group may not be able to examine these different groups with the same depth. However, she also pointed out that they can provide new insights about multiple identities, particularly those which are underrepresented or overlooked in intersectional scholarship. Writer Charlotte Shane (2018) urged people to include contextual and intersectional considerations in their understanding of feminism:

There should be nothing incompatible about feminism and any other movement for social justice; on the contrary, true feminism should be essential to the success of all other progressive movements. Conflict materialises when we buy into the notion that feminism is a narrow aperture through which to consider our world, one that can only inform our analysis on issues that break down neatly around gender [...] where other vectors of power, like race or able-bodiedness or wealth, are immaterial. It conveniently obfuscates just how easily women can participate in oppression of other women, and of men, too – and always have.

Scholars have debated about whether intersectionality should only be applied to women and, if so, *which* women (Lewis, 2009). I don't think that intersectionality needs to always be restricted to women. While women do face a disproportionate amount of social and structural oppression, men can also inhabit oppressed identities based on their circumstances. People are not only oppressed or only privileged. Accordingly, in *Marginally Fannish*, my co-participants and I used the framework of media and fandom to collectively produce intersectional knowledge. We inserted our various concerns, hopes, fears and beliefs into the texts we read and shared this with each other as well as with the wider fan community through our podcast episodes (Coker, 2012). As we discussed our favourite media, we drew on details from our own experiences, backgrounds and knowledges (Coker, 2012; Coppa et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2012a). We explored multiple and complex identities to

gain a better understanding of how they interact to produce privilege and/or oppression in different social, cultural and political contexts (Alinia, 2015; McCall, 2008; Nash, 2008; Purkayastha, 2012; Windsong, 2018).

In online spaces, people bring their diverse intersectional identities and experiences with them which can lead to conversations which one might not otherwise encounter or participate in (Tynes et al., 2016). In the case of globally popular media, the diversity of fans present in online fan communities means that fans encounter ideas which they may otherwise not have considered. People belonging to both dominant and marginalised cultures can come together to engage with culture, create knowledge and promote alternative viewpoints about different experiences (Dittmar and Annas, 2017).

5.3.1 Learning about different identities via fan interpretations

Fans draw on their own personal, social and cultural contexts to interpret texts. Subsequently, they may have different interpretations or come to different conclusions about the same fictional characters or events. Sharing such critical perspectives can offer another avenue for understanding issues and identities beyond what the text offers on its surface.

Alison's working-class English upbringing influenced her reading of the *Harry Potter* series. She argued that despite narrative claims of the Weasley family's poverty in the books, they had immense cultural and social capital which translated to financial advantages. She analysed their home to illustrate her point:

They're landed gentry. They're not poor. And I think this is where people reading Harry Potter from countries where there is a lot of land and land is not necessarily expensive [...] don't understand that we don't have a lot of land. We're a very small country. And so land is actually extremely expensive. So any family that has a house with 6 or 7 bedrooms, that has a paddock and an orchard, are not poor in Britain. I mean that's land that's going to be worth maybe around a million pounds. – Alison (MF Episode 4)

Like this example above, Alison picked out other key instances in the series which not only highlighted evidence of the Weasley family having financial capital but also the ways in which their cultural and social capital improved their circumstances. My exposure to the UK largely came from the literature I read and the movies/TV shows I watched. When I was in India, I didn't really understand the notion of poverty in the UK in any meaningful way. I just assumed that the Weasleys were the British version of poor i.e. not very poor at all. Alison's analysis unlocked an alternative possibility as I learned more about wealth and poverty in an unfamiliar context.

As the *Witch, Please* co-hosts pointed out in their own analysis of social class in the Potterverse, class privilege doesn't just consist of wealth but also includes the social networks and cultural insider information you have access to such as knowing which rules you have to follow and which ones you can break (Kosman and McGregor, 2020a). Alison pointed at the example of brothers Ron and Percy Weasley taking a pet rat to Hogwarts, the magical school, even though the

Hogwarts letter specifically mentions students are only allowed cats, owls or toads as pets. Viewed through the lens of social class – a theme we were focusing on in the episode – a student like Hermione Granger who comes from a non-magical family would be akin to someone from a working-class background entering an elite space. These groups don't have access to the power structures, resources and knowledges that the ruling class (the witches and wizards) take for granted. Through her detailed analysis of fictional characters, Alison shed light on the real-world experiences of people from working-class backgrounds. Her perspectives helped me better understand previously unexplored aspects within the fictional world as well as the real world.

Fandom spaces offer room for those voices that have traditionally been silenced to share their stories and critiques in ways which mainstream spaces don't always represent. These perspectives also allow fans to learn from each other.

Robert, a *Doctor Who* fan, used the framework of the show's characters and storylines to describe his own experiences with disability and ableism. Initially, he was extremely excited about the introduction of Ryan, a then-recent companion on *Doctor Who*. Ryan shared Robert's dyspraxia – a representation of his disability which Robert hadn't encountered before. In response, Robert wrote an essay after the first episode with Ryan aired. This essay ended up being one of the resources we referred to prior to our conversation. In it, he highlighted the powerful impact such representations can have:

The everyday world can be a terrifying place for us anyway, but lord knows what the Whoniverse would be like: when dimensions can be even weirder than they are almost all the time, where the Daleks can handle the stairs and you're afraid you're about to fall down them. – Robert (Shepherd, 2018a)

Robert used a fictional character from a popular TV show to emphasise to others – both those who share his dyspraxia and those who don't – how revolutionary such representations could be. They could not only allow disabled people like himself to recognise themselves in media for the very first time but could also provide them with a positive model for what their lives could look like:

It can feel an achievement and an adventure just getting through the day, but I want to know that we can have adventures, too: that the skills we have and the things we can achieve are more important than the things we're always reminded are beyond us [...] There are unspoken and unknown things that so many of us are going through. I want to see that this one can be overcome. – Robert Shepherd (2018a)

In the essay, "The Future Is (Not) Disabled" (which we also read for this episode), disabled fan and writer Marieke Nijkalmp (2018) pointed out that conversations about the need for representation of disabilities in SFF tend to be restricted to disabled communities. They emphasised that it's important that such conversations should occur in all spaces, especially those frequented by non-disabled people. I first encountered Robert's essay on his Facebook profile (where we were friends before this project). His writing introduced me to dyspraxia and this new understanding went on to inform my own appreciation of Ryan as I

watched the show. Robert's response to a popular show raised awareness about a lesser-known disability and educated me about a marginal identity I hadn't previously encountered.

However, since I didn't share this disability, my perspectives were quite limited by my ignorance. I couldn't recognise the problematic aspects of Ryan's representation until Robert pointed them out in our episode conversation. Robert had grown increasingly uncomfortable and upset that the show constantly privileged Graham's perspective – i.e. Ryan's non-disabled step-grandfather – over Ryan's own needs. To Robert, this felt eerily similar to his own childhood struggles with his family where his parents' needs were prioritised over his own:

Ryan is worried because he's caused an alien invasion. And then Graham is like, "Oh you're going to blame the dyspraxia on that as well?" And I guess the implication there obviously is all the time that these things are going wrong for Ryan, then he's saying it's by dyspraxia, but it's not actually. If he'd had strength of will or tried hard enough, he would have been able to overcome these things that are, in fact, not possible to overcome because they are a disability. – Robert

Robert drew on his own experiences to outline the problems with the way a disabled character was treated in *Doctor Who*. In the process, he drew attention to the frustrations of navigating a world which wasn't designed to accommodate his disabilities. He used the fictional framework to discuss real-world contexts where when disabilities like dyspraxia and autism were portrayed, their experiences were described via the perspectives of their families/caregivers rather than the disabled people themselves:

I guess that the reason that autistic people are uncomfortable about things being centered on family members is because once our own voices become marginalised and once our own humanity begins to be diminished, it does leave us open to narratives that are abusive. – Robert (MF Episode 10)

The episode's fandom framework offered Robert a chance to reclaim the narrative that the show and the character told about his disability. It also offered non-disabled people like me an opportunity to learn from his perspectives. For Robert, his oppressions as a disabled fan intersected uncomfortably with his privileges as a straight white cisgender man. It was only over the course of our conversations – in the episode itself as well as before and after recording – that Robert grew more comfortable with the idea that his perspectives offered valuable insights into the experiences of a disabled person.

Robert's hesitation provoked me to think about what identities/lives/topics should be considered in an intersectional framework. Would he not have volunteered to share his experiences and perspectives had a stranger circulated the participant recruitment information – instead of me, someone he knew? Intersectionality urges us to include different intersections of oppression and privilege. Including Robert's example here encouraged me to consider who it excludes.

Conversations on fan podcasts among a diverse group of fans can offer learning experiences about different real-world identities. In such fan spaces, conversations about different identities aren't isolated to separate corners divided along the lines of specific social groups. Fans from differently marginalised/privileged communities share and access different, individualised contexts and perspectives of different identities. I didn't have access to many such experiences before my conversations with co-participants. Throughout the process of creating different *Marginally Fannish* episodes as well as listening to other fan podcasts, I was able to better understand my gaps in knowledge – something that the autoethnographic focus of this thesis invited me to foreground and analyse. The framework of media representations of diverse identities helped me challenge and expand assumptions which prioritise some lives and marginalise others.

5.3.2 Highlighting issues which matter to fans from different groups

Popular media and fandom provide a framework for discussing a wide range of issues which matter to people. In *Marginally Fannish*, like in other fan podcasts, my co-participants and I brought our multiple knowledges into conversations, offering each other a chance to learn about different topics. We drew on our diverse experiences and interests in order to highlight ideas which aren't always a part of the mainstream discourse. This can help shed light on specific topics for those people unaccustomed to thinking about them. While these conversations may be restricted to fandom spaces, they can influence the thinking of people who *do* encounter them.

Marita, a working-class fan, was interested in analysing the class disparities in a wide range of social, political, media and fandom contexts. She also spent a lot of time in different online fan communities. In one segment of our conversation, she linked both these passions together in order to illuminate the class politics which dictate who gets to participate in fandom spaces:

The difference between different podcasts showcases the kind of people who can afford to have the more expensive equipment. And they end up with more polished podcasts and their polished podcasts end up getting picked up by distribution groups [...] I've been listening to podcasts [...] for a while now. And it has been really interesting to see what gets picked up and what doesn't [...] What ends up becoming a big thing and who gets to quit their job and become a podcaster full time. – Marita (MF Episode 17)

Marita highlighted how the commercial hierarchies within fan podcasts have an impact on which fans can afford to create fan texts and which fans are paid to create them. She pointed out that while the internet may have made creating and promoting fan podcasts much easier, it was still a time- and labour-intensive process. Many fan podcasts experiment with different business models including asking for donations and launching Patreon accounts (Patreon, no date). But there isn't widespread sustainability for this medium yet, especially if you're a small podcast without a large audience or an audience without disposable income. Marita underscored the considerations of social class that dictate whether and how fans can create media in these contexts. Not everybody can afford to work for free – even on something they are passionate about. Creating any kind of art or culture

isn't accessible to everyone. By drawing attention to these issues within the fandom framework, Marita highlighted more widespread social trends and problems when it came to being a poor or working-class creator of media and culture.

In another instance, a co-participant drew on their own childhood struggles to emphasise the importance of diverse representations in media. **Milena** grew up queer first in Bulgaria and then in Austria before moving to the UK. This was during a time when Austria was conservative and the UK had Section 28 which prohibited teachers from presenting homosexuality in a positive light. In such a context, they didn't have any representations of queerness as they tried to figure out their own identity:

Going back to my experiences as a teenager in very Catholic Austria, it's so important for kids to be able to see themselves onscreen like that. Particularly if you're living in a queerphobic society, if you're in a queerphobic family, where else are you going to work out who you are? – Milena (MF Episode 21)

By placing their argument in the context of their own experiences and emotions, Milena highlighted the consequences of the social and cultural erasure of their identity. This made them especially insistent about the need for queer representations in children's media today. As they pointed out, young people need to see their identities reflected – just as Milena needed to see their identities reflected – to better understand their own sense of self. Milena's contribution brought to light the experiences of being a queer young person in different contexts across space and time.

Fans' geographic and social identities impact the kinds of ideas, communities and media they have access to. People can encounter a diverse range of perspectives in online spaces. The fandom framework was an important avenue for many of my co-participants and me to access different identities. However, this access isn't always available or guaranteed. **Diana**, a queer fan who first encountered queer representation in fanfiction, drew attention to a then-recent event which restricted access to queer fan content:

One of the biggest and I think most unfortunate pieces of news in fandom recently has been that [...] the censorship policies in the Chinese government banned A03 and so now in China you cannot access A03. And that's I think really a huge loss of course for the fan community in China. But I think A03 is so tied to queerness. And any fandom space is going to have its problems – but to not be able to access that is a loss. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

A03 or Archive Of Our Own is one of the most prominent fanfiction websites globally. Fandom can provide an alternative to mainstream media and expand/challenge notions of ways of being in the world. Queer representations in fanfiction had played an important role in Diana's own engagements with media, fandom and their identity. Based on this, they pointed at how the loss of this access to a major fandom platform meant that Chinese fans wouldn't be able to similarly access queer perspectives within the fictional framework. Although this restriction

wasn't universal (or potentially even permanent), by highlighting how online censorship policies form extra barriers to knowledge and community, Diana drew attention to concerns which impacted queer people outside their own USA-based context.

Since fans are passionate about different things, including but not limited to their identities, their contributions often raised awareness about a range of issues which mattered to them. Such fan texts and conversations offered me opportunities to learn about intersectional perspectives, especially when I wouldn't otherwise have encountered these ideas.

5.4 Expanding the range of lives people encounter

In social media spaces, users bring their diverse intersectional identities and experiences with them. Conversations in such spaces can help influence norms and behaviours through a process of negotiation and debate (Tynes et al., 2016). Digital media texts can be used to link the local with the global as people are exposed to a range of historical, social, cultural and political contexts (Gounari, 2009).

It's possible that such conversations about different identities remain isolated and restricted to separate corners of the internet – populated by people belonging to similar backgrounds. However, Pande (2017) proposed that with fandom's shift to more dialogic platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, fans from marginalised backgrounds are growing more comfortable with expressing their identities and about advocating for stories and characters which better represent them. This allows other fans to find spaces where conversations about specific identities become the norm. Feminist, queer and anti-racist fan podcasts like *Breaking The Glass Slipper*, *The Gayly Prophet*, *Witch*, *Please* and *Woke Doctor Who* among others also fit into this mould. Similarly, my co-participants and I used our diverse personal, social, cultural, political and ideological contexts to interpret and respond to the texts we read.

Fans whose lives are missing or misrepresented in popular culture can use fan texts to offer diverse and complex representations of themselves. For my master's dissertation, I studied two Facebook fan pages and found that fans used their favourite texts to explore social justice, gender, sexuality, moral issues and mental health. Dennis's (2018) digital ethnography of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* found that the hosts and guests frequently discussed contemporary and sometimes contentious issues such as feminism, politics, body image, the LGBTQIA community, bullying, race, education and religion. Alhayek (2017) described how Arabic fans of the *Game of Thrones* TV show interpreted the fantasy text in ways which highlighted their real-life political contexts. They drew connections between the conflicts in the show and the conflicts in their own geographical region. Such refashioning of source texts allows fans from diverse backgrounds to represent their own interests and priorities (Jenkins, 2012a).

On the "Harry Potter Voices Across Borders" episode of *Reading, Writing, Rowling*, guest M'Balía Thomas, a teacher educator, explained how she used analogies from the *Harry Potter* books to help her student teachers understand the experiences of

their future students. Her classroom in the US was full of undergraduate students learning how to teach English as a second language to people from different communities and cultures. M'Balía used fictional analogies and imagined contexts to evoke empathy in real-life situations among her students, many of whom had grown up in environments where they didn't encounter people from different race, religion, regional and language backgrounds:

I am backgrounding a lot of the wizarding aspects of the book series to foreground something that we take for granted which is Harry and Hermione and a number of the Muggle-born and Muggle-raised characters are foreigners in a sense to this wizarding world. They're entering a new universe. A place where the socio-political context is different and the language that they have to use in class is different [...] When you think about the kinds of challenges [...] to navigating this new space, it's really an opportunity to gain a little bit more sympathy for the people in our real world who have similar experiences. – M'Balía Thomas (in McDaniel and Granger, 2019)

Such fictional interpretations can raise awareness about real-world experiences. In the *Imaginary Worlds* episode "Growing Up Avatar American", Asian-American guests Sam Kaden Lai and Viet proposed that the animated TV show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* offered the perfect Asian-American representation. While the context of the show was American, the culture was Asian; something which reflected their own lives as second- and third-generation Americans. Viet also read the protagonist Aang's story as a refugee/immigrant narrative which resonated with many Asian-American diasporic histories (Molinsky, 2017c). While the creators themselves may not have intended to create this effect, it has nevertheless impacted some Asian-American fans. For fans, conversations about media can easily blend into conversations about their real lives. For fans from marginalised backgrounds, it becomes a way to insert their perspectives into the conversation. For fans from other backgrounds, it can offer an opportunity to expand their understanding about a different identity.

Scholars proposed that debates and discussions about the fictional world and their parallels in the real world resonate with everyday audiences and can allow fans to understand a diverse range of social, political or economic structures (Click et al., 2017; Ito et al., 2015; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016; Brough and Shresthova, 2012). Drawing real-world parallels can bring different cultures and experiences to the fore. These interpretations and analyses offer others belonging to different backgrounds and countries a way to learn about different contemporary and historical experiences.

5.4.1 Understanding real-world events through fictional analogies

Many fans have the tendency to draw parallels between fictional characters/events and real-world histories and experiences. When a media text attracts a diverse group of fans, such fictional analogies draw on a broader base of social, cultural, political and personal contexts. Fans reading real-world concerns into fictional characters can educate people about a range of historical and geographical contexts, especially ones which they may be unfamiliar with.

When Korean actress Claudia Kim was cast to play Nagini in the movie *Crimes of Grindelwald*, **Lorrie**, a Korean-American fan, was thrilled to finally have a character in the Potterverse to identify with (see Chapter 4). Her inclusion in the movie also provided Lorrie creative opportunities to draw Potterverse parallels with Korean history, particularly Japan's colonisation of Korea in the run-up to the Second World War, which is when the movie is set:

If you think about Korean women in the time leading up to World War II, there was no Korea. Korea was colonised by Japan and you do not want to be colonised by Japan [...] This is a political issue that is actually very divisive between Japan and Korea currently. And is responsible for major diplomatic conflicts and trade wars between Korea and Japan right now – that as part of the colonisation, the Japanese military plundered Korean female populations for human trafficking. And this is actually something that the Japanese military did with a number of Asian countries leading up to and during World War II including Indonesia. But really the bulk of it was huge numbers of Koreans. – Lorrie (MF Episode 12)

Lorrie drew a connection between this part of history and Nagini who is imprisoned in a magical circus in the movie. According to Lorrie's interpretation, her enslavement was a metaphor for the trafficking of Korean women during the country's colonisation. None of this history is evident in the movie itself. Lorrie drew inspiration from both the character as well as the actress cast to play her to draw attention to Korean history and culture – a context I had never previously encountered or indeed even thought to research. Lorrie's own family background meant that she was especially interested in this topic, inspiring her to draw parallels between the fictional and the real world. By dynamically analysing different elements of the movie and the time period it was set in, Lorrie's interpretations drew attention to histories of colonial violence in Japan and in Korea.

Encountering such fictional analogies can also encourage other fans to draw real-world parallels between their own personal backgrounds/interests and their favourite media/fan texts. To prepare for Episode 13, **Aparna, Sanjana** and I listened to the episode "Witch, Please and the Rise of White Nationalism". In it, the hosts compared the antagonist Voldemort's rise to power in the *Harry Potter* books to the rise of racist hate crimes in the US, Canada and the UK. The hosts used examples from the books to discuss what fascism looked like and how it used existing systems of power like media, democracy and educational institutions (Kosman and McGregor, 2017).

In turn, Aparna, Sanjana and I made connections between their examples and how fascism manifested in an Indian context. Religion and national/regional origin were the structuring themes of that episode. Those themes felt especially relevant to us at the time (and continue to be today) since the Hindu-supremacist Indian government was discriminating against people along both those identities. We drew on the fictional framework of the *Harry Potter* books as well as the ideas the *Witch, Please* episode highlighted in order to discuss the real-world political issues we were most concerned about. Our conversation in the episode used a

combination of fictional and real-world examples from Western contexts to inform our analysis of real-world events in India.

In another episode, we were discussing the Sorting system in Hogwarts where students are divided into different houses when they start school. We ended up seeing parallels between this and our own dominant caste Hindu contexts. We were reminded of the structural segregation perpetuated by rigid proponents of the Hindu caste system where one facet of your identity controlled the rest of your life:

Sanjana: The Houses in Hogwarts and the Sorting – what if it was at a different level? How would the world have been if the segregation started at a school level, like at that moment when you are put into Gryffindor or Hufflepuff [...] – that defined the rest of your life [...] what jobs were okay for you to take and what jobs were beneath you [...] All the Ravenclaws would be the ones writing all the texts [...]

Parinita: Yeah like they would be the Brahmins [...] Because they have access to knowledge that they refuse to share with other people and hold onto.

Sanjana: They'll be the ones writing the history. (MF Episode 2 Part 1)

Such analogies and parallels shift based on different social and cultural contexts; which identities are marginalised and which become dominant differ based on different situations. My co-participants and I took existing stories and placed them in conversation with different contexts depending on our own individual backgrounds, politics and priorities. Through such parallels and analogies, we shared different historical and contemporary events.

Western media fandoms tend to focus on Western political and cultural contexts, something I explore more in Chapter 8. However, fans from other parts of the world can use the fictional framework to insert alternative narratives in ways which draw attention to histories and cultures which are otherwise not given much space in these contexts. In turn, fans from other cultures can better understand diverse real-world events and histories which they may not have otherwise encountered. Making connections between different kinds of experiences add to fandom's collective pool of knowledge.

5.4.2 Lessons in other ways of being in the world

The *Imaginary Worlds* episode “Fan Fiction (Don't Judge)” proposed that slash ships (fanon relationships which pair male/male or female/female characters from canon) provided countless fans with the kind of queer representation that was missing in mainstream media (Molinsky, 2017a). As **Diana**, a queer fan, mentioned previously, this form of representation can be an important avenue for queer people who don't have access to these perspectives in their social and cultural lives. Such access to queer perspectives can also be important for heterosexual people. In our episode, Diana and I shared how fanfiction provided us both with a crucial entryway to discovering sexual diversity which we didn't otherwise have access to:

Parinita: Queerness is not something that I encountered in school or my family because it's not something that, at least in my community, nobody really broached these topics about different gender or sexual identities. So my first encounter with these ideas was in fandom when as a 13-year-old, I discovered Harry Potter fanfiction.

[...]

Diana: [I] started reading fanfiction in high school. And it was really important to read slash especially then because there was even less queer representation in media than there is now. And so that's where I found a lot of what I wanted to see in terms of particularly lesbian and gay folks and relationships in fanfiction [...] I really relate to what you said about not having any sort of conceptions or examples or representations of queerness around you in your everyday life. Or your non-media, non-fandom life. Because I had a very similar experience [...] So fandom was very key in that sense. (MF Episode 9)

By sharing our experiences as fans from both marginalised and dominant cultures in this context, Diana and I highlighted how fan texts provided an important avenue of representation which went beyond the limitations of our personal and community networks. Such exposure to diverse representations can help queer fans find a way to negotiate their identities and cisgender/heterosexual fans to encounter and empathise with other experiences.

Since fan spaces offer opportunities for fans from different backgrounds to come together, fans bring forward numerous priorities and perspectives. This allows fans from different identities to learn about a diverse array of experiences. In preparation for our episode, **Milena**, a nonbinary fan, recommended 2 works of fanfiction – one they had authored (elmyra, 2019) and one they were a fan of (DontKillBugs, 2020). Both stories reflected Milena's background as the narratives negotiated gender identity and transgender experiences in different ways.

I was only distantly familiar with the 3 different fictional worlds the stories explored – a video game and 2 animated TV shows – so I wasn't prepared for the emotional impact of these heartfelt stories. Both stories navigated complex feelings and emotions around gender, the kind I didn't have experience with since I've always identified with the gender assigned to me at birth. Milena's contribution, both in terms of the fanfic they wrote and that they shared with me in preparation for our episode, used the fictional framework to offer a glimpse into the perspectives and inner feelings of people who *don't* identify with the gender they're assigned at birth and how they navigate the world. In multiple, creative ways, fan texts can offer lessons in other ways of being in the world.

For **Marita**, a polyamorous reader of fanfiction, fandom allowed her to encounter and envision relationship structures beyond traditional monogamous ones. She described how she first encountered polyamorous relationships in the fandom for the TV show *Merlin*. The show's canonical narrative positioned audiences to root for the heterosexual couples but fans zeroed in on the queer subtexts:

One of the things that I noticed in the fandom was that there was the option of shipping Arthur and Merlin, and Guinevere and Morgana. And

there was also a relatively prevalent tendency to just throw all 4 of them together. And be like, "Hello you're all dating now! Figure this shit out." [...] It introduced me to that as a possibility. – Marita

This shared relationship structure wasn't something Marita had previously considered. Marita outlined how fans adapted SFF writer Ursula Le Guin's work to explore the balance between genders and within interactions in polyamorous relationships. Their stories didn't always conflate romantic relationships with sexual relationships and offered nuanced alternatives to the dominant structures. Marita's exposure to a different norm in fanfiction ended up influencing her real-world relationships too:

I've ended up in a situation where I'm other people's either their gay Yoda or their polyamory Yoda. I'm like, "Yes, yes, come to me, child. Ask me thy questions. I will try to answer." Even though I do think that's completely unearned. Because I don't know what I'm doing. I'm reading fanfiction and dating. – Marita (MF Episode 17)

The experimental nature of fandom allows fans to develop ideas and possibilities about different sexualities, gender identities and relationships. Access to such representations – ones we hadn't been able to access in mainstream media or social contexts – allowed my co-participants and I to consider alternatives to ideas we had previously taken for granted. It had an impact on both people who identified with these representations – like Diana, Milena and Marita – as well as those who didn't – like me – but did learn about desires which differed from their/our own.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In the case of globally popular texts, the diversity of fans present in online fan communities means that fans encounter ideas which they may otherwise not have considered. Fans from both dominant and marginalised groups can learn from these new encounters and discuss issues from different viewpoints. Fans adapt their favourite texts to place their concerns at the forefront. Both the fictional and the fandom framework offer opportunities to reflect on different intersections of privilege and marginalisation.

This access to a wider range of perspectives can lead to a better understanding of diverse lives. Fans inhabiting different identities can shed light on their real-world observations and perspectives by discussing fictional characters and plotlines. People highlight experiences which draw on their own individual priorities and interests in both media and the real world that it reflects. This allows fans from other identities to learn about lives which don't mirror their own.

Popular media fandom allows fans to engage with a wider variety of lives than they may meet in their own personal or community contexts. When fans draw fictional parallels to real-world social and political scenarios, such analogies can teach about a range of histories and current events – particularly ones which tend to be underrepresented in fandom spaces where US- and UK-centred cultural discourses dominate. Such parallels also allow fans to learn about the nuances and

complexities of different cultural experiences in a range of contexts, many of which they may never have otherwise encountered. Exposure to a range of hitherto unfamiliar perspectives in fanish spaces can have an impact on fans from both marginalised and dominant groups – one to discover new facets of their own identities, the other to empathise with a different way of being in the world.

Chapter 6 “Where Do I Even Start?": Unlearning What To Think And Learning How To Think

6.1 Introduction

The first time I encountered the term critical literacy was during my master's degree. My lecturer discussed how important it was for educators to develop critical literacies among their students and the ways in which this could be done using children's books. But, in my school in Mumbai and most mainstream schools in India, critical literacy was an alien concept. I was taught what to think rather than how to think and questioning anything was not appreciated by most teachers. However, I realised that I had encountered multiple examples in different informal contexts online. Digital spaces – including but not limited to fan communities – are full of instances of critical literacy.

Accessing other people's online conversations and analyses helped me become aware of issues I hadn't considered previously. Their perspectives allowed me to reflect on my own assumptions and challenge some of my biases. After I encountered discussions about the politics of representation, I began analysing all my favourite media and noticed the astonishing lack of diversity, not just in terms of race, but also other marginalised identities. Once you become aware of this dominant gaze, it's difficult to unsee it. I now constantly seek and appreciate books, television shows and movies which include diverse representations. While critical literacy wasn't a skill I developed in school, it is an approach I discovered and I'm still learning on the internet.

This chapter explores how different fan perspectives offer opportunities to unlearn socially conditioned assumptions and learn new ways of understanding the world:

- The first section explores how fan conversations can raise people's consciousness about a wide range of issues. Media representations build the canon of our imagination. Such representations can shape as well as restrict imaginations and possibilities. By unpacking multiple layers of meaning in mainstream narratives, fans can draw attention to default social scripts in media as well as their implications in the real world
- Next, I describe how fan texts allow people to identify and interrogate their gaps in knowledge. Access to diverse interpretations and perspectives offers fans the space to reflect on their beliefs and biases. Fan conversations draw attention to previously unconsidered ideas and enable fans to learn from these different opinions
- Finally, the chapter features examples of fan conversations providing access to new and unfamiliar contexts. Popular media attracts fans from all over the world. These fans share a diverse array of experiences. Their multiple perspectives and diverse opinions challenge and expand some preconceived notions. Discussions of different personal histories and frustrations offer fresh insights into diverse identities and cultures

6.2 The consciousness-raising possibilities of fan conversations

Media influences people right from when they're young. This is complicated by the fact that a limited group of people is responsible for producing a large part of mainstream representations. These representations and stereotypes are accepted unquestioningly by a significant portion of the audience and go on to become the norm (Kellner and Share, 2005; Livingstone, 2004). According to critical literacy scholars, "language and texts [are] a primary means for representing and reshaping the world and what is possible in society" (Johnson et al., 2016: p. 185-86). In alternative sites of pedagogy online, people can create and share knowledge by talking to each other in informal, everyday contexts (Chun, 2018; Kellner and Kim, 2010). Critical media literacy can counter the stereotypical messages perpetuated by mass media when people talk to each other about the images they consume and the contexts in which they are created (Patterson et al., 2016).

Counter-storytelling features the perspectives of groups which are underrepresented and/or marginalised in mainstream culture. This form of public pedagogy empowers people from these cultures to raise consciousness about their experiences and provide an alternative source of knowledge to dominant narratives (Quayle et al., 2016). The *Imaginary Worlds* episode "Fan Fiction Don't Judge" discussed how fanfiction was more diverse than mainstream Western media since it featured a more varied group of creators. Fanfiction provides an alternative framework for stories by expanding the possibilities of who creates stories and by including a diversity of perspectives, something that the host Eric hadn't considered (Molinsky, 2017a).

As I explore below, for me and my co-participants, access to under-represented perspectives helped us explore and challenge the ways in which media representations empowered certain groups and disadvantaged others. Fan texts allow fans to unpack layers of meaning in representations of their favourite fictional characters, events and worlds (McGregor, 2019). My co-participants and I exercised our critical literacy skills when we evaluated and analysed information based on our prior experiences and background knowledge in order to investigate whose perspectives dominate and whose are misrepresented or missing in popular culture (Buckingham, 2015b; Livingstone, 2004; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004; Peters and Lankshear, 1996).

Dialogue around popular texts can stimulate discussions about a wide range of social and political issues (Wright and Wright, 2015). Fans who bring their multiple skills and knowledges into conversations allow others to expand the scope of the topics being discussed. Fan critiques about issues like race, gender, sexual equality and social justice in media and fandom have acted as consciousness-raising tools. Such conversations highlighted these issues to other fans who hadn't considered them previously and allowed them to shift their perspectives and develop more nuanced interpretations of their favourite texts (Carlton, 2018; De Kosnik, 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016; Pande, 2017). By learning from each other's diverse backgrounds and knowledges, a collaborative learning environment emerges which can go on to influence people's interactions with media, culture and society at large.

In online fan spaces, fans from marginalised groups who didn't previously recognise their marginalisation can encounter texts and critical perspectives that discuss liberation which can, in turn, help them reframe their experiences (Gounari, 2009; Pande, 2017; Shor, 1999). Such fan conversations influence both those who participate in such interactions as well as those who encounter them as audiences. Springgay and The Torontonians (2013) proposed that participatory projects have two audiences: the participants who work with the facilitator to co-create the work and a secondary audience who encounters this finished project. Fan podcasts, like other fan texts, resemble participatory projects where the hosts and guests form the first kind of audience whereas listeners belong to the second. Both audiences engage with digital texts differently and they may also leave with different interpretations and lessons.

The *Witch, Please* co-hosts discussed how fan analyses and critiques about theories, themes, power relationships and identities in the fictional world can help unveil their manifestations in the real world (Kosman and McGregor, 2020c). In the fanzine "Harry Potter and the Problematic Author", Maia Kobabe (2019) described how discovering the critical discussions in the fan podcasts *Witch, Please* and *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* brought new interpretations and analyses to light and completely changed eir engagement with the *Harry Potter* series as well as with the real world. Similarly, conversations around my favourite fictional texts have significantly influenced my own opinions and continue to reshape the ways in which I engage with culture and society.

When fan conversations identify and question the default frameworks in their favourite media texts, their points shed light on how these frameworks undergird social, cultural and political structures in the real world. Our discussions about whose stories are privileged and whose are marginalised in media representations helped my co-participants and I explore which cultures dominate in the real world. Such an intersectional analysis reveals multi-layered structures of power and domination (Cho et al., 2013). It also encourages people to engage with the conditions which shape and influence the frameworks through which cultural knowledge is produced and disseminated (ibid). Such critical engagements allowed me and my co-participants to link separate experiences and perspectives together in order to understand the impact of mainstream media on mainstream imaginations.

6.2.1 Drawing attention to default social scripts

Conversations among fans from different backgrounds can identify, challenge and expand perceptions about who is the default audience of various media texts. This presumed default varies across different contexts. In an episode exploring representations of disability in media, I shared my experiences as a former children's bookseller. My book recommendations which featured characters with visible disabilities on the cover were frequently met with outright dismissal. I discussed how the parents believed that these books weren't meant for their able-bodied and neurotypical children. In response, **Sanjana**, a fan and parent herself, shared her own experience where representation of a disability met with bemusement:

This was a conversation that happened in our house only where somebody gave us [a spotting] game – I have a 2-year-old. One of the people playing the game on the cover was a person in a wheelchair. And my mum looked at it and said, “Why do they need to show someone in a wheelchair?” And both of us said, “Why not? Why shouldn’t there be someone on a wheelchair?” And it was so easy to explain it to a 2-year-old and it isn’t even that [...] daily a part of our lives. – Sanjana (MF Episode 6)

Sanjana shared her own experience of realising which audiences are the perceived default when confronted with someone else’s assumptions. She challenged preconceived notions by drawing attention to them; by questioning the implication that stories about disabilities were only meant for people with disabilities, whereas stories about dominant identities were expected to gain broad, universal appeal. Her contribution offered opportunities to analyse whose perspectives are catered to in mainstream representations and what this says about whose lives are valued more in mainstream society.

Another co-participant shared their encounter with a similar line of argument, albeit one which focused on a different identity. **Milena**, a bisexual fan, discussed how their parents expressed annoyance whenever they encountered gay characters in media:

I have this exact same problem with my own parents who again [sighs] are not even conservative, just ignorant, frankly. And to an extent also refusing to engage. And because they have extremely limited media exposure, I struggle to even have those conversations with them because it’s like where do I even start? Particularly when my father goes, “Oh why do they have to just shove it down my throat all the time?” I’m like well, why not? I get to see all of the straight people in media as well [...] But I deal with it. – Milena (MF Episode 21)

Milena’s point highlighted how in a lot of mainstream media, heterosexuality has traditionally been the default – both in terms of the fictional characters being portrayed as well as the audiences these stories are aimed at. As they pointed out, heteronormative representations became standard and anything counter to that was considered to be an overemphasised trend by heterosexual audiences. Milena believed that even when queer people *were* represented, these portrayals largely emerged from and appealed to the heteronormative gaze. They lamented the pitiable state of representation of sexual diversity in media where both queer creators and audiences struggled to represent/recognise themselves fully and complexly in media. In this instance, as a queer fan, the mainstream default excluded Milena’s identities and experiences. By articulating such assumptions, Milena identified the limitations in people’s imaginations and invited a questioning of taken-for-granted ideas. By sharing their wide range of experiences and perspectives, fans can challenge and expand assumptions about different identities.

Discussions about media, characters and plots highlight the role these representations play in shaping people’s imaginations. By highlighting issues which accompanied mainstream notions of norms and otherness in media and society, fans like Sanjana and Milena encouraged others to question whose lives

and identities people are measured against. Our episodes helped us identify ideas which are taken for granted and discuss how these limited representations limit ideas of what is possible. Such questions and critical reflections can help people identify and unlearn ideas they have previously not considered and begin to learn a new way of understanding the politics of representation.

6.2.2 Unpacking multiple layers of meaning

Critical literacy is important for people belonging to both marginalised and dominant groups. Not only do marginalised communities have the opportunity to challenge the stories that are told about them, but dominant culture populations can also begin to question normative ideas. Fans draw on their different identities and interests to interpret and decode media. Other fans pointing out issues can make these ideas obvious in ways they weren't before. Talking to people from different backgrounds can help fans expand and challenge some of their assumptions. Such an analysis can help others make hitherto unnoticed connections and provoke a changed point of view.

For many people, fanfiction was (and for some continues to be) seen as something inferior. There's a stigma against fanfic where it's perceived to only be about sex; a view which is exacerbated by mainstream media critics and presenters who find and highlight the raunchiest examples of fanfic they can find (Stanish et al., 2015). In our episode, **Alison**, a fanfiction reader, interrogated this view by analysing which ideas and identities were targeted. She argued that fanfiction receives such widespread denigration because it is a female-dominated space:

A thing that is of interest to girls is automatically considered to be of low quality and a bit silly. If a teenage boy has his walls plastered with Led Zeppelin posters [...] that's somehow okay because he's idolising the guitar playing and the lyricism and the musicality. But [...] when I was a teenage girl, I had Duran Duran and Adam Ant posters all over my bedroom wall. But you know it would be assumed that I was doing that because I fancied them. Which yes, I did. But that wasn't the only reason. It was also that sense of camaraderie of being around other girls who shared my interests. – Alison

Alison contributed to the alternative discourse among both fans and scholars who argue that a significant proportion of fanfiction is written by fans from marginalised genders and identities, including teenage girls and cis women. These groups rarely see multifaceted representations of their experiences in mainstream media, which is why they turn to fandom to explore issues which matter to them in ways which centre their perspectives and priorities (De Kosnik, 2016; Derecho, 2006; Handley, 2010; McGuire, 2018; Molinsky, 2018b; Rosenblatt and Tushnet, 2015; Viars and Coker, 2015).

Alison cited examples to outline how the crux of this dismissal was gendered in nature. She highlighted the hypocrisy when it came to criticisms about “Mary Sues” – a fanfiction term used to denote wish-fulfilment stories written by teenage girls and women who insert thinly-veiled versions of themselves into their favourite worlds:

A lot of thrillers written by men for men. We can see [...] the Marty Stu all over those. We can see the kind of rugged and handsome and incredibly clever and incredibly strong and always-gets-the-girl hero. – Alison (MF Episode 4)

Alison's point alluded to the fact that mainstream media was full of male heroes who were also pure wish-fulfilment characters written by men for men. The only difference? They didn't attract criticisms for being "Marty Stus"; they're the norm. When women try to resist and reclaim this norm through fanfiction, the entire genre is mocked and dismissed. Through her analysis, Alison unpacked and interrogated the gendered connotations of ideas popularised in mainstream discourse.

Decoding media texts isn't a skill that develops instantaneously – it's an ongoing process. If fans don't have the contextual knowledge, experience or resources to be able to unpack the meaning within media, accessing examples of other people doing it can help train their brains to do the same. Fans who analyse media representations through the lens of identities they're personally invested in can allow others to recognise their own experiences in ways they may not have before. Encountering critical fan perspectives allowed me and some of my co-participants to become more attuned to gaps in media portrayals of certain identities. While discussing representations of women in media, **Aparna, Sanjana** and I listened to the *Breaking The Glass Slipper* episode "Where are the Tampons?" which explores the erasure of women's bodily functions in media (Leigh et al., 2018b). This inspired our own discussion about which aspects of womanhood don't get space in mainstream media:

I was hearing this NPR interview of Phoebe Waller-Bridge. And her show in the very first episode has a scene of masturbation [...] She said [...] it was funny how shocking it was like it was some big secret and how it's represented as so normal for men [...] But for women, it's seen as some deeply selfish transgressive thing. It brings me back to what you said about the erasure of women's bodily functions. And how women taking pleasure in anything is seen as something very subversive but it's not. It's normal. It's a human trait to do that. – Aparna (MF Episode 19)

Listening to other people talk about these issues opened our eyes to ideas we hadn't previously thought about. This consciousness-raising emerged in the informal contexts of media representation and fandom. It helped Aparna to analyse whose perspectives were the default and how they permeated across mainstream media. In turn, she made connections and came to new realisations about the all-pervasive male-gaze in media. When other women shared their experiences and observations, we were able to learn from them and link our shared examples to broader cultural contexts (Eddo-Lodge, 2018).

Fans who decode the multiple layers of meaning within media texts go on to raise awareness about different issues. Encountering fan interpretations and opinions can shape how people understand the representations of different identities – including their own. Thinking about whose pleasures are acceptable and in what

ways helped us unpack and explore the social scripts and structures both in stories as well as societies.

6.3 Identifying and interrogating limitations in knowledge

When fans from different backgrounds discuss topics collectively, they can acquire critical insight into a wide range of topics and can more effectively question established cultural and social norms (Shor, 1999). Their collective analyses lead to increased insight over individual interpretations and enhances the meaning-making process (Kelley and Jenkins, 2013). Adopting and seeking out multiple viewpoints allowed me and my co-participants to see the diverse possibilities of an issue based on the diverse contexts of fans (Mulcahy, 2008). The collective agency enabled by access to such multimodal texts and multiple perspectives offers several opportunities to develop and practice critical literacies (Gounari, 2009; McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004; Peters and Lankshear, 1996).

Fan texts use the framework of popular media to draw attention to new, potentially unfamiliar, ideas and create a better understanding of different topics. The cisgender co-hosts of *Breaking The Glass Slipper* invited guest Cheryl Morgan to educate them and their listeners about transgender representations in SFF media. One of the hosts shared that she only first heard the term cis in her late 20s since gender identity wasn't an issue which was discussed in most of the spaces she inhabited. Encountering such perspectives within the framework of fandom helped educate her about a range of diverse identities she otherwise wouldn't have come across (Leigh et al., 2019b). Fan interpretations and analyses about media representations can help fill gaps in knowledge and address those areas that people are ignorant about. Participating in such conversations or encountering them as audiences provides fans an opportunity to practice critical literacies by reflecting on their beliefs and biases.

Actively participating in fan conversations isn't the only way in which fan texts expand people's thinking. Based on a survey of fans of *Harry Potter* reread podcasts, McGregor (2019) found that listening to fan podcasts allowed fans to encounter ideas and interpretations they hadn't previously considered. Here, the fans didn't need to appear on the podcast to have their ideas influenced. The collective and public discussions allowed listeners to access and develop new understandings in light of new information. In *Marginally Fannish*, for me and at least some of my co-participants, reading the fan texts we shared with each other shaped our perspectives even before we spoke to each other in our episodes. Bury's (2017) study found that many fans frequent online spaces which feature collective fan interpretations and critiques. Some fans checked their reactions to others' reactions and were open to acquiring new information and having their interpretations expanded or changed. Many participants did not actively post but reading others' posts and conversations influenced their own understanding and opinions (ibid).

People – from both marginalised and dominant cultures – who encounter such conversations can access multiple interpretations and diverse viewpoints, potentially leading to a reformulation of ideas (Jenkins, 2006). Fan conversations

demonstrate critical literacies by collectively challenging dominant ideologies, highlighting critical perspectives of wider social practices, and respecting diverse experiences and perspectives (Luke, 2012; McLeod and Vasinda, 2008; Peters and Lankshear, 1996). As writer Rebecca Solnit pointed out, such discussions in different public spaces can result in new conceptions about different identities and experiences. Such a process of critical education – where one finds and fills new knowledge-gaps – is never finished. As she said, “I have learned so much. I have so much to learn” (Solnit, 2019a).

Gaztambide-Fernandez and Arraiz Matute (2013) argued that a public pedagogy involves interactions where one or more of the people involved push against the others’ knowledge and experiences in an effort to provoke change and to learn new perspectives. Feria-Galicia (2011) found that engaging in dialogue with diverse groups of people – both in-person and in online spaces – provided opportunities for people to practice self-reflexivity where they began to question their own beliefs, assumptions and worldviews.

The *Imaginary Worlds* episode “Dumbledore’s Army” featured Andrew Slack, founder of the non-profit social justice organisation *The Harry Potter Alliance*, and Jackson Bird, a *Harry Potter* fan who came out as a trans man while working there. In the episode, Andrew Slack acknowledged that before he knew Jackson’s identity, even though he considered himself to be progressive, he had a blind-spot when it came to transgender people. Before Jackson’s transition, both of them used to get into debates about trans issues. Jackson’s public announcement that he was trans forced Andrew to confront his internalised prejudices in order to be able to better support his friend (Molinsky, 2016a). In an updated version of this episode, the podcast host himself acknowledged an error he had made in the previous version where he had referred to Jackson by his pre-transition name. The new episode included a section where he and Jackson talked about how their understanding about using a trans person’s old name had changed and grown (Molinsky, 2020). Here, critical literacy developed when people became self-aware of their positions and contexts on a larger social scale, and how social, cultural and political systems work to privilege some and marginalise others (Mulcahy, 2008).

Fans who openly share their journeys from ignorance to a better understanding of a topic can provide an educational space for potential audiences. The co-hosts of *Witch, Please* have similarly edited their episodes in light of listener feedback. At the same time, they make sure to explicitly acknowledge their errors in their edited episodes so that their learning is visible and publicly accessible (McGregor, 2021). Being critically literate doesn’t mean people are free from contradictions, inconsistencies and biases (Mulcahy, 2008). But accessing diverse ideas and conversations can allow fans to view their attitudes and behaviours in a new light. In online fan spaces, critical literacy is a non-linear, ongoing, evolving process – a work in progress without any one correct or universal model which can be applied to all contexts (Bonsor Kurki, 2015; Luke, 2012; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). As I explore below, fan conversations offer different opportunities for not only critically analysing media and fan texts but also people’s own assumptions.

6.3.1 Space to reflect on beliefs and biases

This section features several examples with me and my Indian co-hosts **Sanjana** and **Aparna**. Both of them appeared on 6 episodes altogether over a period of 10 months unlike my other co-participants who only appeared on single episodes. Because of this, we were collectively able to explore how our thinking about a range of different identities had evolved over a longer period. This allowed us more room to explore the limitations in our knowledge and reflect on our beliefs.

We used our episode conversations to discuss some of our biases and blind-spots and described how we were learning to unlearn them. In one instance, we discussed our assumptions about gender and sexual identity. I shared how, until I started researching for this project, I had long conflated the two since I had largely encountered conversations which lumped both identities together. Had someone asked me to explain the difference between them, I would have been at a loss. It was only via accessing other people's first-person perspectives both within and beyond fandom that I was able to understand them as distinct identities. This prompted Sanjana to share her own learning and unlearning process:

[I had the same confusion] for actually quite the longest time. I think the journey is similar. My understanding came from wanting to educate myself and to understand it better. And so now I'm beginning to get a better sense of the difference between the two. It's more reading and more people talking around me and meeting newer people that helped me understand this. – Sanjana

For the episode in question, we were discussing sexuality. However, this confusion had come up while planning the previous episode where we focused on gender identity. I noticed that some of the texts suggested in our shared Google document conflated both identities in ways that I had only recently begun to unlearn. I raised this point with both Sanjana and Aparna who decided they didn't know enough about either identity and went off to conduct some more research. As it had done for me earlier, listening to other people's perspectives – again, both within and beyond the context of fandom – helped them come to a more accurate understanding of identities which didn't reflect their own. In fact, as Aparna argued in the same episode, it was *because* these identities didn't have a direct impact on our lives that we could choose to be ignorant about them. This privilege wasn't accorded to those who didn't identify with heteronormativity or cisnormativity:

I think because we're so far removed – at least I was – from encountering many of these identities in our daily lives, I didn't end up even trying to find out for a long time. So there was a lot of unlearning that I had to do before I started educating myself because, like you said, all these identities are clubbed together so often. Now it seems so obvious to me that gender identity and sexuality are so completely different. Since we just hear it as one term and always mentioned in the same breath, unless you start looking at more nuanced experiences and read up a little more in detail, it's hard to be able to figure these things out initially. But when you start

to educate yourself, it's actually all there and it's quite easy too. – Aparna (MF Episode 22)

As Aparna pointed out, we hadn't been motivated to learn about these different identities previously. We had been content to live with our imperfect understanding. Such an interrogation of beliefs and taken-for-granted ideas may have occurred even if we hadn't participated in the podcast. But the space, format and themes of the episodes offered us the opportunity to actively engage in such research and discussion. Additionally, both in this episode and others, we signposted resources – articles, essays and fan texts – which featured the perspectives of people from different backgrounds and which had aided us in educating ourselves.

As fans from dominant cultures in many of the contexts we were discussing, encountering other fans' conversations and perspectives helped us better recognise our own privilege and ignorance about certain identities (see MF Episodes 2, 6, 13, 19, 22). It further encouraged us to find ways to educate ourselves so we could understand diverse experiences in more complex and nuanced ways. We were able to analyse some of our assumptions in light of new insights. This process also helped us realise that even though the 3 of us considered ourselves relatively well-informed and open-minded, we still had a lot of learning and unlearning left to do.

In fandom spaces, critical counternarratives identify which elements are oppressive and misrepresent people and beliefs, and then reframe these to present the oppressed groups more authentically (Curwood and Gibbons, 2009). *Marginally Fannish* episodes also offered a space to share alternative narratives that challenged the mainstream norm. When my co-participants highlighted some of the persistent stereotypes which exist in media, this gave others – including myself – a chance to learn about these stereotypes and their damaging impacts – something they may never have thought about before simply because these identities didn't reflect their own.

Ziv, an Orthodox Jewish fan, critiqued the ever-present trope in SFF media of religious people as extremist and adversarial. He argued that there were rarely any empathetic portrayals of religious people which tried to explore the different ways in which they engaged with the world. He used the example of *Station Eleven*, a book set in a post-apocalyptic future, to expand his critique. In it, the primary antagonist known as "The Prophet" uses the framework of religion to create authoritarian communities. Ziv drew on his own experiences and knowledge to outline why the way the Prophet's rise to power is presented didn't resemble any of the ways in which a religion emerged:

If you look at how the Prophet is constructed, it's a character who is presented as being intensely unlikable. This is not a charismatic person. And yet, somehow, he has converted town upon town, community on community, to do exactly what he says even when he's not around, by no mechanism. All the mechanisms of religion are mechanisms of community; of having a community that acts in certain ways and in certain interests. But you get the impression of the Prophet as somebody

who is kind of this spoiled kid. But he comes to a place, he says, "I'm a Prophet and you should behave in these horrible ways and punish everybody who disagrees." And apparently everybody just goes along with that for no apparent reason. – Ziv

Ziv didn't think the Prophet was creating a religion at all. He criticised the fact that the narrative was using the framework of religion to paint religious people as wholly negative:

If he was the leader of a gang of thugs who found the first weapons cache and just built on that, that would make sense. But putting it into the trappings of religion, it just doesn't follow any of the natural progression that a faith or a community does. It's just using the clothing of religion in order to say we don't actually need to justify why these people are being so horrible. Rather, religion is something that gives people permission to be horrible, and that's the only explanation you need. – Ziv (MF Episode 15)

I'm not religious so I wasn't able to pick up on these themes. I had loved *Station Eleven* when I first read it. Before recording our episode, Ziv had emailed me with some brief comments which signalled his wariness about the anti-religion sentiment of the book – a book which he otherwise thought was good and compelling. Even when I reread the book with his comments in mind, I hadn't seen the problem; I thought that since such people *did* exist in the real world, it wasn't entirely unrealistic. Indeed, the representation only fed into my own suspicion of religion and how it could be used to perpetuate violence in different real-world societies.

However, the more I thought about it both before and during our conversation on the episode, I realised that if this was your only representation of religious people in media – both entertainment and news – it does a great disservice to all those people who *don't* fit into these limited ideas. Not all religious people are violent or authoritarian. But media often tends to showcase the most extreme incidents and largely overlooks tales of religious people's more everyday engagements with their faith. Ziv interrogated the book – along with a few other examples of SFF media – to identify whose version of events was being highlighted, which perspectives were included, whose lives were excluded, and whose interests were served by the representations. By doing this, he offered me another way to interpret both the book and religious people's representations overall. His points in the episode helped me to reorient my thinking as I discovered new ways of understanding the issue.

6.3.2 Encounters with previously unconsidered ideas

As seen above, accessing other fans' perspectives allows people to gain a broader understanding of different experiences – especially in instances where they don't have personal experience with the themes and identities being discussed. In the past, when we had (re)read *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, **Sanjana** and I often wondered why Harry was so angry all the time and attributed it to

adolescent angst. However, alternate fan interpretations of Harry's behaviour offered us a perspective we hadn't considered before:

Parinita: There were people who were identifying all the different behaviours and signs and symptoms because they have experience with PTSD. And that made me think of the character in this whole other way

[...]

Sanjana: I till date keep citing the fifth book as my least favourite because it has Harry just whining through the whole thing. And when you pointed this out [...] it really does throw things in a new light and it really does help understand the development of the character or what the character is going through a lot more. (MF Episode 6)

Here, fan discussions which outlined the real-world symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) helped Sanjana and I not only make better sense of Harry's fictional character development but also understand a real-world mental disability – something which we had very little knowledge of. We weren't alone in our relatively-recent understanding of Harry's rage in the book. Fans on other podcasts discussed how they initially found his behaviour annoying until they viewed it through the lens of depression and PTSD. Others shared how their own experiences with trauma and abuse allowed them to recognise Harry's attitude as mirroring their own (Molinsky, 2016b; Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2018b). Fan conversations centred around media representations can expand the possibilities inherent within the text and in people's understanding. In fact, fans who made connections between Harry's behaviour and background and their own experiences of suffering helped me unpack some of my experiences of childhood trauma, and resulted in a better understanding of my mental status as an adult – something I explore in Chapter 7.

Aparna, Sanjana and I have grown up with and loved the *Harry Potter* world. We also consider ourselves feminists. However, we hadn't given too much thought to the problematic gender politics within the books until one of our episodes on *Marginally Fannish*. It was in the podcast *Woke Doctor Who* where I first encountered the idea of internalised misogyny within the *Harry Potter* books. The co-hosts, reread the series with a more critical gaze and realised that the characters as well as the narrative itself were quite dismissive of women (Eugenia and Toya, 2020). This point was further bolstered by different fan podcast episodes (Blount and Grey, 2020a; Davis and Jordan, 2018; Kosman and McGregor, 2016c; 2016d; Zoltan and Nedelman, 2019e).

While preparing for Episode 19, I was keen to explore this further with Aparna and Sanjana and suggested it as a theme. We gained a better understanding of how gender was represented once we encountered some fan perspectives which explicitly highlighted these issues. Once these fan texts pointed it out, it was difficult to unsee it. Armed with these critical insights, we analysed the theme in our own episode and described the examples which stood out to us that reified the troubling way female characters were treated in the books. One of the things Aparna noticed was that if you wanted to be taken seriously in the Potterverse, you needed to abhor all traditionally feminine things:

This extends to many of the other girls in the book who are not Hermione or who are looked at from Hermione's point of view or how they are always giggling and they are always in a group and they are always drawing hearts and things like that. It's such a overreaction to girly things and girls are only given girly things and pink is only for girls. And now and then it's tilted to this complete extreme like if you want to be taken seriously, you cannot like any of these things anymore. You have to rise above all these girly things. – Aparna (MF Episode 19)

Our conversation with each other as well as our encounters with other fan perspectives allowed us to unpack the limited gender politics within a beloved book series. By offering new insights, fan conversations allowed us to understand things we hadn't considered when left to our own devices. They provided us with a new lens with which to see the world and helped us question things we had previously accepted without much thought.

6.4 Access to new and unfamiliar contexts

New media technology allows for a participatory model of education and culture where multiple people – particularly those from marginalised groups – can interact with each other to create and share knowledge (Kellner and Kim, 2010). Alternative media such as podcasts can encourage a collaborative literacy through dialogue which leaves room for multiple experiences and perspectives. These can raise awareness of issues which one may not otherwise come across in mainstream media and society (Bianchi-Pennington, 2018; Carlton, 2018; Weiner, 2014). Conversations within these contexts can offer opportunities for fans to question their received knowledge and immediate experience about different identities, thereby developing and practising critical literacies (Shor, 1999).

Fans analyse power relationships within the text and the real world by interrogating their favourite texts to see who is disadvantaged and whose perspective is highlighted (Janks et al., 2018; Kelley and Jenkins, 2013). Fan texts act as counternarratives which use the fictional framework to not only question the established norms of the fictional world but also use it as a gateway to discuss real-world structures. My co-participants and I employed critical literacies to question the larger systems, assumptions and dominant norms which surrounded the text and our own lives (Bonsor Kurki, 2015). Examining norms from multiple perspectives helped us disrupt commonplace notions of norms and values (McLeod and Vasinda, 2008).

Similarly, several podcast episodes hosted by transgender, nonbinary and cisgender *Harry Potter* fans addressed J. K. Rowling's tweets and messages in 2019-2020. These were perceived to be transphobic by a significant portion of the *Harry Potter* fandom. Some fans specifically decoded and analysed these messages in order to educate themselves and their audiences about the transphobic implications within them. Additionally, this discourse prompted fans to research the history of transphobia in the British feminist movement and share their findings with their audiences. They also signposted more resources for listeners to follow up on and educate themselves (Anelli et al., 2019; Klink and Minkel, 2020).

These fans critiqued the fact that these gender-critical and trans-exclusionary conversations divided women along certain lines; subsequently, only one facet of identity i.e. sex was centred at the cost of all others like gender identity, race, religion or social class. Several fans called for a more intersectional feminist movement which considered and addressed everybody's struggles together rather than pushing forward a universal experience based on the most privileged faction within a marginalised group (Leigh et al., 2019b).

Intersectionality work involves constant self-reflection and critique in order to challenge assumptions and to expand the scope of what is being investigated (Okolosié, 2014). Social interactions in online spaces often transcend national boundaries. Here, people can be a part of the majority and minority simultaneously which means that different contexts of domination and oppression need to be considered (Purkayastha, 2012). Intersectional analyses need to be contextualised so that the lived experiences of marginalised groups can provide deeper understandings of political and structural intersections in different settings (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). People's social experiences are necessarily different, based on their historical and geographical positions; thus the kind of structural inequalities also differ as do people's views about both their own as well as other people's marginalisation (Collins, 2015).

According to Luke (2012), one of the aims of critical literacy is transforming dominant ideologies, cultures, economies, institutions and political systems so that they include differently marginalised groups of people. By analysing media, my co-participants and I became aware of how they represented the world. By creating our own texts, we shared our diverse social, cultural, political contexts which may not be represented or may be misrepresented in dominant narratives (Wohlwend and Lewis, 2011). By recognising and acknowledging different interpretations and experiences, we could better understand how to navigate diverse spaces (Kelley and Jenkins, 2013).

6.4.1 Challenging preconceived notions with diverse perspectives

Fan conversations can help people see the world through the lens of multiple identities. Fans from different backgrounds who come together around a shared interest can form a more contextual understanding of issues like poverty in both fictional and real-world contexts. While discussing social class in the *Harry Potter* books, **Alison**, **Rita** and I drew on our different experiences of wealth inequalities in England, the Philippines and India. In the series, the Weasleys are presented as a poor family. As I've written in Chapter 5, Alison, an English fan, argued that even within a British context, she didn't think they were particularly impoverished. Her own working-class upbringing led her to propose that the Weasleys had significant amounts of social, cultural and financial capital (MF Episode 4).

Rita was from the Philippines while I'm from India. Both of us had a vastly different understanding of poverty than the examples we encountered in the *Harry Potter* books and other Western media. In our episode, we shared how when we first encountered the representation of the Weasleys as poor in the books, we ascribed it to a British version of poverty which didn't match our experiences in our home

countries. However, both of us moved to the UK as postgraduate students. We were able to disrupt our assumptions about deprivation in the UK only after we witnessed and understood how people lived in poverty here – an image we didn't have access to back home. When we revisited the Weasleys, we placed their representation in light of what we now knew about poverty in the UK:

When you come here into the UK, you learn that a lot of poor families use food banks. The Weasleys never had a problem with hunger. I mean it was Molly's stamp of pride that she always fed her family and she fed poor Harry [...] There are many living a much poorer life than the Weasleys [...] They always seemed to have fresh food. They never seemed to eat something that was canned or frozen. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

New information about a context Rita had only previously read about helped her – and me – make connections which weren't as obvious to her/us before. By placing these ideas in a fictional framework, Rita was better able to articulate and explore the discrepancies in her own assumptions and share what she had learned and unlearned. She highlighted how her understanding had expanded and changed through a combination of fandom and real-world encounters.

Marginally Fannish episodes were ostensibly dedicated to exploring our favourite media. However, like other fans, my co-participants and I couldn't help but talk about different political, social and cultural issues that mattered to us. We drew on multiple sources – including news media and current events – to inform our opinions and bolster our arguments about different intersectional identities. In many episodes, we shared our opinions and frustrations about real-world issues, especially those which were freshly relevant at the time or those which we felt really passionately about.

For me and some of my fellow cisgender co-participants like **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, conversations around J. K. Rowling's tweets and messages in 2019 and 2020 – seen as transphobic by many people – were a revelation about an identity we had previously not given much thought to. Since we were not very familiar with the discourse that existed in either the trans-inclusive or the gender-critical part of the feminist movement, we carried out our own research to understand what exactly was happening. The discussions about privilege and oppression when it came to positioning cis women against trans women helped us learn about a range of trans people's experiences as well as the history of prejudice against them. Other fans' responses to Rowling's tweets were instrumental in helping us unpack the issue and form a better understanding of a marginalised identity that we didn't inhabit. These perspectives, which included but weren't limited to trans fans and activists, often offered further resources with more research about trans rights and transphobia in different contexts. These different resources made up for our lack of knowledge and lived experience by helping us understand what was problematic in ways we wouldn't have otherwise been able to:

The fact that seeing other people's rights as a threat to your rights, is just such a narrow-minded view of equality or of representation in general. – Aparna

While researching for our episode, Aparna was moved by a letter written by a trans *Harry Potter* fan. On reading this first-person account as well as other criticisms about misrepresentations in media, it was evident to Aparna that this wasn't an abstract topic of discussion but something deeply personal and important to trans people:

I was reading this very heart-breaking but beautifully written article by a transgender woman who's a fan of Harry Potter. And it was her response to what's going on saying that, "I understand why she feels threatened but what about my rights?" And then she starts comparing how she saw Harry Potter as a metaphor for her gender identity. How when he enters the wizarding world, even though there are problems there, that's where he finally feels like himself. Whereas when he's in the Muggle world, he never felt understood. And how she saw that as a parallel to her own experience that finally when she figured out her identity is when she felt like she'd found her Hogwarts so to speak. – Aparna (MF Episode 19)

As she pointed out in Section 6.3 above, since the 3 of us were on the privileged end of the spectrum, we never had to think about these things and were happily ignorant when it came to queer representations. This discourse, which had become a prominent part of the fandom conversation in our corners of the internet, familiarised us with these issues. Access to the perspectives and unfamiliar contexts of people from marginalised backgrounds allowed us to become more aware of their problems. The diverse community around *Harry Potter* fandom helped take us out of our echo chambers.

Based on all the fan responses I've encountered as well as my own emotions, this has been a difficult time for many *Harry Potter* fans who also support trans people's rights. Some fans have had to disengage from the Potterverse and its fandom entirely; others have had to negotiate their own ethical boundaries with how they/we continue engaging with the world which means so much to them/us – something I explore in Chapter 9. In the midst of all this, the difficult conversations have allowed trans fans to share their experiences and cis fans to learn from them.

6.4.2 Insights into people's personal histories and frustrations

Fans' different histories and frustrations can help people reflect on a range of issues. Bringing together different interests and priorities can allow fans to learn from each other's contributions. In the episode with **H**, a Japanese co-participant who had spent a year in England, we discussed a selection of 3 films – all of which he had recommended. Our episode focused on representations of race and racism in these 3 movies. The umbrella of racial representations allowed us to discuss topics which resonated with our own experiences.

I brought up a scene in the movie *Last Christmas* which had stood out to me in a way which I uncomfortably recognised from my own encounters as an Indian person in the UK. While watching the movie, I made particular note of the character Santa – aka Huang Quing Shin – an East Asian woman in the UK who keeps adopting nicknames based on where she's working because white British

people find it too difficult to pronounce her original name. In a previous job at a bakery, she was Muffin; now in a Christmas shop, her name is Santa.

Based on this scene, I spoke about how the first time I had encountered this practice was when I moved to the UK and discovered that many Chinese classmates adopted traditionally Anglo names. I also shared how uncomfortable this practice made me with its inherent privileging of native English-speakers like myself. I felt strongly about the politics of Asian names in Western countries since as an Asian immigrant in the UK, it's not something I would have considered doing myself. However, as I acknowledged in the episode, I didn't know what Chinese students themselves thought about this widespread cultural practice. My outrage drew on my own feelings, which may not have mirrored those of the people who were actually impacted. H himself didn't seem as bothered by the idea:

I was wondering if I should have my English name or not while I was there. But my name is [spells out name here]. So it's not really hard to pronounce for a native speaker. – H (MF Episode 8)

I was surprised that H had considered changing his name too. On further reflection, the casualness with which H met this idea may have revealed something about both our differing priorities. I'm not sure whether the rationale for my discomfort caused H to analyse his own acceptance of this cultural practice. The fact that it didn't seem to be a big deal to him initially didn't make an impression on me. However, the more I revisited this conversation, the more I began to see that my own specifically-situated cultural experience doesn't need to have universal applications. In fact, the movie itself doesn't linger on this aspect at all. Huang Quing Shin seemed perfectly happy to adopt new names to make her own life easier. Had I expected H (or the fictional character) to share my sense of outrage, I would have been expecting him to do that devoid of his own cultural context – one which I had no knowledge about. The autoethnographic focus of this project combined with accessing other people's different histories helped me pause and reflect on my ideas and learn to be more critical of them. Exploring different contexts of marginalisation and privilege helped me analyse my own positionality and assumptions and come to a more nuanced consideration than my initial instinct allowed.

In a different episode, **Diana**, a queer fan, brought up an example of how dominant culture comfort comes at the expense of a marginalised culture. Echoing Milena's points from Section 6.2, they critiqued how queer people were only allowed to be themselves in certain ways to earn a positive reception in media:

We have this [sighs] very limited amount of acceptance. Where there are palatable versions of queerness that have gone mainstream and have hit mainstream media. [...] There's a lot of this still structural cis- and heteronormativity that happens that can seep into media. – Diana

They drew a connection between how the heteronormativity in media both reflected and reproduced heteronormative structures in the real world:

And even outside of media, right? It's always interesting to me that the most known, I would argue, landmark in LGBTQ+ rights has to do with

marriage equality, right? And marriage is a traditionally normative institution [...] Now listen, I say this as someone who thinks that getting married is a beautiful thing for a lot of folks. And also really important in terms of being protected and being with a person that you love etc. But we have to assimilate into what the heteronormative default is rather than think about alternative or reoriented structures. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Diana's frustration provided insights into the link between how media portrays queer people and how these representations influence attitudes about queer lives in the real world. In both, they were largely supposed to exist in limited and predetermined ways to ensure the comfort of non-queer people.

In a similar vein, **Deb**, a middle-aged fan, was tired of older women in SFF media constantly being represented in ways which tied them to their roles as mothers and wives (see Chapter 4 and MF Episode 14). Whereas Deb's critiques focused on fictional representations of middle-aged women, she also pointed out that this both reflected and reinforced perceptions of how middle-aged women were expected to behave in the real world.

By drawing on their own identities, Diana and Deb invited people to critically analyse representations in media and society. They weren't satisfied with singular narratives of how to be a queer person or an older woman in the world. They didn't want people to exist in specific predetermined ways in order to be accepted by mainstream society. In both instances, their points not only drew attention to what kinds of lessons mainstream media conditions us to internalise but also urged people to question and expand these ideas. Diana and Deb wanted to destabilise norms of gender, age and sexuality by having more kinds of representations so that no one experience was considered to be normal.

6.5 Chapter Summary

The fictional framework fans employ can help people develop and practice critical literacies. Conversations can help fans identify and unlearn the limitations in their imaginations in different ways. Fans belonging to different groups – both marginalised and privileged – can highlight the shortcomings of default assumptions and help others see them anew. By aiming the lens of different intersectional themes to fictional characters and worlds, fans can unpack how the dominant gaze reifies and perpetuates certain narrow ideas.

Fan texts of popular media offer the space to fill in knowledge-gaps. By bringing together fans from different backgrounds, these texts provide opportunities for people from dominant cultures to recognise and address their ignorance about differently marginalised groups. They can also learn to critically reflect on ideas they took for granted and re-examine them in light of other people's viewpoints.

Such access to previously unfamiliar perspectives can lead to a new understanding of different identities in both the fictional and real worlds. Fans' diverse interpretations can subvert people's biases and blind-spots about topics and identities they may not have had the chance to previously address. By accessing

fans' personal histories and frustrations – which vary depending on the person sharing their perspectives – people can glean new insights into norms and otherness. Actively analysing media and social structures through their conversations enables fans to hone their critical skills and question whose lives are privileged and whose perspectives are erased.

Chapter 7 “Acknowledging Everyone’s Stories”: Restorying Imaginations With Fan Counternarratives

7.1 Introduction

When I look back to my early engagements with fandom – including but not limited to reading and writing fanfiction – my different identities didn’t really inform the kind of things I was most interested in. The *Harry Potter* books had 2 South Asian characters in canon – the twins Parvati and Padma Patil – characters which some fans explored in much greater depth in their own fan works. However, I wasn’t interested in either reading or writing about them. Since they were so backgrounded in the series itself, they didn’t have an impact on my imagination either, even though they were the only 2 recognisably brown characters in a largely white Potterverse. Perhaps the fact that I grew up in India surrounded by media and culture which reflected me somewhat explains this. This wasn’t really the experience of fans from a South Asian background living in countries where they were the minorities. For them, fanon i.e. fan-authored canon was possibly the only space where they could see themselves represented complexly.

As my fannishness has evolved over the years, I now deeply appreciate such creative expressions of fan agency. Fan interpretations have provided me with a marvellous education – allowing me to learn not just about other identities but also introspect on my own experiences. These fan works have helped me improve my ideas about the politics of representation as well as my understanding of equity, diversity and inclusion.

This chapter explores the different ways in which fans exercise agency and critical literacies by reclaiming existing narratives, challenging mainstream norms, and restorying people’s imaginations:

- The first section explores how fans rewrite mainstream narratives. They diversify canon by reading their diverse identities into their favourite worlds – worlds which don’t otherwise represent them. Others who don’t inhabit these identities can learn about real-world experiences from such multiple interpretations
- The next section describes how fans’ creative agency allows people to see old things with fresh eyes. By retelling existing stories in ways which place their concerns at the forefront, fans collaboratively carve out a space which better reflects their interests. Consequently, these alternate perspectives act as counternarratives to mainstream portrayals of different identities
- The final section offers examples of how participation in such communities and stumbling upon fans’ different interpretations and activities can have concrete consequences beyond the fandom context. Fannish practices can not only result in a more diverse mainstream media but can also have an impact on fans’ lives and identities

7.2 Rewriting existing narratives

People are shaped by the language they use and encounter. Critical literacy scholars like Shor (1999) believe they can also employ language in order to rewrite their world and contribute to their culture. This is particularly important for those whose experiences are underrepresented or misrepresented in popular culture (Burnett and Merchant, 2011; Pangrazio, 2016). People belonging to marginalised groups create alternative media as a form of counter-storytelling (Chun, 2018; Quayle et al., 2016; Rossing, 2015). They use digital texts to write against established narratives which underpin the culture. These “multimodal counternarratives” (Curwood and Gibbons, 2009) resist oppressive dominant cultural ideologies and seek to replace them with versions that represent diverse identities more complexly. The internet offers these counternarratives a more widespread audience, which in turn can encourage others to imagine alternatives (Gainer, 2010).

Online fan communities are heralded for encouraging critical and resistant readings of source texts and of popular culture where fans discuss, critique and debate interpretations based on their own prior experiences and knowledges (Coker, 2012; Coppa et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2012a). Fan-created digital archives challenge existing cultural systems as groups on the margins of mainstream society rewrite dominant culture stories and create their own cultures (De Kosnik, 2016). Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2016) termed this fannish practice “restorying” i.e. fan responses to favourite texts which highlight marginalised perspectives in mainstream media and culture. They believe that restorying not only challenges inequalities of representation and exclusion of certain groups of people, but it also offers a way of promoting empathy, respect and understanding for diverse lived experiences.

The term racebending originated in the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* fandom. The term draws from the TV show’s magic system where characters can control different elements like fire, water, earth and air – a process known as bending. Many fans criticised the live-action remake of the original animated series for only casting one actor of colour, despite the fact that the show was steeped in Asian influences. They believed the remake should have featured more Asian actors and termed the practice of whitewashing as racebending (Lopez, 2011). Apart from challenging the representations, fans also displayed critical literacies by subverting this practice to transform canon. They racebent canonically white characters by reimagining them as characters of colour in online fandoms. This kind of racebending is now a widespread fandom practice. Racebending is used to expand the diversity of the source text and to push back against the assumption that white is default in Western media.

In addition to racebending, fans from diverse backgrounds draw on their identities to offer different interpretations of canonical characters. The overall absence of sexual diversity and gender nonconforming characters in SFF prompted some fans to read their identities into their favourite fictional worlds, resulting in gay, bisexual, asexual, trans and nonbinary characters in fanon (Alison et al., 2017; Brigida and Foster, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Granby, 2020; Kadlec, 2020; Monster,

2018). Similarly, religious fans addressed their underrepresentation in canon by reading their religious beliefs into different SFF texts and characters (accio-headcanons, 2016; Molinsky, 2018a). Disabled fans also read themselves into the *Harry Potter* books which don't otherwise have any representations of these disabilities (Kosman and McGregor, 2016b; Papamichael, 2003). By outlining their rationale for these interpretations, fans educate people about different identities and provide alternatives to the dominant norms.

Gilliland (2016) suggested that the prevalence of this discourse within online fan spaces shows that a demand for more diverse representations within canon exists. Groups of marginalised fans negotiate meanings together and reinterpret source texts in ways which matter to them (Jenkins, 2017). In many instances, the original author's intentions don't matter to fans. Fans may also choose to deliberately go against implied intent (Kadlec, 2020). Such practices enable fans to reclaim characters and worlds which mean a lot to them. Encountering such restored texts can make people aware of the lack of these diverse representations in the source texts (Pande, 2017; Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2016).

Below, I describe how my co-participants actively worked to read themselves in the text when popular culture frequently excluded them (Blay, 2015). They transformed the canon in multiple creative ways to place their perspectives and identities at the forefront in stories which otherwise misrepresented or erased them (Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2016). Such fan interpretations act as public pedagogy by challenging and expanding how people view different characters and identities.

7.2.1 Diversifying canon through fan activities

In different episodes, SFF fans **Alison** and **Lisa** critiqued representations of different identities in some of their favourite fictional worlds. At the same time, both of them emphasised how much fan activities which transformed these source texts meant to them:

I do want to acknowledge the problematic and frankly transphobic nature of a lot of what J. K. Rowling has said at the moment. And the transformative works aspect of Potter fandom is something that continues to give me joy. And I do think that now Harry Potter's ours. He belongs to the fans. – Alison (MF Episode 4)

Alison didn't want to end our episode exploring class and gender in the *Harry Potter* books without clarifying her feelings about J. K. Rowling's then-recent tweets. However, she asserted her – and her fellow fans' – right to reclaim the canon from an author whose politics she didn't agree with. For Alison, what fans did with the canon was much more meaningful to her than the original text itself. This is true for many fans for whom the interactions and engagements they have in fan spaces become really important – sometimes superseding their relationship with the text which inspired these responses. For fans from marginalised backgrounds, this acquires particular resonance because of the ways in which fans transform the canon to better represent a multiplicity of identities.

Lisa, a prolific fanfic writer, highlighted the gaps both in mainstream media as well as the lack of diversity among creators of popular culture. She proposed that fanfiction's overwhelmingly queer and female creators/audiences challenged the heteronormative white male hegemony and control of Western media and culture. She pointed out that for many fans – including herself – fanfiction filled an important need in terms of representations which were absent in mainstream media:

One of the reasons why I love fanfic and why I got into it and why I started to read it considerably more is that it is transformative fandom at its best. It is taking that which exists as a base and not rejecting it. Saying, "Okay this has value, this has power as a modern myth – as something that's important in society." And going, "But where are the cracks? What is missing?" So fanfic questions normality by saying, "Well yeah here's all the things that you could read into that. And we only got one path. But we need to see where all these other paths are." – Lisa (MF Episode 11)

While Lisa acknowledged that most fanfiction may not be great, she pointed out that it was still valuable to people who used the framework of their favourite fictional worlds to insert their own priorities, concerns, hopes and fears into their favourite narratives. She thought that many fans from differently marginalised backgrounds turned to fandom in order to recognise themselves in stories which otherwise didn't have room for them. By outlining how and why fans expand the possibilities within canon, Lisa described how they resist the narrative norms.

Although most mainstream media may not be ready to move in this direction, fans step in to shape their own stories. Such fan interpretations can influence how others engage with these texts. For our episode on representations of sexuality, **Sanjana, Aparna** and I read some fan texts which interpreted characters in *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* as asexual. The fans supplemented their interpretations by citing information from the narrative (Alison et al., 2017; Granby, 2020). Aparna appreciated that by imagining themselves into popular fictional worlds, fans taught her about new experiences:

That makes a lot of sense now when I read what exactly asexuality is and also I remember the characters. It's completely a valid interpretation of their characters. And just leaving room for these interpretations is super important. Of course, they have to exist alongside specific representation as well. And not just for people to see themselves represented, but imagine if we had more diversity in the media that we consumed growing up; we wouldn't take till our 30s to learn some of these things. – Aparna (MF Episode 22)

Aparna pointed out that while she was happy to have learned about unfamiliar real-world sexualities through such readings of fictional characters, she wished they existed in canon too so that more people would be able to access a diverse range of experiences – something **Milena** also speaks about in Chapter 9. At the same time, encountering this interpretation through fan texts prompted her to research asexuality further. Through fan-authored representations, she was able to learn about an identity which she hadn't encountered before. Similarly, in another episode (MF Episode 6), Aparna, Sanjana and I were also able to learn about

disabled fans' experiences through their interpretations of characters as disabled (Kosman and McGregor, 2016b). In both instances, fans' rationale for their analysis allowed us to fill the missing gaps in our knowledge and experiences. Such interpretations also offered us the opportunity to rethink the norms inherent within the text itself.

Fan activities can not only diversify a limited media landscape but also act as an educational experience about diverse perspectives – especially those beyond people's own personal contexts. By challenging mainstream representations, fan activities used the fictional framework of popular media to raise awareness about marginalised identities. Even if the media itself isn't diverse – and may never be diverse – these campaigns act as valuable consciousness-raisers. Without such conversations, I would certainly not have been able to apply a more critical lens to my favourite fictional worlds or to media overall. Fans identifying the limitations within the text can expand the possibilities both within the text and in people's imaginations.

7.2.2 Reading themselves into their favourite worlds

In *Marginally Fannish* episodes, my co-participants often described the ways in which their identities were misrepresented in some of their favourite media. However, a few of them challenged this by reading themselves into the narrative even though the narrative didn't claim to represent them.

Before our episode exploring representations of religion in SFF media, **Ziv**, an Orthodox Jewish fan, suggested we read a blog post titled "Fantasy and the Jewish Question" about Jewish representations in fantasy media (Nussbaum, 2010). In the comments section of this post, I encountered people who offered their rationale for why they interpreted comics such as *Asterix and Obelix* and *Superman* as Jewish stories. When I brought this up in our episode, Ziv offered an explanation for such interpretations:

It's often said of Jews that our most primordial story is, "They tried to kill us. They failed. Let's eat." It's the constant repeating Jewish story [...] So many common adventure narratives or fantasy or science fiction narratives are so completely alien to that. They're so often like, "Oh no there is a disruption to the natural order." Whereas [laughs] if you look at Jews through the ages, the natural order just isn't so good [...] The basic fundamental Jewish stories are very different from the adventurous stories that we're used to seeing. – Ziv

His critical analysis outlined why Jewish fantasy stories couldn't mirror the Christian underpinning of most Western narratives. He supported this by drawing on his cultural beliefs and knowledge to present his own theories and interpretations of what Jewish stories should reflect:

A Series of Unfortunate Events, which is about [...] 3 kids whose parents were killed and are running for their lives and they keep getting into horrible situations and needing to navigate a morally grey field of what is actually the right thing to do – that's a story that I identify with my texts and my culture. – Ziv (MF Episode 15)

Ziv not only read his own religion and culture into the books *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket, but also drew attention to Jewish history and perspectives. He challenged the narrative and cultural norms by placing his own perspective in contrast with popular fantasy stories.

Aisha, a Muslim *Harry Potter* fan, also found ways to draw connections between her own culture and the fictional world of Hogwarts. Despite the lack of Muslim characters in the Potterverse, Aisha found recognition via the Hogwarts school uniforms:

A lot of characters wear robes which is something very similar to what female Muslims or Arabs wear like loose-fitted cloaks or robes so it's very easy to replicate that [...] They're all black. So whenever I go to Comic Con here in Dubai, [...] I would definitely see someone wearing a Harry Potter costume with the black robe, the neck tie and the colour of the [Hogwarts] House and headscarf as well. And it doesn't seem out of character to be honest. It seems like ah this is very similar to the culture, to what we really wear. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

While we spent a large part of our episode critiquing the lack of cultural diversity in Hogwarts (see Chapter 8), Aisha – and the other fans she's seen in her home city – were nevertheless able to playfully challenge their erasure in the books. Their love for their favourite fictional world coupled with an absence of representations they would recognise resulted in creative imagined contexts.

Such creative interpretations emerged with other identities too. **Robert**, a neurodivergent *Doctor Who* fan, inserted himself into his favourite fictional world in part to take control of the narrative about his identity. In his case, the show *did* represent a character who shared Robert's dyspraxia. However, as I've written about in Chapter 5, Robert found that this did more harm than good – something other fans have found in canonical representations of their disabilities as well (Kosman and McGregor 2016b; Leigh et al., 2019c). Instead, he relied on his own imagination to recognise himself in the show. Robert was thrilled when Jodie Whittaker was announced as the new Doctor. He had previously watched the actress in a movie called *Adult Life Skills*, a movie he suggested I watch in preparation for our conversation. Robert strongly identified with her character:

In [Adult Life Skills] she plays a character who I don't know if in the context of the movie she is on the spectrum, but she very, very much reminded me of someone who was. As someone who's awkward. In the opening scene where she tried to microwave her bra because it's wet and then the bra catches fire and the microwave explodes. And I was like, "Oh my god I would totally do that if I was a woman!" And I saw myself in her character more than I think I had any character ever before. – Robert

In this instance, Jodie Whittaker's identity as a woman didn't matter as much as her character behaving in a way which resonated with Robert. They both found the world difficult in similar ways – a representation Robert didn't otherwise recognise in most of the media he engaged with. He also highlighted how the actress positioned her character in a dignified way – something he found lacking when it came to characters who were explicitly identified as being disabled. Robert

also felt this kind of identification with Matt Smith's version of the Doctor who he also read as dyspraxic:

A lot of what [Matt Smith's Doctor] does in terms of falling over and causing messes and thinking he's being cool and impressive but is actually causing a disaster, is quite resonant to people who have dyspraxia. So we've definitely done a bit of reading that in things ourselves in the dyspraxia Doctor Who community such as it is. I used to like imagining how his Doctor and Ryan [a character canonically identified as having dyspraxia] might work together. I think Ryan would have a bit more fun and maybe [Matt Smith's] Doctor be a bit more responsible. – Robert (MF Episode 10)

Even though neither of the characters were explicitly identified as having dyspraxia or autism, Robert found that they both represented his own identities in complex and nuanced ways – something he didn't find in the character of Ryan, someone who *was* supposed to represent him. Robert's interpretation and rationale for reading these characters as disabled highlighted the experiences of a disabled person in the real world. Instead of accepting the representation he was offered, Robert challenged and expanded the narrative by outlining the kind of perspectives he actually wanted in his favourite media.

Like Robert, **Tam**, a nonbinary SFF fan, wasn't entirely happy with the representation of their identity which did exist. Tam pointed at the nonbinary character of Double Trouble in the animated children's TV show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. While Tam loved the character, they identified how Double Trouble fit into some problematic norms. To prepare for our conversation, they suggested we watch a video that outlined the ways in which nonbinary people are dehumanised in SFF media (QueerBuccaneer, 2020). Expanding on this video, Tam pointed out how nonbinary characters were frequently portrayed as aliens, monsters, robots or lizard creatures like Double Trouble. Additionally, they're treated as second-class citizens to cis characters where their stories and experiences aren't as important (see Chapter 4). This pattern of erasing nonbinary characters in SFF media or representing them in limited ways led Tam to imagine the character with more agency:

My wishful thinking theory about Double Trouble is that they're not actually an inhuman lizard creature. They are human and they just choose to look like a lizard creature because that's how they're most comfortable. – Tam

For many fans, these fanon interpretations become just as if not more important than canonical representations. By considering such interpretations as equally valid and sharing these readings with others, fans can promote alternatives to established canonical characters and narratives and diversify the media they love. Tam also turned their gaze to another SFF show which didn't have a nonbinary character. However, they proposed that Janet, the Artificial Intelligence character in the TV show *The Good Place*, could be read as nonbinary:

Janet's an interesting one because she obviously does look human and she uses she/her pronouns and presents in quite a feminine way. And I think

that's in some ways quite an interesting bit of representation, the idea that nonbinary people don't necessarily have to be androgynous or outlandish looking. And I think that is good. – Tam (MF Episode 16)

Tam acknowledged that Janet wasn't intentionally presented as nonbinary and there was no serious exploration of gender diversity within canon. At the same time, they pointed out that the implications of her character could pave the way for more complex and nuanced representations of nonbinary people. This would differ both from mainstream perceptions about nonbinary people as well as the tendency to represent nonbinary characters in limited ways.

Tam hoped for a future where canonical representations of nonbinary people offered a multiplicity of perspectives – something they had yet to encounter in mainstream media. Like the other co-participants, they were not content to accept the misrepresentation and erasure their favourite media offered them in terms of their own identities. Fandom provided a framework to challenge the gaps as well as transform canon through their own contributions.

Fan interpretations are flexible and varied. My co-participants' diverse motivations and experiences offered space for multiple interpretations which rarely privileged "correct" meanings. They inserted their beliefs and ideologies into both the texts they read as well as the fan texts they created and shared. While the meaning they made from the source text may not have been originally intended by the author, their interpretation is nonetheless valuable to them – sometimes even more meaningful than explicit representations of their identities.

While one might not be able to encounter these diverse identities in their personal networks, fan spaces offer opportunities for such interactions. People from dominant cultures don't usually consider characters or events from a marginalised lens. Unless explicitly mentioned, a non-disabled fan is less likely to read a character as disabled; a cisgender or heterosexual fan is less likely to read a character as queer. My co-participants' interpretations helped make up for my own gaps in knowledge. Diverse representations in fandom have gone a long way in expanding and challenging my understanding about identities which don't reflect my own. I'm still in the process of unlearning, relearning and questioning my conditioning and mainstream society's messages. Fan interpretations have been immensely important in shaping how I engage with media texts and have been responsible for expanding the possibilities of my imagination.

7.3 Creative agency sees old ideas anew

Popular culture is full of opportunities for resistance. Audiences aren't completely passive and there is room to resist mainstream media's dominant narratives within informal and alternative public pedagogical spaces online (Dittmar and Annas, 2017; Sandlin et al., 2011; Sandlin et al., 2013; Savage, 2009). Counter-storytelling acts as a form of public pedagogy which features the perspectives of cultures which are underrepresented and/or marginalised in mainstream culture. This form of public pedagogy raises consciousness about alternatives to the dominant social, cultural and political narratives (Biesta, 2013; Quayle et al., 2016).

Black's (2009) ethnographic study of fanfiction found that people "employ creative agency as they create fan fiction texts that are relevant to their own lives" (p. 76). Fans find opportunities to explore fantastical and futuristic possibilities through their fan works. In the *Harry Potter* books, the character of Nymphadora Tonks is a Metamorphmagus which means she has the power to change her physical appearance at will. Several fans have taken this potential further by reimagining Tonks as genderfluid or nonbinary. Maia Kobabe, a nonbinary *Harry Potter* fan, created a comic which explores how a genderqueer Tonks would navigate the gender-segregated spaces of Hogwarts. E imagined its magical architecture transforming itself to accommodate an array of gender identities (Kobabe, 2020). Similarly, my co-participants reclaimed stories and created counternarratives in assorted acts of creative agency. They challenged the notions which canon takes for granted. By reappropriating their favourite fictional worlds and characters to better reflect their identities, fans challenge essentialist and monolithic representations which are frequently the norm in mainstream media. Through their conversations, stories and art, fans insert their priorities and interests into the narrative in ways which are missing in more mainstream spaces.

Steele (2016) proposed that researchers shouldn't ignore the practices and knowledges which don't mirror those of the dominant groups lest they risk always measuring marginalised groups through the lens of the dominant culture. Choo and Ferree (2010) suggested that an inclusion of marginalised voices needs to be accompanied by problematising the idea of the mainstream itself and what cultures and perspectives it normalises. Accordingly, in this section I explore how fans find ways to create spaces where the alternative to the mainstream becomes the norm. Here, multimodal fan texts can raise critical questions and reflections by playfully challenging dominant representations and beliefs.

Fans try to resist the narrative norm by reimagining their favourite fictional worlds. Florini (2015) investigated how a network of black podcasters created an alternative media for black audiences. Whereas the white gaze of mainstream media marginalised black perspectives and both objectified and oppressed black bodies, these podcasts foregrounded black culture, language and contexts. Florini (2019) also studied the prolific podcasting habits of black *Game of Thrones* fans. In these black-dominated spaces, fans used the prism of black culture and language to engage with their favourite texts even when, such as in the case of *Game of Thrones* and most SFF media, black people and culture are largely absent. In the alternate fan spaces they created, blackness was normative.

Before our episode on representations of disability, **Sanjana** shared a Reddit thread for us to refer to. In the thread "How do physically disabled people travel around Hogwarts?", fans envisioned magical accessibility aids such as broomchairs instead of wheelchairs, using a levitation spell to manoeuvre moving staircases in the Hogwarts castle, "a magical set of leg braces that walked for you, [...] a floaty chair, or a really comfy broom" (noydbshield, in r/harrypotter, 2017). For some fans, their disabilities are very much a part of their identity, ones they don't want to fix. In the essay "The Future Is (Not) Disabled", SFF writer and fan Marieke Nijkamp (2018) envisioned the possibilities of medical and technological advancements for providing better access to people with disabilities. Although

they critiqued the fact that most SFF texts erased disabilities altogether, Marieke also presented some ways in which technology could be used to include rather than exclude.

Fan campaigns are another way fans employ their creativity in order to explore the gaps in popular media and make alternative ideas mainstream. Fans who interpreted Elsa from *Frozen* as a lesbian demanded queer representation onscreen by launching the #GiveElsaAGirlfriend campaign. They drew attention to the fact that Disney had yet to represent a canonically queer protagonist in their media (Hunt, 2016; McCluskey, 2018). In the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, movie fans highlighted the underrepresentation of films featuring or made by people of colour in Oscar nominations (Ugwu, 2020). In response to J. K. Rowling's allegedly transphobic tweets in 2019 and 2020, the fan podcast *The Gayly Prophet* launched a #MakeHarryPotterEvenGayer2020 campaign to invite, curate and share instances of fans reclaiming the Potterverse and queering canon (Blount and Grey, 2020b; makeharrypotterevengayer2020).

Public pedagogy scholar and artist Morna McDermott (2013: p. 195) outlined the importance of such activities:

If we don't keep the creative imagination alive in public spaces, then the world around us will be designed for us. The arts as collaborative community-based efforts to transform ourselves are the most vital tools we have to create a sustainable revolution. It's not what we know, but what we can imagine as possible forms of and purposes for public pedagogies that may inspire engaging discourses - aesthetic experiences that reveal to one another what we choose to disclose about ourselves, or not, what we can change about our own perceptions, how we disrupt the stories others choose to tell about us, and how we maintain a public stake in our democratic project.

Thanks to much of the mainstream fanon discourse via fanfiction, fan art and fan conversations, many fans have now grown used to the idea of imagining Hermione as black, Harry Potter as mixed-race or Elsa as gay (Jenkins, 2017; Pande, 2017). Jenkins (2017) even wondered whether this fanon norm ended up impacting a version of canon when the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* cast Noma Dumezweni, a black actress, to play Hermione Granger. For these fans, countering the normative dominance of whiteness and heterosexuality in popular culture became a public, political act.

7.3.1 Creating a space to better reflect different identities

Fans carve out their own spaces to write stories and talk about things in ways which matter to them. **Marita** was someone who spent a lot of time reading and writing fanfiction. She believed that these spaces offered opportunities for fans to create and share the kinds of stories and critiques that they wanted to see in the world:

It's a great equaliser because you don't have to go through the publishing grinder. You can just put yourself out there. And in many cases, they would be thoughts that might not be published or be able to be published

either because of their content or because of you as a person who lives in a society and has or does not have the ability to go through the long process of trying to get a book deal. – Marita (MF Episode 17)

As she pointed out, these opportunities weren't always available in more mainstream spaces where commercial considerations dictated what kind of stories are told and who gets to tell them based on what publishers think will sell. She proposed that fanfiction was free from this form of capitalist consumption which allowed people to create literature and culture which reflected niche and diverse interests.

Online fanfiction platforms themselves were created to promote these activities without outside interference. To prepare for our episode, Marita and I listened to 2 podcast episodes which featured an interview with Francesca Coppa, a co-founder of A03 i.e. Archive of Our Own (Molinsky, 2017a; 2018b). Francesca shared her experiences and motivations for starting the fan-run and fan-controlled fanfiction platform (Archive of Our Own, no date). Along with the now-massively popular website, the group of fans launched a non-profit organisation (Organization for Transformative Works, no date), a wiki to document the history of fan works (Fanlore, no date), a legal advocacy group to protect fan texts from either being exploited or legally challenged (Legal Advocacy, no date), and an open-access peer-reviewed journal for academic scholarship about different fan cultures and practices (Transformative Works and Cultures, no date).

The creation of A03 has been instrumental in promoting an online fan culture which allows fans from all over the world to explore their favourite media on their own terms and reflect an array of identities and interests. However, these spaces aren't inclusive of everyone – which I discuss in greater detail in Chapters 9 and 10. While online fandom spaces make it easier for fans to read and write a diverse range of stories, the dominance of certain languages and cultures on mainstream fandom platforms can act as barriers which exclude different groups of people and restrict the diversity of ideas in these spaces. **Aisha**, a *Harry Potter* fan from the UAE, described the dominance of English on the fan platforms of globally popular Western media:

In order to access those platforms, the language that is spoken is English. If you have good English, then you have access to those outlets. And if your English is limited, then there's a limitation for you to get into those fandoms, to get access into those things, to fandoms basically. – Aisha

She pointed out that non-native English speakers had to work extra hard to achieve the same level of access and belonging. Consequently, as a teenager and young adult, Aisha often struggled to understand the things discussed on an international *Harry Potter* fan forum. However, fans who may not recognise themselves in mainstream fan spaces also go on to create their own communities that reflect the languages and cultural contexts which the mainstream spaces exclude:

I believe it was 2002 or 2003 when I was still in school, I stumbled upon a forum [...] And it was a specific forum dedicated to Harry Potter but it was in Arabic. And altogether I think we were like 5-6 members only. But

it was so nice you know. It was finally meeting up people from within the region who were also fans of the book. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

Aisha emphasised how meaningful discovering this platform was for her as an Arabic fan, a space where she could communicate in both Arabic and English rather than being restricted to English – a language which wasn't her native one. This platform created by and for Arabic *Harry Potter* fans allowed her and her fellow fans to engage with people from her own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The Arabic *Harry Potter* community offered her a like-minded peer group who didn't have to explain themselves to each other as they had to with Western fans who formed the majority of online *Harry Potter* fan spaces. This group of fans created their own distinctive cultures and languages that drew on a blend of native and Western influences to carve out a new kind of communicative space which reflected their priorities. They found creative opportunities to challenge and expand normative structures within online fandom communities.

Robert, a disabled SFF fan, took to writing his own fiction in order to bring alternate realities into being. For our episode, Robert suggested I read “Never Change” a *Doctor Who* fanfic he wrote (Shepherd, 2018b). This fic used analogies to engage with difference and disability. While planning our episode, he mentioned that he hadn't actively thought about disability while writing that story. However, he later realised that his protagonist's experiences as well as his difficult relationship with his mother in the story had inadvertently been autobiographical:

Having a character stand up and say I'm going to do this thing for myself that is explicitly selfish in this way was something that simultaneously felt like it was important to have a story about but also felt like it was something very taboo to say. – Robert

For Robert, the story became a way for him to challenge the self-sacrificial narratives which were prominent in media representations of disabled characters. His story wrote against the expectation of disabled people having to sacrifice their priorities in service of non-disabled people/family members with more power and privilege:

Pretty much all the Doctor Who fanfiction I wrote was stuff that I thought an actual Doctor Who episode would never be able to do or never be willing to do. But stuff that I felt was still true and important to say. And I think that someone who is in a vulnerable position asserting their own needs and asserting their own boundaries with the knowledge of destructive consequences was a story I felt should be told somewhere. Even if it would have to be in a fanfiction that people don't read. – Robert (MF Episode 10)

Robert used the framework of fanfiction in our episode to describe his struggles in navigating the world as a disabled person. In a media landscape where he often didn't recognise his own experiences and identities, he created his own representation to navigate his emotions as well as to reach other people who may share similar feelings. Fans find different ways to create contexts where their identities and interests are the norm. Robert used the frameworks of *Doctor Who* to tell the kinds of stories he himself needed.

7.3.2 Retellings as counternarratives to mainstream portrayals

Stories, art and critiques present fans a way to retell their favourite narratives. Retellings not only allow people to make the story their own but can also teach audiences about different experiences and histories which they might be unfamiliar with. Multiple storytellers collectively contribute to making knowledge-creation more democratic and more accessible in different contexts. **Sanjana, Aparna** and I discussed how we had learned about indigenous cultures in Canada through the TV show *Anne With An E*. This modern TV adaptation (2017 – 2019) of the *Anne of Green Gables* book series written in the early 1900s showcased the empowering possibilities of reclaiming and retelling old stories to highlight new perspectives. The show included representations of the First Nations people in Canada – something which wasn't present in the original book series. I appreciated that the show retold the books to highlight and challenge real-world historical oppression:

I really loved Ka'Kwet's whole storyline. And how they showed how the Christian missionaries tried to brutally assimilate Native children into the Christian norm. This is a piece of history where they were stolen from their families and they were sent to these residential schools and these boarding schools. So it is very much a part of history where their language and her name, her hair, her clothes – all aspects of her culture were stripped away from her and her very identity was taken in this really violent way. It's something I think now in Canada and in Australia and in New Zealand, they're coming to terms with it more, this horrible part of their history. But it's generations of erasure and generations of oppression. And this can't go away instantly. This work has to be done actively to reverse this oppression. – Parinita

All three of us had watched and loved this show. Since I was watching the show while recording the podcast and due to the project's autoethnographic focus, I was more attuned to storylines which featured intersectional identities. I was able to learn about this history of erasure and oppression of indigenous populations thanks to the creators of the show choosing to highlight these stories. In turn, I shared this with my co-hosts as well as potential audiences of the podcast, hoping to draw attention to both the history itself as well as the potential of retellings to include the stories of those people who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream narratives. This prompted Aparna to draw a connection between how a diversity of storytellers offers opportunities to diversify the kinds of stories that are told:

We can only start doing that work by telling these stories. Which is finally changing because for so long we've just been consuming media that has been created by a majority. So the white guys will be the good guys in everything that we've seen from when we were kids. And it's only now that we're starting to see diversity in the stories that are being told or the stories we're consuming. And it's because of the diversity of creators and things like that. But this is the first step. Acknowledging everyone's stories is the first step to changing the narrative that's been in everyone's minds for so long. – Aparna (MF Episode 13)

As Indian fans, the 3 of us were unfamiliar with and far-removed from the colonial histories of Canada. Focusing on specific intersectional themes and placing them in conversation with our favourite media allowed us to discuss the stories of different marginalised groups of people. Retellings set within unfamiliar contexts helped us become active readers of media and history as we explored whose perspectives were privileged in these narratives and whose were erased.

Accessing the way others creatively reimagine characters and worlds can influence the imaginations of those who hadn't thought to do this earlier. Both **Aisha** and I loved the fan text "Imagine A Muslim Witch" (accio-headcanons, 2016) which we read before recording the episode. In it, the author deliberately inserted her own faith tradition into the Pottermore which otherwise doesn't reflect her identity. She imagined the experiences of a Muslim witch in Hogwarts and creatively navigated the Eurocentric structures, religions, foods, festivals, languages and clothing within the books. Inspired by the points made in the fan text, Aisha and I wondered how Hogwarts could be more inclusive of diverse cultures:

Aisha: What if they had different classes teaching spells in different languages? Different spells of different cultures.

Parinita: Yeah or have an exchange programme. For a semester, have an Arabic witch who comes in or an Arabic wizard who comes in and teaches their culture or an Indian witch or wizard who teaches. So not just magic but also the stories and all the cultural things that come with being a part of another country. (MF Episode 18)

As fans of the series who didn't see our identities reflected in the fictional world, Aisha and I were able to retell elements from the Pottermore to better represent our own backgrounds and priorities. Sanjana, Aparna and I had a similar conversation in another episode where we proposed suggestions for how we would decolonise the Hogwarts curriculum (MF Episode 2 Part 2).

Critical literacy scholars encourage people to create and share texts that challenge dominant narratives and present alternative perspectives. My co-participants and I drew on our diverse real-world priorities in order to reimagine beloved fictional worlds as ones which were better attuned to our various concerns. We were able to offer alternate interpretations by retelling stories from multiple and diverse perspectives. These sections of our conversations were largely irreverent. At the same time, even as we shared our flippant responses with each other, we were articulating our different problems and desires. Such conversations analysed how certain identities were represented/invisible in some of our favourite fictional worlds. These alternative viewpoints helped us playfully navigate and challenge the cultural and social norms inherent within the narrative.

7.4 The consequences of discovering unfamiliar perspectives

Digital spaces are important avenues for encountering and sharing ideas about feminism and other social justice activism. Such spaces promote multiple perspectives and provide access to a diverse range of ideas to a larger group of people (Bailey and Gossett, 2018). Craig and McInroy (2014) suggested that for

many queer youth, marginalisation and heteronormativity in their offline contexts may restrict their access to information and limit opportunities to explore and develop their identities. However, online media and online spaces can allow them to access this information, negotiate their identities, discover a community, and even encourage them to come out – both online as well offline (ibid). Burton (2017) studied fan communities of animated television shows on Tumblr and found that some fans from LGBTQIA+ communities were able to explore and accept their identities in these spaces even though they weren't able to openly and comfortably do this in their personal contexts.

As I've explored earlier in the chapter, fans play with different interpretations and identities in their favourite fictional worlds. Some fans described how these diverse representations in fandom allowed them to learn new facets of their own identities. In the essay "How Fanfiction Made Me Gay", J. M. Frey (2016) described the different ways in which fanfiction allowed her to question her internalised assumptions of sex and gender and helped her come to terms with her own sexual identity. This exposure made up for the lack of these conversations and representations in mainstream media. In the essay "Representation In Acefic", queenieofaces (2014) discussed how many people discover and learn about asexuality and aromanticism in fandom communities because of how fans interpret different fictional characters as asexual or aromantic. The essay outlined how this exposure not only helps non-asexual people learn about a different sexual identity but also helps others explore and articulate their own asexuality in ways they didn't have the space to do elsewhere.

Jenkins (2017) suggested that such fandom conversations can themselves result in a more diverse media canon – something I explore below. A more diverse mainstream media space can have real world impacts in similar ways that more diverse fandom spaces do. Some fans have discussed these impacts on audiences. While researching for the episode where **Tam** and I were going to discuss *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, I found a Twitter thread where many fans interpreted the character of Scorpia as a trans woman. In the same thread, a fan also discussed how Scorpia's representation and the fan interpretations had helped them come to terms with their own trans identity (CaseyExplosion, 2020). The hosts of the *Alohomora* episode "LGBTQIA+ in Potter: Beauty In Difference" explored how explicitly queer characters in children's literature can help children articulate and negotiate their own identities as well as imagine people complexly as they learn about different ways of living in the world. The hosts argued that not including such representations in a misguided effort to "protect the children" would signify to queer children that their feelings and identities aren't valid or valued in the world they inhabit (Alison et al., 2017).

According to Shor, critical literacy is a social practice which "challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development, [...] connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local" and allows people to rethink their lives and strive against inequality in both rights and representation (Shor, 1999: p. 2). As I discuss below, practising critical literacies not only helped me and my co-participants challenge media representations and the world they reflect but such critical orientations also

changed us (Johnson et al., 2016). Analysing issues of power and justice by reading, creating and sharing digital media texts can result in transformative action (Bonsor Kurki, 2015; McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004; Peters and Lankshear, 1996). Online spaces are full of emancipatory potential. My co-participants and I used language and dialogue to develop our personal and political identities through a process of creative experimentation (Gounari, 2009).

7.4.1 More diverse mainstream media

Fans who discover and explore a diverse range of identities within fandom spaces can have an impact on creating a more diverse media landscape. When these fans become traditionally published writers, artists or TV showrunners, they can reflect a diverse range of identities in their fictional worlds. This can lead to more inclusive media and diversify people's imaginations and ideas. In our episode about representations of sexuality with **Aparna** and **Sanjana**, I shared the journey and story behind the book *Carry On* by Rainbow Rowell:

So Carry On was a fanfic in [the YA book] Fangirl. One of the characters in Fangirl was writing Carry On. And Rainbow Rowell decided to make that into a book by itself. And it's very loosely inspired from the Harry Potter world [...] you can totally tell who's supposed to be who. – Parinita

I described how the gaps in the original *Harry Potter* text led writer and fan Rainbow Rowell to create a much more explicitly diverse text which then went on to become the canon for a new cohort of readers:

The difference is that it is so much more explicitly queer. And it also engages with these issues that we've been talking about throughout this podcast. Things like different cultures within the magical community, diversity in terms of race; also conversations about class in terms of who has more power in the magical community and who has less power. And the person who's inspired by Draco and the person who's inspired by Harry – spoiler alert – they do end up together. I love that fans take this text that they love that might not be as inclusive as they want it to be, and inspired from this world, they make these texts so much more inclusive. – Parinita (MF Episode 22)

In fact, in response to J. K. Rowling's tweets about trans people, the trans and queer co-hosts of the *Harry Potter* fan podcast *The Gayly Prophet* decided to start another podcast exploring the *Carry On* book series. This podcast called *EsGaype From Reality* helped them deal with all the complicated feelings associated with *Harry Potter* – including but not limited to its erasure of queer people. The hosts spoke about how making this new podcast enabled them to take a break from thinking about J. K. Rowling while at the same time allowed them to explore a world which was inspired by it but didn't come with the same kind of baggage. For them, *Carry On* – a book which is drawn from fannish practices – became an important form of queer representation which they, in turn, shared with their fellow *Harry Potter* fans.

Such representations in mainstream media have an impact on audiences from both marginalised as well as dominant cultures. In different episodes, **Tam**, a nonbinary

fan, **Milena**, a queer nonbinary fan, as well as **Aparna** and I, both heterosexual and cis fans, discussed how some of our favourite children's media were creating fictional fantasy worlds with plenty of gender and sexual diversity.

Milena, Tam and I loved the TV show *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* where the fictional queernormative and female-dominated world of Eternia featured diverse groups of characters of different races, sexualities, gender identities and body types. We researched interviews with the creator Noelle Stevenson and talked about how her own fannishness had impacted the worlds she now created (MF Episodes 16, 21). We discovered that while growing up, Stevenson didn't find any canonical representations that represented her. She ended up having to read different characters in *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* as genderfluid and gender nonconforming (Reddish, 2019). When Noelle's own work became a part of mainstream media, her YA graphic novel *Nimona*, *The Lumberjanes* comic books she co-founded, and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* offered new generations of audiences – both young and old, queer and non-queer – a range of sexual and gender diversity. Tam and I made connections between Noelle's childhood which lacked fictional role models and how careful she was now to present these role models to her own audiences:

Parinita: As much as she loves these [fan interpretations of some of the She-Ra characters as trans], she said that she didn't want to take credit for them because it wasn't explicitly mentioned on the show. So they're completely valid but she doesn't want to pretend like she came up with this idea because she didn't make it canon. With Double Trouble, there was a nonbinary actor portraying Double Trouble. So that was a very definite choice [...] I also love that Noelle Stevenson will randomly tweet, "I love trans people!!!!" with 5 exclamation marks. And just devoid – no, not obviously devoid of context, she knows very much what the context is. But it won't be in response to somebody; it'll just be like yeah these are my feelings. This is out there.

Tam: Yeah. She's honestly such a positive force on Twitter. She is absolutely delightful as a person. – MF Episode 16

Both of us loved the fact that while Noelle had to struggle to imagine herself in popular SFF media, she was now using her power and influence to create fantastical and social media worlds which were populated with the kinds of representations which would have meant so much to her younger self – and now mean so much to generations of her own fans.

Aparna signposted the shows *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* where queer writer Rebecca Sugar similarly populated both worlds with people from diverse backgrounds. As someone from several dominant cultures and as someone who was a writer and editor of children's books in India, Aparna spoke about how such representations and accessing interviews with their creators had influenced her own thinking about children and children's media:

I'm going to switch to talking about children's media and how sexuality is represented there because if done well, it should just be a part of our daily lives. And a sure-fire way of doing that is to include various sexualities in

children's media. While everyone is always tiptoeing around it, the success of shows like Adventure Time and She-Ra and Steven Universe which is just completely open and embraces all sorts of diversity, is proof that children are completely open-minded and they don't see differences, they rather see similarities. So you give them any character or any relationship and they'll find something to identify with. And that we've seen so much in children's literature as well. They won't look at something and think it's inappropriate ... until they inherit it from their parents or the people around them. – Aparna (MF Episode 22)

Aparna pointed out how normalising wide-ranging representations in children's media could not only create a more diverse mainstream media but it could also have an impact on which perspectives and identities young people considered valid and valuable – both including and beyond their own. As she signalled, offering examples of different kinds of families and relationships could help restore their imaginations. By rewriting mainstream narratives and providing an alternative to the adult social norms and values children may otherwise encounter, some creators of children's media created a space to reflect diverse marginalised identities – much in the way fan spaces do. By writing themselves into the narratives they now control, media creators who grew up unable to recognise themselves in media can invite audiences – both children and adults – to imagine differently.

7.4.2 Impact of access to fan communities

As I mentioned in the introduction to this section, participating in fan communities can have real-world impacts on different aspects of people's lives. For **Anna R.**, her participation in online fandoms led to her finding a strong community of friends. Moreover, she was also able to combine her fandom and community to participate in mental health initiatives in the real world. In our episode, she spoke about how thanks to her involvement in the online fandom of the TV show *Supernatural*, she started volunteering weekly for a crisis intervention hotline. She was sponsored by a non-profit organisation which was launched by one of the actors of the TV show. This organisation paid for Anna's training and ensured she was equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to help those who were struggling mentally and emotionally:

I think what's great is that you can make a difference, actively make a difference. Because speaking and talking and preaching maybe is awesome and it can be very inspiring. But it's not very often that you see people actively doing something. And I think that even if it doesn't come from the cast or the people who create the show, the actual community behind it can do so much good. – Anna R.

Anna's advocacy and volunteering work drew directly from what she encountered in fandom. She pointed out that this sort of mental health support didn't require people to have money and signposted a fan-led campaign which sought to help people going through mental health struggles. This was a tremendously important outcome for Anna since her fandom allowed her to have an impact on the wider community:

So if there is a fandom or something that you love and you have found people behind it that you go along with then you've made friendships, try to do some good because there's so many people behind a family and a fandom. It's not just you. You all can make a difference. We all can make difference in this world and god knows, we need it. – Anna R. (MF Episode 5)

Anna's participation in an online community not only ended up having a significant impact on her identity both within and beyond fandom, but also encouraged and equipped her to do the kind of work she was most passionate about. For some people, encountering conversations under the umbrella of fandom can allow them to navigate issues in ways they weren't equipped to do before.

In my case, the pandemic was immensely difficult for my own mental health and I experienced several bouts of depression, anxiety and burnout. As someone who didn't have the vocabulary to recognise these ideas, fans explicitly drawing connections between fictional characters and their real-world implications helped me better understand my own experiences.

At the time, I was listening to many fan podcasts for this PhD project. Due to my own mental condition, I was more attuned to discussions of mental health. The hosts of *The Gayly Prophet* and *Harry Potter of the Sacred Text* have repeatedly drawn on their own experiences of depression and anxiety to analyse examples of mental illness in different *Harry Potter* characters. The concepts of depression and anxiety weren't explicitly mentioned in the books. However, by sharing their interpretations of the behaviours and histories of different characters, the fans highlighted the symptoms and causes of different mental conditions. Coming across different fan interpretations of Harry's PTSD and how this manifested in his behaviour (see Chapter 6) prompted me to reflect on my own childhood experiences. Subsequently, I was able to recognise and identify some of my own symptoms in these conversations. This prompted me to do my own research outside the context of fandom to better understand my state of mind.

Another encounter which helped me reflect on my mental condition was the episode with **Robert**, a disabled SFF fan. While planning our episode, we decided to have one segment which explored how trauma impacted the lives of different characters in the Potterverse and the Whoniverse. In our episode, when Robert shared his own childhood ordeals within the context of this discussion, it prompted me to draw on and share my own different experiences of childhood trauma:

Something I've not shared on the podcast before or indeed with many of my friends either, was my childhood experience with an alcoholic father who beat up my mother. And he gambled much of his and my mother's money away. – Parinita

Since other fans in general and Robert in particular were so open about their own experiences and generously shared them on a public platform, it provided me with a space to reflect on my own difficult emotions and experiences – both past and current – something I usually do my best to ignore:

I don't know explicitly how this has impacted me and my own interactions with people because I've not been to therapy or I've not examined this aspect of my life. But I feel like this sort of childhood experience does leave scars. Because there has been a lot of trauma related to this even otherwise. – Parinita (MF Episode 10)

I was able to develop a better understanding of my own traumas as well as their effects on my mental health and relationships with people. This helped me seek out more information about mental illness which helped me better identify what I was going through and how I could manage it.

Fandom can make up for limitations in personal, social and community networks by expanding the range of ideas people encounter. As I've written about previously in this chapter, fan interpretations allow people to learn about a range of identities through a fictional framework. **Milena** learned about asexuality thanks to Tumblr spaces which used the framework of fandom to raise awareness about sexual diversity. This awareness went on to inform Milena's understanding about their own identity. In our episode, Milena and I discussed their blog post "[Elsewhere] Arrows and Aros" which detailed their rationale for why Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, was asexual and aromantic (Popova, 2015).

The reason Milena felt so passionately about their interpretation of Katniss as asexual is because fandom conversations had helped Milena figure out their own asexual identity when they were well into their 30s. Since asexual representations were so rare in mainstream media, Milena hadn't recognised their experiences and emotions in the fictional worlds they loved. It was fandom which filled in the gap. Fan conversations about different identities can have an impact on people at different ages and life stages. Fandom offered Milena a space full of alternative representations of relationships and helped them unlearn some of their socially conditioned ideas about sexual and romantic relationships:

If the media doesn't tell you that being asexual is even an option, it just presents you with this default view of how relationships work which is you are cisgender, you find somebody of the other gender who is also cisgender, you shack up together, you must have sex, you must move in together, you must get married, you must have children. It rules your entire life plan. It teaches you some really harmful things about how to have relationships. – Milena

Milena highlighted how the social media platform of Tumblr was an important space of knowledge where fandom and queer communities co-existed and overlapped in ways that didn't always happen in other media or social contexts. People in these communities frequently interpreted fictional characters as asexual and aromantic and described the different traits based on their own experiences. These conversations generated knowledge about asexuality and helped Milena challenge the default scripts of sexuality and romance, something mainstream spaces didn't allow for:

It takes so long to unlearn that once you've internalised it and to realise that you know what, actually no, I don't have to do any of these things. Whether that's have sex with people, whether that's have relationships

with people, whether that's have a relationship that fits that particular model or have a relationship with the person that that model tells me I should be having a relationship with. It's just so insidious. And trying to unlearn it is a lot of effort. – Milena (MF Episode 21)

For Milena, fandom and the internet were a valuable resource to both identify and unlearn their ideas about the default script. It allowed them to witness and understand another way of living beyond what they saw in the media or in the communities around them. Fan activities like restorying and discussions about different identities can help people expand their knowledge about a diverse range of experiences. Such encounters can also help people navigate new understandings about their own identities.

7.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter demonstrated how fan contributions can have a significant impact both on the canon as well as people's lives. For fans from groups which are marginalised in both the fictional and real worlds, these activities become a way of exploring the diverse possibilities within their favourite media. For fans who don't inhabit these identities, such fan works can teach them about different real-world experiences.

In such spaces, fans can create, share and access the kind of literature and culture they most want but can't find elsewhere. These self-curated cultural products encompass a wide range of identities and interests. Fans challenge and address cultural limitations by bringing alternate realities into being. These inclusive considerations – especially in instances where they're missing from the more mainstream narratives – can inform and expand imaginations.

Fan activities can have a broad range of concrete consequences on both media and audiences. Fans who practice imagining themselves into worlds which don't include them can go on to create their own more inclusive fictional worlds in more mainstream avenues. This expands the reach of ideas about equity and diversity; ideas which can end up becoming a more inclusive norm for a larger group of people. Additionally, fan spaces can help people participate in community action with real-world interventions. They can also offer opportunities for people to learn new aspects of their own identities in ways they may not have access to elsewhere.

Chapter 8 “There’s Never Chicken Tikka Masala At Hogwarts”: A Collective Process Of Decolonisation

8.1 Introduction

Before moving to the UK for my postgraduate education, I worked with children’s books back home. Like generations of other children in India, I grew up with largely British and American children’s literature. English writer Enid Blyton has shaped countless Indian imaginations, including my own. British and American books continue to take up most of the space in bookstores and libraries today. They tend to overshadow Indian children’s literature which has been making great strides in the last couple of decades. I worked with people in different spaces to raise awareness about this excellent selection of Indian children’s books. I had yet to come across the term decolonising in either an academic or a children’s literature context, but I suppose that’s what we were contributing to.

However, it was only when I moved away from my Indian context to a British one that I began to realise how colonised my mind continued to be. Until then, I didn’t know what I didn’t know. Encountering a more diverse range of perspectives here – both in-person and on social media – helped me disrupt my notions of both India and Western countries like the UK. When I began researching for this project specifically and spoke to different co-participants, I was further able to identify and challenge some of these colonised ideas. I now appreciate that this is likely a lifelong process, where I’m sure to come across new critical perspectives which make me reconsider things I had long taken for granted.

This chapter explores how fan texts can herald a collective process of decolonisation:

- The first section explores how people engage in decolonising practices in fandom spaces. Conversations about people’s differently colonised minds on fan podcasts can provide access to a diverse range of perspectives. Such conversations also help fans navigate patterns of erasure and dominance in the media they love
- Next, I describe examples of the different ways in which fans analyse cultural imperialism and erasure in some of their favourite media. Fans draw on their own identities and experiences to decode narrative norms and challenge cultural misrepresentations. Sharing and accessing different people’s interpretations can better equip fans in this analytical process
- The final section illustrates how the framework of media representations allows fans to explore nuanced perspectives and analyses of different identities. Through their conversations and encounters with other fan perspectives, they are able to better understand their own cultures as well as acquire fresh insight into other cultures

8.2 Decolonising our minds in fandom

Writer and educator Darren Chetty (2016) shared an experience from his English classroom:

A few years ago, I taught a Year 2 class in east London. I had built up a good bank of multicultural picture book resources and shared these with the class whenever seemed appropriate. When it came time for the class to write their own stories, I suggested that they used the name of someone in their family for their protagonist. I wanted them to draw on their own backgrounds, but was worried about “making an issue of race”. When it came to sharing their stories, I noticed only one boy had acted upon my suggestion, naming his main character after his uncle. He had recently arrived from Nigeria and was eager to read his story to the class. However, when he read out the protagonist’s name another boy, who was born in Britain and identified as Congolese, interrupted him. “You can’t say that!” he said. “Stories have to be about white people.”

For many audiences from marginalised backgrounds, mainstream media representations shape and limit their imaginations about their own identities (Patterson et al., 2016). Thanks to repeated exposure to media where some lives dominate and others are under- or misrepresented, people begin to take certain cultures and norms for granted. Such imbalances are also evident in online fan communities. In Western media fan spaces, the perspectives of fans of colour are often erased, whiteness is considered normative, and conversations largely tend to focus on the experiences of fans from the US and the UK (Pande, 2017; Woo, 2017). This erasure of certain identities has an impact on fans who inhabit those identities. Describing her experiences as an Indian fan in Western media contexts, Rukmini Pande (2017) shared how she assumed she was the only Indian person in these spaces. It was only when she encountered other fans who were explicit about their marginalised identities that she felt comfortable enough to share her own. Other fans played an instrumental role in challenging her assumptions about whose stories were important not only in mainstream media but also in mainstream fan spaces.

Some fan studies scholars have noted that the field of fan studies itself privileges the experiences, concerns and identities of a certain kind of fan – white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered, from the US or the UK (Busse and Gray, 2011; Chin et al., 2017; Woo, 2017). This despite the fact that fans of colour have a long history of participation and engagement with media. But these experiences have largely been erased in fandom history (Pande, 2017; Wanzo, 2015). Hickey-Moody and colleagues (2010) outlined a similar trend in public pedagogy scholarship which emerges from the US and Europe and tends to privilege scholars, issues, institutions and knowledges from the Global North.

Pande (2017) had another brush with the need to decolonise her own thinking in her academic career. When she first began working on her thesis, she reproduced the normative assumptions of fan studies. Her realisation about the structured whiteness of fan spaces only came gradually. Through interviews for her doctoral project, Pande realised that other fans of colour had very similar journeys. While

fan studies is increasingly expanding the scope of the field beyond gender and queer analysis to include race and ethnicity, scholars advocate for more research exploring other social identities, including those beyond primarily US and UK contexts (Chin et al., 2017; De Kosnik and Carrington 2019; Ellcessor, 2017; Harrington and Bielby, 2017; Woo, 2017).

I read Pande's thesis at the start of my own PhD journey and her experiences both as a fan and a researcher strongly resonated with me. Thanks to her perspectives, I was able to identify and investigate the limitations in my own thinking. Partly due to her insights, I actively attempted to incorporate the perspectives of a more international group of fans for *Marginally Fannish* in order to expand the normative notion of a fan of Western media. While my co-participants and I did largely explore texts produced in the US and the UK, our own lived experiences beyond these contexts diversified the discourse around both Western media and fandom.

Due to the processes of contemporary cultural imperialism, media produced in the US and UK tends to be globally popular. This media is created by specific groups of people and promotes specific types of representations. These representations go on to become the norm for a large number of people all over the world. People become fans of popular media regardless of their origin and not necessarily because of any cultural or national similarities (Chin and Morimoto, 2013). Pande (2017) framed online fan communities as postcolonial cybercultural spaces which attract fans from different cultures and countries to engage with popular media texts produced in the Global North. Through our conversations and encounters with other fan texts, my co-participants and I were able to offer our different readings of our favourite media and help each other construct a more complex understanding of these worlds (Kellner and Share, 2005).

According to Alinia (2015), intersectional oppression manifests through the reinforcement of certain ideologies, cultures and knowledges which misrepresent and stereotype marginalised groups, reproduce taken-for-granted ideas, and normalise a privileged perspective. Resistance becomes possible when marginalised people become aware that they are oppressed and challenge the dominant conceptions of the groups they belong to (ibid). The decolonisation process is equally important for people from dominant as well as marginalised cultures (Risam, 2018). Gounari (2009) proposed that even when people from oppressed groups don't recognise their oppression, once they encounter texts and perspectives in online spaces which discuss liberation, they can reshape their ways of thinking, leading to a transformative process. As Burdick and Sandlin (2010) contended, education isn't a one-way transmission of predetermined information; instead, critical public pedagogy encourages people to unlearn troubling social, cultural, political and educational scripts which are otherwise taken for granted (ibid).

For me and my co-participants, conversations encouraged the process of confronting some of these internalised ideas not just about other cultures but also about our own identities. Patterson and colleagues (2016) outlined how critical media literacies allow people to question popular media structures which portray

their cultures in stereotypical and harmful ways. By analysing, interpreting and critiquing messages promoted by popular culture, fans can understand how representations shape opinions in positive or negative ways (Happel-Parkins and Esposito, 2015; Patterson et al., 2016; Scharrer and Ramasubramanian, 2015). Talking to people about these popular media representations and the contexts in which they're created enables a form of collaborative decolonising literacy.

In her essay "What A 'Racebent' Hermione Granger Really Represents", Alanna Bennet (2015), a biracial *Harry Potter* fan in the US, wrote about how she deeply identified with Hermione's character and the politics of her non-magical cultural background. However, Alanna never read Hermione as black. She had grown used to assuming whiteness as default for all the fictional characters she encountered, unless explicitly mentioned otherwise. This was an experience, Bayana, a black *Harry Potter* fan in the US also shared (Zoltan and Nedelman, 2019b). They couldn't recognise or imagine themselves in the stories they read. When both of them encountered racebent Hermione in online fandom, where fans interpreted Hermione as black, a new possibility was unlocked. Both of them loved the theory and were able to draw better parallels to Hermione's Muggle-born experiences and activism in the magical world and a black/biracial woman's experiences in a white supremacist society.

According to feminist knowledge production philosophies, "the moment individually experienced problems appeared to be shared by many other women they were no longer isolated problems but acquired a shared fact status" (van der Tuin, 2016: p. 247-48). This applies to people from a range of marginalised groups. In the interpretive communities of fan spaces, fans resist dominant conceptions by engaging in dialogue to understand and debate the complexities of different situations (Alinia, 2015; Hancock, 2016). Here, conversations allowed my co-participants and I to read the world critically as we explored the ways media representations emerged from particular historical, social, cultural and political contexts (McArthur, 2016). Discussing these issues via the framework of fictional media helped us identify and unpack some of the troubling implications within our favourite fictional worlds.

8.2.1 Sharing stories of colonised minds

The process of decolonisation may or may not begin in online fan communities but such spaces do offer opportunities to practice and explore these ideas. My co-participants and I freely talked about how our imaginations had been hostage to the representations we had long been accustomed to. Accessing fan conversations about representations of Western and other cultures in our favourite media helped us in our ongoing journeys towards decolonising our minds. Our episode conversations offered a space to articulate certain taken-for-granted assumptions. More specifically, when it came to co-participants from Asian countries, our discussions explored how a Western media diet had influenced our imaginations.

Aditi, an Indian immigrant in Singapore, and I discussed the impact of growing up with British fantasy texts in India. Although we loved these books, they went on to shape our ideas of fantasy in very Eurocentric ways:

This is probably true for lots of us growing up in India – the first things that you read, the first fantasy, everything – it’s all Enid Blyton. And all the magical creatures that you hear about are the brownies and the pixies and – you know the things they eat, the puddings and cakes and jellies [...] And then The Hobbit I guess was next. And these are all ... just so very, very British [...] Which is fine because they were by British writers [...] but growing up, there was definitely not many fantasy books that were really relatable for me. – Aditi (MF Episode 7)

As Aditi pointed out, the fact that the books we were reading were written by British writers and set in British contexts wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. The problem was that when we were growing up, these were the only kinds of books we were reading since books from the UK and the US took up so much cultural (and shelf) space in India. This meant that when it came to the books that we read, the formative influences were largely British – ones which, as Aditi brought up, were largely alien to our contexts. British books shaped our imaginations to such an extent that for a long time, our minds immediately went to British cultural references rather than Indian ones when it came to ideas of fantasy.

For me and some of my co-participants, a predominantly Western media diet also shaped our perceptions of which cultural elements were superior. **Aparna**, a fellow Indian fan, pointed out how the depictions of food in British children’s books seemed like the ultimate exotic goal to us as Indian readers (MF Episode 1). By focusing on media, we were able to articulate and understand some of our own internalised assumptions. As we discussed, our repeated exposure to such depictions colonised our imaginations and influenced which languages, foods and fashions seemed aspirational – often Eurocentric ones – and which seemed uncool – our own.

As readers who grew up in India reading primarily North American and British children’s books, Aparna, **Sanjana**, Aditi and I hadn’t been able to unpack the ways in which these representations foregrounded certain cultures as the default. Our conversations encouraged us to question such norms. All 4 of us shared how our default assumption was that the characters we were reading about were white unless explicitly mentioned otherwise:

Most of the time, my imagination was right, because we were reading only white people – white men mostly. I just assumed for the longest time, until like shamefully recently, that all the characters I was reading were white. And all the characters that I identified with also in the books that I was reading and all just happened to be white only because they were the coolest. Even if there were non-white characters in the book [...] they were either stereotypes [...] Or they were so surface level that beyond their name or one line here and there, they didn’t really have much of a role to play. So you ended up identifying with the white characters and then that just became the normal. It took me a long time to say, oh the characters I identify with can actually be similar to me. – Aparna (MF Episode 2 Part 1)

As Aparna pointed out, our assumptions were frequently upheld in the text, which made it difficult to move beyond them. Thanks to my own exposure to Western

literature, my mind was trained to focus on the white protagonists in the books I read. Even when I spotted an Indian name in a Western book, like Parvati and Padma Patil in the *Harry Potter* series, I felt no sense of curiosity or connection with them since their cultural identities weren't explored at all. Like Aparna, I was unable to imagine them in ways which extended them beyond their superficial representations.

This expectation of whiteness is something **Aisha** – a fan from the UAE – and **Rita** – a Filipino fan – also recognised in different contexts.

Based on the books Aisha and I read when we were growing up, it wasn't just that Western society defaulted to white people in our imaginations. Much like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) childhood experience in Nigeria of writing stories featuring foreign people, foods and settings, neither of us could imagine ourselves in the stories we wrote. Even when Aisha and I wrote stories which weren't fanfic, they would automatically be set in the US or the UK rather than in Dubai or Mumbai and feature white characters rather than brown ones:

I wouldn't even think someone like me or someone with a different name or with a different feature could be featured in those books. I guess maybe because I read so many English books or so many other stories where diverse characters were not at all included. I thought maybe subconsciously that nobody else belongs in a book except for American or Western or whatever. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

This assumption of whiteness as the default is something I'm still struggling to unlearn as an adult fan of Western media. Much like Rukmini Pande's point above, Rita and I also grew up in online fan communities for Western media. Even though we were Asian fans in these spaces, we often didn't question the default whiteness of the stories, characters and art we were interacting with/creating. Rita was able to confront her own internalised ideas about default representations in online spaces when another fan pointed out limitations that she herself hadn't noticed:

I was either an admin or one of the mods for an RPG [roleplaying game] site. And one of our members called out the fact that our panellists [of characters] was mostly white faces. And that was the first time I'd ever encountered that – like think about the faces that you're putting forward for people to portray themselves as; portray their characters as. If you don't give them a choice, then you're whitewashing your community. – Rita

Rita still remembered her first brush with the experience of having her attention drawn to the default and who this default included and excluded even within the context of the characters being used in an online roleplaying game. This wasn't something she had critically reflected on at the time:

I don't think at the time I critically engaged with it. But I did take on those lessons without the theory that academia forces upon us. But it's just this real-life realisation like, oh of course you are erasing identities in a way [...] Like why is your medieval world so Westernised? And don't just say it's because it's based off of Game of Thrones. Because that's not an

excuse anymore. So yeah it was really, really interesting going through that process. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

As Rita pointed out, this form of decolonising public pedagogy wasn't something she encountered in the same way as people do in formal academic spaces. Nevertheless, fandom conversations offered her opportunities to confront her colonised mind. Her participation in these spaces enabled her to question the cultural representations in fandom spaces she had previously taken for granted and to reconsider whose perspectives they reflected. This analysis emerged through the collective intelligence of fandom since she could draw on diverse knowledges and perspectives. Encountering these helped Rita open up her own mind about diverse identities in online fan communities.

As some of my co-participants and I discovered through our podcast research and conversations on *Marginally Fannish*, a colonised mind meant that often, we didn't even know what ideas we had internalised and how they limited our ideas of what was possible. The umbrella of fandom and its associated conversations offered us a space to share our experiences of colonised minds with each other, spot similar patterns, and unpack our perspectives about our own cultures, thereby encouraging a process of decolonisation.

8.2.2 Navigating patterns of erasure and dominance

In our episodes, our conversations provided space for a collective process of decolonisation as we drew on our own experiences with media and fandom. An array of voices beyond academic contexts and the Global North interacting with each other allowed us to decolonise our own minds (Simaan, 2020). As we generated themes together based on our own lived experiences and observations, we were able to self-reflect on, articulate and share different aspects of our realities – reflecting Freire's (2018) claims of dialogue as a tool for both knowledge and liberation. We were able to raise our own as well as each other's consciousness in a process of critical public pedagogy (ibid).

As a teenager and young adult in online fan spaces, I often assumed that the fans of Western media I was talking to were from the US or the UK since all the media I engaged with – including fanfic – featured North American and British people. **Rita** had a similar experience and noticed that whereas most people didn't mention their nationalities, all the political and cultural references skewed towards the US:

One of the fan sites that I was part of way back during the Obama versus McCain election, there was an actual thread on the forums that discussed people's political beliefs when it comes to them [...] I know that Paul Ryan was brought up a lot and fiscal conservatism. – Rita

This prompted me to share my own encounters with politics and fandom. I realised that the US political system was usually the implied framework and wondered how many fans would/could have similar discussions about Filipino or Indian politics. This wasn't a segment we had planned to talk about but this analysis emerged through our conversation. In the process, we found that fans online were expected to know details about USA-based events but people didn't know or care about

other countries' histories, cultures and political contexts. My point helped Rita appreciate the role that USA and UK-based contexts played in online fandom and the dominant narratives this perpetuated:

The fact that I was a Filipino discussing American politics. To be fair, there is a degree of how much American politics does affect us because of our colonial past. But at the same time, we wouldn't talk about Filipino elections on that. You're absolutely correct. That's one way of almost cultural imperialism that happens in fan spaces. Because the things that we talk about more often than not are US or UK. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

Rita pointed out how fandom wasn't a neutral space even though it was often considered as such. Both of us explored how fans from non-Anglocentric cultures had to work harder to find belonging in spaces where the default largely excluded them. Through such encounters and conversations, we were able to unpack norms which changed the way we interpreted different contexts and experiences. By providing a space to explore how patterns of erasure and dominance manifested in different contexts, our episode framework allowed us to think about and articulate our colonised mindsets even as we strove to move beyond them.

In the episode with **Aisha**, an Arabic fan, we explored how different real-world and fictional cultures were represented in the Potterverse. Like me, Aisha had grown up in the 1990s and early 2000s largely reading Western books in an Asian country. In comparison to those, she found the *Harry Potter* series much more diverse since it included people from different cultures and nationalities. This is something I hadn't considered while thinking about the lack of diversity in the Potterverse. When I think back to the American and British children's books I read when I was younger, they very rarely attempted to include experiences of diversity that I recognised. Something I'd temporarily lost sight of was that even superficial representations can have a powerful impact on people, especially people from those backgrounds who are rarely represented in media (see Chapter 4).

In turn, over the course of our conversation, Aisha began to see how assimilationist the *Harry Potter* books were where people had to leave behind their cultural and national heritage in order to fit in with British magical culture. She now had higher expectations from her media and from *Harry Potter* than she did when she was younger:

And probably if we really look at Harry Potter – I mean I know that I'm a fan, a very loyal fan – but again this is how they've included those cultures like with Padma and with Mostafa and all of those characters. They seem to have been very assimilated into the wizarding culture and very little of who they are, what is their background is really brought up in the story. – Aisha

Collectively analysing patterns of dominance and marginalisation in the Potterverse helped both of us make new connections based on our own backgrounds and priorities. In Aisha's case, talking about how diversity was superficially incorporated in the Potterverse encouraged her to reiterate the importance of having stories which reflected the diversity of audiences so that

people could see themselves reflected in nuanced, complex ways rather than just as tokenistic representations:

It's important to include those cultural backgrounds and stories and have a central role you know. It's not just to tick boxes [...] There's no shame in characters bringing in their cultural parts. I don't see why they have to assimilate to the dominant culture or with the dominant characters. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

Whereas a younger Aisha found solace and recognition in brief glimpses of Arabic names and clothes in the *Harry Potter* series, our episode provided her with the opportunity to challenge the erasure of cultural identities and demand better than tropes and stereotypes. She wanted new generations of readers from different backgrounds to feel like their favourite stories were written for them; like the narratives had room for diverse experiences and identities; like they as fans belonged in the stories in ways she didn't always feel like she did.

Through our episodes, my co-participants and I critically engaged with the dominant narratives and questioned the larger systems, assumptions and norms of both media and fandom spaces. This helped us uncover some of the ideologies which perpetuated cultural inequalities and encouraged us to emphasise the need for more diverse and inclusive spaces.

8.3 Investigating cultural imperialism in favourite media

No texts are neutral since they are positioned in certain ways by authors as well as interpreted through the different readers' positions (Kelley and Jenkins, 2013). Critical literacy involves analysing the explicit and implicit power relationships in these texts to see who is disadvantaged and whose perspectives dominate (Janks et al., 2018). Intersectionality is not just concerned with oppression but also the complex ways in which marginalised people express their agency within oppressive social structures (Alinia, 2015). Creating alternative media and culture allows people to question and reflect on given information (Reitsamer and Zobl, 2014).

In the alternative media of podcasts, people from marginalised cultures can present their own counternarratives which challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about them (Carrillo and Mendez, 2019). Such spaces also allow groups whose perspectives are missing in mainstream culture the opportunity to shape culture in ways which highlight diverse issues (Barber, 2016; Carlton, 2018; Copeland, 2018; Day et al., 2017). In such cases, creative media production can be a politically cultural act since people are better able to unpack which voices, lives and norms are privileged and which are marginalised (Garcia, 2016; Kafai et al., 2011). This enables fans to identify and challenge the cultural hegemony promoted by mainstream media texts.

As Zen Cho pointed out in her *Breaking The Glass Slipper* episode "Cultural Traditions of Magic", Western fantasy/culture is currently global fantasy/culture because of the systems of cultural imperialism. The fantasy fiction that's popular reflects which culture is dominant in the real world. This also means that cultures,

religions and practices which aren't dominant are exoticised or erased (Leigh et al., 2019d). Different fan podcasts explored how food can be used to express xenophobia or to perpetuate cultural erasure both in the fictional as well as the real worlds (Eugenia and Toya, 2018a; Molinsky, 2018c). Such conversations about different aspects of cultural hegemony can help people identify and possibly unlearn ideologies they've been conditioned to accept as the norm.

The co-hosts of *Woke Doctor Who* proposed that *Doctor Who* was a deeply imperialistic show. They pointed out that even though the Doctor is an alien, they are played by a British person and the narrative centres British people, cultures and experiences within the framework of the show. They argued that the show was positioning the British Doctor as the moral compass of the universe who imposed their own ideologies on diverse cultures (Eugenia and Toya, 2019c). In another episode, the co-hosts highlighted the widespread use of Latin words in the magical spells used in the British Potterverse. They proposed that this Eurocentric linguistic focus erased the contribution of students from different religious and cultural backgrounds. The hosts clarified that they weren't complaining about the fact that J. K. Rowling didn't include these considerations; rather, they were using the opportunity to explore gaps in the text and imagine a more inclusive fictional world (Eugenia and Toya, 2019b).

Similarly, my co-participants and I interrogated the cultural norms within fictional worlds by drawing on patterns in the real world. Our episodes acted as counternarratives which used the fictional framework to not only question the established norms of the fictional world but also used it as a gateway to discuss real-world issues. Participating in fan conversations helped us develop critical and interpretative skills. Collaborating with each other helped us analyse the fictional elements and construct meaning by going beyond the information presented in the source text (Jenkins, 2012a). We practiced critical literacy by interrogating texts from multiple viewpoints, analysing the author's position and intent, understanding how media texts privilege some identities and marginalise others, and disrupting commonplace notions of diverse identities (McLeod and Vasinda, 2008; Mulcahy, 2008). By coming together in conversation, we could unpack the historical, social, cultural and political contexts in which media representations were created and the ways in which they influence what people think about themselves and each other (Livingstone, 2004; McArthur, 2016).

8.3.1 Decoding narrative norms

Until I spoke to my co-participants and encountered other fan perspectives which drew my attention to it, I hadn't cottoned on to the Eurocentric witch and wizard supremacist nature of the Potterverse. Nor had I realised how this reflected real-world cultural imperialism in different contexts. My understanding of this emerged and solidified throughout the course of the project. When **Aisha**, a *Harry Potter* fan from Dubai, suggested exploring cultural representations in the series, we drew on both our interests and examined the cultural imperialism in the books. Before we recorded our conversation, I was in the middle of rereading the books. The theme – supplemented by other fan perspectives I had encountered – helped me focus on how different cultures were depicted in the series:

In The Goblet of Fire, what struck me during the second task, when Harry goes to the bottom of the lake and he doesn't know that Merpeople live there [...] even though the lake is on Hogwarts grounds so you would think that this sort of information would have been shared. But he doesn't know whether they eat humans or whether they're murderous. He knows nothing about them. – Parinita

Revisiting the books helped me see how the narrative privileged witches and wizards at the expense of all other magical and non-magical people. As I observed, all the cultures in the magical world were segregated and were relatively ignorant of each other's practices and customs. What knowledge they did have was full of cultural stereotypes and prejudices. While Aisha hadn't considered these issues before our conversation, she soon began drawing her own parallels between the superficial way in which other cultures were represented in the magical world – as plot points rather than as fully-fleshed out characters – and Western media's superficial attempts to represent diverse cultures in the real world:

That maybe also shows that how again the idea of diversity was so superficial even in a fantasy you know. Oftentimes, for example, I would honestly be wary if I see an Arab character in a movie or in a book. 'Cause usually [...] instead of it coming from the point of view of the character, instead of it coming from within, it comes from how Western or how others see Arabs, for example. Sometimes they exotify like ooh those exotic costumes and those exotic food and this exotic music. Or sometimes it's just even the opposite, which is worse as well. So I guess that's how maybe the different characters and different species in Harry Potter are also included. – Aisha (MF Episode 18)

Aisha drew on her own cultural background to analyse how different cultures are marginalised in both the fictional and the real worlds. By putting different contexts in conversation with each other, she investigated the negative impacts of viewing diverse cultures through the lens of a dominant one. This knowledge emerged via collective contributions as we exchanged our interpretations with each other.

A few fan podcast episodes pointed out how Muggle-born characters like Hermione Granger were marginalised in the magical world due to their non-magical parentage (McDaniel and Granger, 2019; Zoltan and ter Kuile, 2017b). When I revisited the books through this lens, I realised that they were forced to leave their Muggle culture, knowledge and interests behind in order to entirely assimilate into a magical culture where most people had stereotypes and prejudices against Muggle lives and technologies. Perhaps my experiences of living in the UK, where I suddenly moved from being a part of the dominant culture in India to a marginalised one, informed this reading.

Whereas the Muggle culture outnumbered the magical community in the Potterverse, Muggles didn't have access to the kind of powerful resources and knowledges that the magical community took for granted. This is something **Aditi**, a fellow Indian immigrant in another country (Singapore), also alluded to when we were discussing how different cultures were represented in popular fantasy media. In the context of the Potterverse, we discussed the limitations of the magical

community's paternalistic/hostile attitudes towards people from non-magical communities:

Aditi: There's one thing that didn't occur to me at first but later when I reread and thought about it, I thought it was really awful. Which is right upfront when Hagrid says, we don't reveal ourselves to Muggles. And the reason is that they'd want magical solutions to their problems. And okay you don't want to just be fixing people's glasses and all, I get it. But when you realise that wizarding medicine in Rowling's world is so advanced [...] And they're just keeping it to themselves because they can't be stuffed.

[...]

Parinita: Nobody seems to really be that curious about Hermione's Muggle background – except Arthur Weasley. But even he isn't – it's in a way that's –

Aditi: It's like he's looking at something in a zoo.

[...]

Parinita: There's so much that can be achieved through cross-cultural collaboration. If the wizards and witches actually respected or were curious about Muggle culture, imagine how much better Hogwarts would be [...]

Aditi: I mean just imagine if Harry had a cell phone then Sirius would not be dead.

By analysing the books through the lens of cultural representations, Aditi and I were able to draw on our own knowledges and experiences of cultural imperialism. Through our conversation, we unpacked the cost of dominant-culture prejudices and theorised that both dominant and marginalised cultures would benefit through co-operating with each other.

The issues Aditi, Aisha and I discussed hadn't been evident to us during our initial readings of the books. However, our different interests and priorities – as well as the collective analysis we engaged in via the podcast format – helped us decode the various narrative norms within the books and how they both reflected and reproduced real-world biases.

8.3.2 Challenging cultural misrepresentations

When it came to our own cultures being represented in some of our favourite media, my co-participants and I used our knowledge to draw attention to the gaps in the representations. My Indian co-hosts **Sanjana, Aparna** and I explored the politics of names in Western media. The three of us were outraged by how some of our favourite writers depicted Indian names. In the *Harry Potter* sequel, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, an alternative timeline sees Ron Weasley marrying South Asian character Padma Patil. Their child is named Panju, a name which isn't a real Indian name at all. We also criticised popular SFF writer Neil Gaiman whose picture book set in India featured an eponymous character named Cinnamon –

another Indian name which only exists in exotic if unrealistic ideas about the country:

Sanjana: Even if you had blinked an iota of research, you would have found a better name.

[...]

Parinita: Cinnamon! Yeah that's what we name our children in India.

Sanjana: Yeah like ice creams.

Aparna: [laughs]

Parinita: What would you name them in the UK? It would be like naming a kid Fish and Chips or something. Or Haggis. It's just so ridiculous! (MF Episode 1)

Names have been a bone of contention across other parts of the *Harry Potter* fandom too with both Panju as well as Cho Chang attracting critique from fans of South and East Asian descent (Eugenia and Toya, 2019b; Gohil, 2016; Lee, 2013). By critiquing cultural and representational elements in our favourite stories and sharing this analysis on a public platform, we created a source of knowledge which could potentially educate others who may otherwise not have realised the context of these criticisms.

While Rowling's fictional universe drew on her own cultural background and priorities, fans such as **Aditi** can reveal what these assumptions exclude. Aditi turned her gaze towards the representations of food in Hogwarts to outline how that perpetuated forms of marginalisation:

Aditi: The other thing that struck me is that in all of Harry Potter, all the food is just exactly like in Enid Blyton. And I think the most foreign thing they have is bouillabaisse. Even that is making fun of it [...] But actual British culture I mean they do have a lot of other food I would think.

Parinita: Oh, you know what the national dish of the UK is? Chicken tikka masala. [laughs]

Aditi: Yeah exactly. But there's never chicken tikka masala at Hogwarts. (MF Episode 7)

Aditi's point about how the food in the British magical world doesn't reflect the social diversity of Britain prompted me to draw on my own observation of the food habits of the UK. By highlighting the lack of culinary diversity, Aditi helped me develop new connections and analysis. Even though there are characters of colour in Hogwarts, there is no mention of any food which isn't traditionally white British cuisine. This knowledge about how the food in the *Harry Potter* books didn't reflect the diversity of British cuisine and the impact of immigrant food emerged through our conversation. It helped us both identify and unpack how certain ideas are internalised within both the narrative as well as in our own minds in ways we don't always fully realise.

Through our conversations, Aditi, Aparna, Sanjana and I examined media representations to identify sociocultural assumptions and ideologies which

perpetuated inequalities either intentionally or unintentionally. We questioned narrative norms as well as their real-world implications by accessing an array of perspectives. In the process, we were able to reflect on the ways in which cultural imperialism manifests in both the fictional and the real worlds.

When our different interpretations intersected, it resulted in a better understanding of real-world social, historical, cultural and political contexts. Our conversations became a way to collectively identify and challenge the cultural hegemony we noticed in our favourite media. This is not to suggest that this collective process of decolonisation was an ever-present part – or even a deliberate aim – of our episodes. These ideas emerged in light of the themes we had chosen to focus on while planning the episodes. Had we selected a different theme or had I spoken about the same themes with different co-participants, it's quite possible that a different kind of narrative would have emerged – one that may not necessarily have contributed to this decolonising literacy. Nevertheless, such explorations reoriented some of our thinking about our favourite media.

8.4 Fresh insights into own and other cultures

People are unwittingly influenced by the roles, values and knowledges promoted by media. However, people can critique dominant systems of power and oppression as they collectively engage with knowledge and culture in ways which matter to them (Dittmar and Annas, 2017). People from marginalised groups are able to share their own perspectives rather than have others represent their lives. Inclusion of these perspectives is not a trivial issue since these experiences can provide complex and nuanced insights about power inequities (Choo and Ferree, 2010).

Through their conversations about the representation of diverse identities, fans negotiate issues of oppression and privilege as they explore how dominant groups become normative. People can acquire more insight and can more effectively question established cultural and social norms when they discuss topics collectively (Endres, 2001; Luke, 2012; Patterson et al., 2016; Shor, 1999).

Different fans challenge the ways in which their cultures are misrepresented or erased in their favourite media genres. Their responses go on to shed light about marginalised traditions. In a *Woke Doctor Who* episode which explored how faith was represented in the Whoniverse, the American co-host Toya critiqued the Christian underpinnings of most media in the US where Christianity is often the unspoken default and other faith traditions are marginalised. She used the opportunity provided by the episode theme to discuss how Christianity and colonisation had impacted the lives of her and her fellow black communities in the US. To challenge this nexus, she had now adopted the Orisha faith tradition from the African continent to be able to worship deities that reflected her own racial and regional identities – a kind of decolonisation (Eugenia and Toya, 2019d).

Fans use their interests, cultures, knowledges and experiences to recognise stereotypes and critique misrepresentations. Sharing these perspectives online using the framework of fictional media texts allows others a chance to learn about

the nuances of different identities and understand unfamiliar contexts. To prepare for the launch of the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise set in the US, J. K. Rowling wrote a series of articles titled “Magic in North America” which expanded the Potterverse from its British origins (Rowling, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d). These articles described the magical world and history in a fictional North American context. They were met with criticism from a range of indigenous American fans. The *Reading, Writing, Rowling* episode “Fantasy, Imagination and Indigenous Futurism” criticised the articles for further perpetuating the imperialistic notion that indigenous cultures didn’t have their own history, expertise of cultural knowledge, and intellectual contributions (McDaniel and Granger, 2017). The episode’s guest, Native American scholar Amy H. Sturgis, analysed the articles and questioned their dismissal of different cultural beliefs:

Rowling treats the Native population – all the different Native nations as something exotic and extinct – no longer living or present [...] She repurposes the story of the Skinwalkers for her own magical world. Now the Skinwalker concept is something sacred to nations like the Navajo today and not discussed in public out of respect [...] She’s acting as if there are no people who believe these things anymore [...] She wouldn’t have treated Christianity or Judaism or Islam or other world religions which are alive today in the same way. – Amy. H. Sturgis (in McDaniel and Granger, 2017)

Such critical conversations don’t rely on the whims of a single authority figure and result in a dynamic, flexible, collaborative and ongoing process of knowledge-creation (Bruns, 2008). By exchanging ideas and interpretations with each other, fans aren’t isolated and passive recipients of media and information; instead, they actively shape their interactions with media and with each other. Such contexts provide opportunities for multiple and alternative perspectives which are often missing in mainstream media. Lewis (2009) suggested that intersectional researchers should always be aware of the historical, social, cultural, national, ideological and political contexts of the intersectional categories they are investigating in their study since in different contexts, different categories may be the most relevant. By sharing our different contexts of marginalisation and dominance, my co-participants and I explored a more nuanced understanding of our different lived experiences.

8.4.1 Exposure to diverse cultural perspectives

The same fictional character or narrative can hold different meanings for different audiences depending on their cultural background. **Sanjana, Aparna** and I discussed how fans from different backgrounds had different reactions to media representations based on whether they were cultural insiders or cultural outsiders. The 3 of us had vastly different experiences watching 2 *Doctor Who* episodes based on real-world histories – “Rosa” which featured black civil rights activist Rosa Parks set in the US, and “Demons of the Punjab” which featured the Partition of India.

For our episode which explored representations of race, I suggested we watch the *Doctor Who* episode, followed by a *Woke Doctor Who* episode which analysed it.

Sanjana, Aparna and I loved “Rosa” when we first watched it. Since we hadn’t been taught about anti-racist activism in our schools, we loved being able to learn about a cultural history we weren’t familiar with. However, the black and Chinese-American co-hosts of USA-produced fan podcast *Woke Doctor Who* had a different reaction. Eugenia and Toya discussed why they disliked the simplified depiction of black American activist history, specifically Rosa Parks’ minimised role in it. They criticised the fact that other women activists were largely missing in the episode, which they felt erased black people’s agency and centred white people instead. While they acknowledged that a black writer, Malorie Blackman, had written the episode, they argued that her British identity led her to miss the nuances and contexts of American race-related activism (Eugenia and Toya, 2018b).

Armed with the critical perspectives we gleaned from this dissection of the episode, Aparna, Sanjana and I were able to come to a more contextual and complicated understanding of both the *Doctor Who* episode as well as black American history:

When I listened to this podcast, and [“Rosa”] was viewed from the experience of what was wrong with it and what could have been done better and why they didn’t like the episode. And it all just came so clearly to me [...] When the context was not properly understood and that’s why something that probably had good intentions behind it ended up being a really clumsy way of telling a story. – Aparna (MF Episode 2 Part 2)

On the other hand, both the *Woke Doctor Who* co-hosts as well as the British, Canadian and Australian co-hosts of *Verity!* loved the “Demons of the Punjab” episode which Aparna, Sanjana and I found underwhelming (Eugenia and Toya, 2019; Stanish et al., 2018). Sanjana highlighted the differences in our reaction to this episode and to “Rosa” as she proposed her own theory which explained the discrepancy in different fans’ responses to both episodes:

One of the things that was very evident to me is whose story is being told? Because when we watched the Doctor Who Rosa episode for our podcast episode on race, we loved the episode right at the onset. And when we heard the Woke Doctor Who episode where they spoke about the episode and all the problems with the episode, we were like, “What?! Yeah! You’re absolutely right.” With comparison to how they loved Demons of Punjab and we didn’t quite love it [...] We did have problems with it. And I think that’s basically how the way history is consumed becomes very limited and subjective to how it’s being told and to the people whose story it is – who were directly affected by it. – Sanjana (MF Episode 13)

While accessing *Woke Doctor Who*’s response had provided the 3 of us with more nuanced insights about an unfamiliar culture, Sanjana pushed back against what she felt was a simplistic depiction of a traumatic part of Indian/Pakistani history. She analysed her reaction by drawing on her own family history of Partition-induced migration in order to explain why the episode left her unsatisfied. In both cases, *Doctor Who*, a British show, portrayed histories of the US and India presumably for a British audience. Sanjana pointed out that as people who’ve grown up with these histories and contexts as a part of their cultural imagination,

different fans inevitably had a more complicated perspective of the representation of their cultures.

Conversations about diverse representations draw attention to the limitations of media and cultural industries in different ways. In our episode, **Aditi** drew on her own experiences as an Indian fan in Singapore to wonder why we didn't see any celebrations of non-Christian festivals like Diwali, Eid or Chinese New Year in Hogwarts:

I mean is everyone a Christian who goes to Hogwarts? Because they seem to celebrate Christmas and Easter [...] I don't get the impression that anyone is really overtly a believer. – Aditi (MF Episode 7)

The lens of the representation of different cultures allowed Aditi to identify and challenge ideas of whose beliefs are considered the default and whose are othered in the Potterverse. As she pointed out, even though nobody seemed explicitly religious in the series, the underlying framework still privileged Christianity. Imagining a more inclusive fictional world allowed her to share her own multicultural experiences where different cultural celebrations co-existed.

Analysing elements within some of their favourite fictional worlds enabled my co-participants to unpack the default framework and its implications. **Anna M.**, a fan who practiced a version of Wicca, pointed out the fallacy in fundamentalist Christian groups accusing J. K. Rowling of promoting Wicca through her books. Anna was puzzled by this accusation because she didn't think the witches in *Harry Potter* ascribed to any of the philosophies or politics of their real-world Wiccan counterparts:

You don't get any sense of pagan leanings within the books at all. In fact, one of J. K. Rowling's tweets about religious diversity in Hogwarts explicitly mentions how the only religion she didn't envisage as being part of the Hogwarts student body was Wicca [...] You don't get a sense that these people who go to Hogwarts are heirs of the persecuted community of historical witches. Neither do you get the sense that they have particular leanings towards activism or towards social movements. – Anna M.

Anna drew on her own faith background to decode the dominant cultural framework within the Potterverse. Moreover, she argued that the religious framework of the books was quite evidently Christian even though it wasn't explicitly stated as such:

In terms of the internal religion of Hogwarts, that's very, very Christian. They celebrate Christmas, they've got very Christian ethics. So not just the external religion in the context of which Rowling writes is Christianity, but also the wizards themselves can be conceived to be Christian. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

Different fan podcasts (including some *Marginally Fannish* episodes featured in this chapter) have discussed how Western fantasy texts have colonised global imaginations. As Zen Cho observed in her *Breaking The Glass Slipper* episode, many globally popular fantasy book series are built on a Christian framework. These

Christian underpinnings are exported internationally in ways which marginalise/exoticise other faith traditions (Leigh et al., 2019d). The different cultural resources, experiences and knowledges that Anna and Aditi brought into our conversations highlighted how despite the lack of overt mentions of religion in the *Harry Potter* series, the implied dominance of Christian narratives erased other belief systems.

Their points contributed to my own journey of decolonisation. While talking to them about the Christian underpinnings in Hogwarts, I realised that I'd never thought to question the traditions which existed in the narrative. Anna signposted Rowling's tweets which claimed that there was plenty of religious diversity in Hogwarts and pointed at the example of Anthony Goldstein as a Jewish character in the books (Bausells, 2014). However, in light of the different conversations I'd encountered in fandom spaces, I realised that the token Jewish character presented an exception to the otherwise Christian norm. Fandom conversations like the ones we had on *Marginally Fannish* as well as some of the other fan texts we read can contribute to both diversifying and decolonising these implicit themes within favourite media.

8.4.2 Understanding new cultural contexts

Fans of popular media who come from a range of backgrounds can learn about different cultures and gain a better understanding of the politics of representation. In my episode with **Anna R.**, a Greek fan, we discussed how we'd both learned about anti-Semitism thanks to fandom conversations. As fans from Greece and India, we didn't have the cultural contexts necessary to understand what anti-Semitism meant. The first time we learned what anti-Semitic tropes were and what they represented was via discussions within the *Harry Potter* fandom which critiqued the representations of goblins in the series for caricaturing Orthodox-Jewish stereotypes. Thanks to our diet of North American and British media, we had a vague understanding of some Jewish stereotypes but had no idea where they came from or what they meant:

For many years, I didn't even know what anti-Semitic means because, I'm sure it happens here, but that's not something I ever encountered or even discussed with anyone. So when you mentioned and when I listened to the podcast and through many things that I've read through the years, I was so shocked [...] I only know one stereotype about them like with the money and something but I don't even know the stereotype. It's something I've heard maybe once or twice or I've seen on TV or something. – Anna R. (MF Episode 5)

Similarly, we didn't know about indigenous stereotypes and tropes either until Native American *Harry Potter* fans began critiquing Rowling's writings for appropriating Native cultures and presenting them in limited ways. Fans from marginalised cultural backgrounds who analysed popular media and shared their critical insights with others helped us learn about different contexts of oppression. In our episode, we discussed how we would never have been able to pick up on the problems in Rowling's articles had it not been for indigenous *Harry Potter* fans in North America sharing their perspectives and criticisms. These fans argued that

the articles appropriated Native cultures and beliefs and presented them as primitive and monolithic entities (Davis and Jordan, 2016; Kosman and McGregor, 2016e).

By highlighting the limited and inaccurate stereotypes, tropes and tokenistic representations in media, fans can offer a more complex and nuanced understanding of their identities. These discussions and reactions also allowed us to learn about Native American cultures and beliefs. Critiques about cultural inaccuracies educated fans like us who didn't have the cultural/critical resources required to do this ourselves.

In the above instance, the framework of Western media fandom offered us a glimpse into unfamiliar contexts. However, accessing such perspectives can enable fans to look at their own cultures with fresh eyes too.

While most of our conversations were centred around Western media, **Sanjana, Aparna** and I often drew parallels to Indian contexts and made connections between different aspects of diversity and oppression. For example, racism in the way it manifests in primarily white countries is not as evident in India (though Indians do perpetuate racism within and outside the country too). But when we encountered conversations about race in fan podcasts and other fan texts, the ways in which oppressed races are treated in the West reminded us of how oppressed castes and ethnicities are treated in India (MF Episode 2). Similarly, when we listened to other fan perspectives about representations of indigenous groups in some of our favourite Western media, we couldn't help but draw parallels with Indian tribal and rural cultures whose knowledges and practices were similarly belittled or erased in Indian media (MF Episode 13).

Whereas in a Western context, our Indian representations may have been rare, in an Indian context, we belonged to the more privileged cultural backgrounds in terms of language, regional location, religion, class and caste. Encountering perspectives of unfamiliar cultures led us to critical insights about cultures closer to home and helped us articulate and analyse our own positions of cultural privilege. Viewing issues through the lens of identities we didn't share lived experiences with helped us understand the world in different ways.

8.5 Chapter Summary

Representations – or the absence of them – can have a tremendous impact on the imaginations and identities of marginalised cultures. Multiple nuanced and complex representations are important in the different public spaces and media which people encounter in their everyday lives. Conversations about the absences of stories – the stories we hadn't encountered until recently and the countless ones which were forever lost to us – allow fans to think about which cultures are represented in which ways. Through their analysis and critiques, fans can begin to decolonise their own minds as well as those of their audiences – especially valuable in instances when these topics of conversation aren't otherwise a part of mainstream discourse.

Admittedly, what's mainstream for one may not be the same for another. However, the fictional as well as the fandom frameworks allow fans to delve into a wide range of identities and themes and unlearn things about different cultures, including their own. Fans share their own journeys of learning to identify and unlearn cultural imperialism and cultural assimilation in different contexts. By sharing their previous assumptions and how and why these needed to change, fans challenge norms which they – and mainstream media and society – had long taken for granted. Fan critiques can bring patterns of marginalisation and erasure about certain identities to light and highlight structural inequalities. Once people begin to view media and the world it reflects through a more critical, intersectional lens, it's difficult to pack this viewpoint away. Such encounters can kickstart a lifelong and ongoing process of decolonising imaginations.

Chapter 9 “It’s Not Something Bad And It’s Not Something Good”: Incomplete Conversations In Imperfect Spaces

9.1 Introduction

I spent 10 months recording the podcast, followed by a year and a half of revisiting the conversations and blog posts as I analysed the data and wrote about the project. Over that period, I’ve learned (and unlearned) several things which, I’m sure, will have a lifelong impact on the way I think about intersectionality and the politics of representation. What I came to most appreciate about the process was that one’s ideas and conversations about these issues don’t need to be perfect for them to be valuable. As I explore in greater detail in this chapter, *Marginally Fannish* was hardly a perfect space full of infallible conversations. If I revisited these episodes in a few years, I’m sure my future-self would find things which make me uncomfortable. In fact, I’d almost be disappointed if I didn’t. It would mean that my ideas hadn’t evolved and my thinking had remained the same. It would mean I failed to encounter ideas which challenged me and helped me learn.

This chapter elaborates on how even deliberately-constructed inclusive spaces can feature failures of imagination and a lack of intersectional solidarity – and what one can learn from these imperfections:

- The first section looks at how even when fans gather to discuss issues of inclusion, diversity and equity, intersectional considerations aren’t always perfect or even evident. Such unfinished spaces feature a range of unresolved conversations and complications
- The next section explores the ways in which fans debate about whose stories matter in media, fandom and real-world settings. By questioning the structural inequalities within spaces that claim to represent diverse interests, fan conversations can draw attention to the lack of intersectional solidarity among differently marginalised groups of people
- The final section looks at how debates about intersectional issues – even ones which don’t arrive at a perfect solution – can add some nuance and complexity to opinions about diverse identities. These contradictory viewpoints and disagreements can challenge simplistic and monolithic narratives of representational equality

9.2 Imperfect intersectionality

People’s understandings about different identities are contextual. Intersectionality helps people understand differences between and within groups and discourages essentialising differences (Davis, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007). What it means to be a woman differs based on historical, geographical, social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). This also applies to other identities which are privileged in some contexts and marginalised in others. Some intersectionality scholars recommend that researchers should be aware of these contexts so that they can use locally relevant categories to analyse privilege and

discrimination (Lewis, 2009; Śliwa et al., 2018). All these factors need to be taken into account lest intersectional analyses ignore differences between marginalised groups of people.

An intersectional framework encourages us to examine and address more than one injustice at a time (MacKinnon, 2013; Śliwa et al., 2018). Davis (2008) proposed that intersectionality can be used in a diverse range of contexts to interrogate any social, cultural or political system by anyone who uses their own social position as an analytical tool. This project focused on the established structural systems of cultural representations. Media literacy can raise awareness among people about the discrimination and inequalities based on multiple marginalised identities (Kellner and Share, 2005). However, in fan spaces, even fans who have an intersectional orientation aren't always considerate of different identities and experiences.

Hannell (2020) proposed that the field of fan studies has much in common with feminist cultural studies. These shared feminist underpinnings include methodological choices about how knowledge is produced, interpreted and represented. But both fields also share similar gaps and blind-spots wherein the feminist experiences they privilege are distinctly white, Eurocentric, middle-class, cisgendered and able-bodied. However, she believed that an intersectional fan scholarship can expand understanding about a range of experiences. As she pointed out, both fields encompass broad definitions of feminism and fannishness. There is no single set of practices which is considered the one true feminism/fandom – there is room for multiple and conflicting philosophies and politics (ibid).

Even though we tried to analyse a broad range of identities, our conversations on *Marginally Fannish* were imperfect and incomplete; weren't always inclusive of diverse perspectives; and sometimes offered contradicting ideas with no definitive answers. According to the framework of "a methodology of discomfort" (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010), this imperfection and incompleteness is a crucial part of people's knowledge-making process. It embraces the idea of complex, multiple truths and leaves open room for opinions to change. Inspired by Burdick and Sandlin's (2010) invitation to write about these feelings of unease and uncertainty while researching critical public pedagogies, this section explores some of the discomfort in this project and my thinking. The doubt and failures I write about in this section helped me question my assumptions, reflect on my limitations, and exposed me to unexpected ideas, thereby expanding my imagination about diverse identities (Springgay and The Torontonians, 2014).

9.2.1 Unfinished spaces

Fan communities are often imperfect and incomplete spaces filled with contradicting viewpoints. In my own project, I chose to focus on a deliberately curated fandom space which means that my theories and observations are applicable only in a limited context. While several fan podcasts exist, some are more critical than others. Not all fan podcasts aim an intersectional lens at their favourite media – not even ones featuring fans from marginalised backgrounds.

Among the fan podcasts I've chosen, a few explicitly state their allegiance to intersectionality (*Breaking The Glass Slipper*, *The Gayly Prophet*, *Witch, Please*, *Woke Doctor Who*), but most don't. I believe that even the ones that don't use the term intersectionality do increase awareness and understanding of diverse intersectional identities and perspectives. But I can only claim this with regards to the fan podcasts I quite deliberately selected. Even in *these* podcasts, not all episodes delved into themes which were relevant to my research and personal interests.

Belonging to a marginalised background in any context doesn't necessarily mean that people bring that identity to the fore while engaging with their favourite fictional worlds. Many fans don't. I certainly didn't until relatively recently. Consequently, just talking about *Harry Potter* or *Doctor Who* doesn't mean fans start unpacking the representations of women, people with disabilities, portrayals of different religions etc. My co-participants and I chose to engage with specific intersectional themes as we explored our ideas about marginalisation and dominance in media representations. Our active participation in a project with an intersectional focus allowed us to share and learn from diverse perspectives. Even then, it's very likely that all my co-participants left with very different experiences of participation. I certainly can't make claims for the ways in which others have learned – only the way in which it has influenced my own thinking.

Moreover, fandom isn't always critical. For many fans, being a fan is about loving something and sharing their enthusiasm with others. Sometimes this love and enthusiasm can manifest through critical ways – other times, fans just want to excitedly talk about things which matter to them which may not really matter in intersectional ways.

Even deliberately constructed spaces aren't always perfect. Fan podcasts are limited in scope – both in terms of the people these podcasts include and reach as well as the topics they discuss. In the case of *Marginally Fannish*, even though it was presented as an explicitly intersectional project, there were limits to intersectional awareness and solidarity even within this structure. Most of my co-participants wanted to focus on 2 or 3 primary identities – ones they were personally invested in. Even though some of them were excited about exploring their individual theme(s), they didn't necessarily want to discuss others. Moreover, there were 2 specific interactions with co-participants which made me uneasy owing to our diverging beliefs – though I'm not going to describe them here for ethical reasons. I only mention the incidents to underscore the fact that the podcast did not present an unproblematic space.

Nonetheless, fan podcasts have opened my mind up to a myriad of possibilities. For me, fandom has always been a form of social pedagogy. In both my personal fandom life and in my research, I've quite deliberately curated a more progressive, more nuanced, more positive space based on whose ideas I access. I am lucky to be able to choose not to actively engage with the more toxic parts of fandom.

As a researcher, however, throughout the recording of the podcast as well as while writing this thesis, I constantly worried about presenting a false picture of fandom.

Firstly, I was wary of having *Marginally Fannish* be the sole source of data since I had specifically created it for my PhD project with an intersectional aim in mind. This is why I used my observations from other fan podcasts as corroboratory literature to bolster my primary data. Secondly, I didn't want to present the idea of fandom as a wholly utopian space. I purposely controlled my fannish interactions to largely have positive encounters. However, many fans have vastly different experiences in fandom. For them, bypassing fandom negativity isn't an option (see below and Chapter 10).

When I shared my discomfort of not wanting to engage with the negative aspects of fandom, **Rita**, a fan and researcher, pointed out that curating such fannish spaces wasn't an inherently negative thing:

Part of the echo chamber is really protecting yourself against harmful discussions that could harm your mental health. And I understand that has detrimental aspects to it but I guess you could say echo chamber is a neutral term. It's not something bad and it's not something good. It depends on what it brings back to both sides of it. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

Rita's point highlighted the fact that fan spaces are what fans make of them. No one fan's experience mirror another's – even if they do inhabit the exact same spaces, which people rarely do. Like me, Rita as well as **Milena**, a fellow fan studies researcher, spoke about how they curate their fannish spaces and interactions to be positive experiences (MF Episodes 20, 21). Elsewhere, Milena has written about how for fan studies researchers, the construction of a field site draws on their diverse politics, research questions, theoretical underpinnings of the research, their own individual experiences, interactions and practices online – which may or may not mirror those of their research participants (Popova, 2020). They framed this process as a journey that by its very nature and focus remains incomplete and unable to present a holistic picture of fandom (ibid).

Both their points helped me see that my deliberately-curated space wasn't as much a research liability as I had initially considered since it did reflect my engagement with fandom. Talking to Rita and drawing on Milena's perspectives helped problematise my own worries about presenting a complete picture of fannish spaces. Owing to a researcher's limitations and priorities, any picture of fandom would be incomplete and subject to change. Putting their perspectives together with my own also helped reinforce the educational potential of such conversations, however limited in scope they may be.

9.2.2 Unresolved conversations/complications

As in other spaces, conversations about inclusivity and diversity aren't perfect in fan podcasts – even when the people involved are trying to consider different intersectional perspectives. In my own case, there were a few instances where I conflated my co-participants' intersectional identities with their interests. I ended up making assumptions about what topics they'd be interested in exploring based on my own limited understanding of their backgrounds.

H, a fan from Japan, wanted to explore representations of race and racism. While preparing for our episode, I ended up recommending fan and other texts which explored Japanese media like anime and Pokémon or which explored Asian-American perspectives of Western media. I didn't critically analyse my choices until much later. At the time, I thought these texts would be the ones most likely to make H comfortable since they reflected his country of origin. What I failed to consider was that Asian-American perspectives were probably irrelevant to his Japanese experiences. I also didn't think about the fact that he might be unfamiliar with the Japanese media I'd suggested. In fact, his suggestions were 3 movies he loved that explored issues of race in different ways – all of which were produced in the US or the UK. H wanted to talk about Western movies, not Japanese ones. In hindsight, it's absurd I didn't consider this since I grew up in India immersed in Western media myself.

In **Aisha's** case, we decided to focus on diverse cultures within the *Harry Potter* books. Based on this, I chose texts which drew parallels between religion, Islam, and *Harry Potter* in different ways. Since Aisha was a Muslim fan from Dubai, I thought these themes might resonate with her. She loved a couple of the texts I recommended but clarified that while she didn't mind discussing her Muslim identity during the conversation, she'd prefer for religion not to be a focus because she didn't connect her religious experiences with her fan identity. Ironically enough, she was more confident talking about Japanese anime and culture than she was about religious parallels to fandom. I suggested anime fan texts to H since he was from Japan but I didn't think to do the same for Aisha since she wasn't – despite knowing that anime is globally popular too.

In both cases, my choice of text suggestions were useful in that they revealed much more about my own cultural biases and assumptions and provided me the opportunity to identify and challenge them. Growing comfortable with discomfort happened in different ways at different stages and processes of the project. To begin with, I was quite uncomfortable about potential conflicts and mistakes. But eventually, I began to appreciate the value of discomfort. As a researcher, this uncertainty and constant self-reflexivity felt liberating because it allowed me to become comfortable with not always knowing the correct thing to say or do. If I was 100% comfortable with all my beliefs, it's likely I'd overlook the many lives and experiences I'm ignorant of – like I did above. Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable offered me valuable insights into what I didn't know.

Having said that, even being comfortable enough to share discomfort isn't always possible. Discomfort can be quite harmful. Some of my co-participants raised awareness about the psychological toll faced by both media fans and creators from marginalised identities.

When I shared how happy I was about the liberatory potential of fan campaigns and conversations which sought to diversify the media they loved, **Diana**, a queer fan and fan studies researcher, pointed out the unequal nature of such practices:

I think that there's a larger structural intervention that's required in media. And right now a lot of times the work or burden will fall on fans to have these campaigns and to fight for this. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Whereas I thought that fan conversations could contribute to a more diverse mediascape, they outlined the existing power imbalances where commercial interests continued to dictate what kind of diversity would sell and how it would be represented – a matter which fans had very little say in. While fan practices can be liberatory, they are not enough. Diana challenged my overly positive view of fans' subversive activities and added nuance to considerations of diversity and equality within cultural spaces.

In another episode, **Rita**, a Filipino fan, shared her experience of the psychological impact of imbalanced power hierarchies on fans from marginalised identities:

I was very much a part of the fandom of Bon Appetit Test Kitchen on YouTube. And they went through a reckoning for race and equality because it came out that their producers, their creators of colour were not paid for their appearances or not paid at the same rate. And then after that, I didn't know why at the time, but I just wasn't excited to cook anymore [...] And then I only connected it much later when I realised, "Oh yeah. Because the entire thing about it that made you happy was just shattered into a million little pieces. So of course it's going to affect you in a very personal way." Because that's something about fandom; it's not just discourse, it's not just objective. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

While I tend to focus on the empowering potential within fandom, my co-participants contributed a more complicated picture which drew on their own experiences and observations. Rita illustrated the emotional burden which came with fans' intense investments in their favourite media. She also pointed at the psychological drain on *Harry Potter* fans from marginalised identities who didn't see themselves reflected in their favourite world. She argued that constantly having to write themselves into the Potterverse through fanfiction, art and commentary was emotional labour that was unfairly distributed. Again, while I've largely seen the fact that fans reclaim and diversify their favourite fictional worlds as empowering acts (see Chapter 7), Rita pointed at the negative side of such practices. By offering a perspective which differed from my own more optimistic conceptions, she highlighted that while fan activities *can* diversify a limited media canon, this needs to be tempered with an understanding of the kind of effort which fans from marginalised backgrounds need to do and how this differs from the experiences of fans from dominant cultures.

In the episode with **Milena**, a queer fan and activist, they empathised with the struggles that queer creators of TV shows like *Black Sails*, *Steven Universe* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* had gone through to represent certain queer themes and characters in their worlds against the looming threat of censorship – something which creators from more dominant backgrounds didn't have to contend with. Milena drew a parallel between the psychological toll involved in conversations about diverse representations in media and their experiences in activism:

If you read what Rebecca Sugar [creator of Steven Universe] says, it's genuinely harmful to people's mental health (Moen, 2020). And it's just this constant uphill fight. And that's true for producers, it's true for fans.

I've been an activist for a very long time. I regularly go periods of like I can't deal with this anymore. And how many times you can just keep picking yourself up off the floor is an interesting question that at some point we may find the limit to. But it's just exhausting. – Milena (MF Episode 21)

Milena shed light on how the constant gauging of what producers, audiences and censors wanted from their identities was dehumanising to people from marginalised backgrounds. My co-participants provided insights into the different hurdles marginalised creators and fans had to face to merely exist fully and complexly in media, fandom and society. For Diana, Rita and Milena, it wasn't an abstract and theoretical topic of discussion. These were issues which had had a very real impact on their own lives. For them, being a fan wasn't a wholly positive experience.

9.3 Whose stories matter?

One of the critiques against feminism is its centring of the most dominant group of women within a specific context (Eric-Udorie, 2018; Khan, 2019; Manfredi, 2019; Okolosie, 2014). The internet has offered women who are otherwise marginalised in discussions about feminism a platform to highlight their own perspectives and concerns. These spaces allow women inhabiting different intersectional identities to challenge the narrative promoted by a privileged group of feminists for whom sexism alone is the biggest tool of oppression (Okolosie, 2014). This ability to share a diverse range of perspectives also applies to other contexts and hierarchies of marginalisation. Intersectionality requires feminists to consider people from differently marginalised identities as equal participants. Online spaces have subsequently promoted conversations about the need for an intersectional feminism.

However, even with the best intentions, this sort of critical intersectional awareness isn't always present among people in online spaces. Producing alternative media online does not always guarantee resistance, empowerment or liberation (Feria-Galicia, 2011; Jones and Hafner, 2012). Digital media creators can reproduce dominant forms of discourse and oppression. Kanai (2019) and Okolosie (2014) noted that merely adopting the language of intersectionality isn't enough; not all feminists who employ the term intersectionality online centre inclusivity and equality for everyone. In these informal contexts, one of the challenges of intersectionality is to retain its critical edge (Collins, 2015).

Crenshaw (2015) explained that while she originally coined the term intersectionality to talk about black women's experiences in the US, it now encompasses all those marginalised groups whose experiences are erased. However, inhabiting a marginalised identity does not automatically mean you share the perspectives of other marginalised groups (Gentile and Salerno, 2019). Yosso (2005) noted that conversations about race in the US usually end up focusing on black Americans and ignoring the perspectives of Latinx and Native American populations whose encounters with racism may differ. In the context of

Indian feminism, privileged urban issues tend to drown out the perspectives and experiences of rural, tribal, Dalit and poor women (Chakraborty, 2018).

Many intersectional conversations within fandom tend to mirror those in other parts of the internet and within intersectional scholarship. Pande (2017) acknowledged that online fan spaces offer the potential for resistant and transformative readings which critique dominant conceptions of marginalised social identities. However, she noted that such discussions are fraught and often attract accusations of disrupting “normal” i.e. dominant culture fandom’s pleasure and practices. One of her respondents additionally complained that while discussing race in fandom, the focus tends to be on black and Latinx issues, marginalising Asian and Asian-American perspectives. This also erases other intersections of oppression.

Alinia (2015) and Windsong (2018) examined how people can both be oppressed and the oppressor, depending on the context, since people occupy multiple positions of privilege and oppression. Mel Stanfill (2019) featured a discussion with fans of colour about their experiences in a marginalised corner of the fanfiction community. The fans argued that even in those areas of fandom which are populated by queer marginalised groups and which position themselves as progressive and inclusive, there are racist and ableist undertones. They thought that inhabiting one marginalised identity was often used as an excuse to not question implicit biases about other oppressions. They also criticised the lack of representations and conversations featuring queer and trans people of colour in queer fandom spaces (ibid).

Different fan podcast episodes pointed at how even within marginalised groups, certain factions gain dominance at the expense of others. In the “Bechdel-Wallace Test” episode of *Breaking The Glass Slipper*, the hosts acknowledged that while there was increasing awareness about better representations of women in media, there needed to be more intersectional considerations so that identities like age, race, disabilities, religions etc. weren’t left behind (Leigh et al., 2018c). Other fans highlighted how considerations of bisexual, pansexual, intersex and trans people were often missing in discourses about queer representation in both media and society. They pointed out that being a member of one of the acronyms under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella didn’t mean you shared the experiences of the others. Even within queer groups, there’s a hierarchy where some identities are privileged over others (Alison et al., 2017; Eugenia and Toya, 2018c).

Gatson and Reid (2012) noted that fans of colour have long borne the brunt of antiracist work within fandom. The fans Stanfill spoke to echoed this sentiment and contended that fans from dominant groups needed to be allies so that marginalised fans weren’t the only ones engaged in activist work. They also advocated for more intersectional coalitions between fans from different marginalised groups (Stanfill, 2019). Some scholars advocated for an intersectional approach which emphasises building alliances and solidarity among different social groups (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez and Matute, 2013; Hancock, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Collaboration between different marginalised groups can help people learn from diverse lived experiences in order to challenge

and transform unequal systems (Chakraborty, 2018; Gentile and Salerno, 2019; Gillborn, 2015; Roberts and Jesudason, 2013).

People's experiences and perspectives may differ from other members' but they can still co-exist under the same intersectional movement (Gentile and Salerno, 2016). This politics of difference and solidarity enables people with different priorities to acknowledge that they're impacted by social, political, cultural and educational structures in different ways (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). These differences strengthen rather than weaken their relationships and can enhance building coalitions around the shared work of social justice (Roberts and Jesudason, 2013). Ignoring the differences results in a hierarchy of marginalisation and benefits the most privileged within the marginalised group and overlooks the needs and priorities of the others (Hancock, 2007; Roberts and Jesudason, 2013). Conversations among diverse groups of people – like the ones on *Marginally Fannish* – featuring different interpretations of intersectionality in non-academic contexts can make an important contribution to intersectional scholarship (Bailey and Gosset, 2018; Collins, 2015).

9.3.1 Questioning structural inequalities

In their discussions about media representations, some of my co-participants pointed out the structural inequalities in cultural industries and how these impact differently marginalised identities. In our episode about representations of older women in SFF media, **Deb**, a middle-aged fan, critiqued the narrow demographic make-up of writers in Western media structures:

The more marginalised identities you add in, the less people who seem to appear in these productions and these media [...] We've got to start with all the way back to what are the stories that we write? What are the stories that we decide are worth putting forward? I would be very interested to know what sort of age breakdown they have in the writers' room because specifically focusing on questions of age, as we are here, because particularly in sci-fi and fantasy, the writers' rooms tend to pretty young, they tend to be pretty white, and they tend to be pretty male. – Deb

Deb foregrounded her own intersectional priorities in order to identify and question the dominant norms in media industries. She drew on her identities as a middle-aged female fan whose experiences and perspectives were rarely at the forefront of SFF media:

I know that [Doctor Who has] done a lot of work diversifying in terms of race and ethnicity, and in terms of gender in [the] writers' room which is fantastic. I would be very interested to see if there's also been diversity in terms of age so that we're looking at what stories we even value and even want to tell. – Deb (MF Episode 14)

As Deb noted, while there have been strides in terms of racial and gender diversity, older women wasn't an identity which received the same treatment. She proposed that the absence of older writers, especially older female writers, meant that certain lives and stories were privileged at the expense of others, even when it

came to shows like *Doctor Who* which have been praised for presenting an increasing diversity of perspectives. Deb signalled that having a more diverse group of media creators could do a better job of representing the diversity of the world onscreen. That way, progress wouldn't just mean progress for one group but instead would signify progress for all.

However, **Diana**, another co-participant, believed that having creators and actors from diverse groups wasn't enough when the media industries themselves reified social inequalities. They drew on their own white, queer and nonbinary identities to highlight the institutionalised whiteness, heteronormativity and cisnormativity of Western media industries – normativities which they didn't think would go away just by hiring more queer people or people of colour. They expanded their point by citing poet and feminist activist Audre Lorde's framework of the difference between having a seat at the table versus having a voice at the table:

Just because you have people of colour, queer people, disabled people in a room doesn't mean that they are going to be able to have the same amount of influence in that room as folks who are more structurally socially powerful, right, because societal power dynamics are still going to be at play there. And so, it is of course extremely important to diversify media industries; but at the same time, that sometimes is just a band-aid on top of this larger structural problem. – Diana

Diana argued that the term diversity had become such a buzzword in media industries that publishing and production companies were jumping on the bandwagon. To ensure that this wasn't just a momentary trend which would eventually disappear, they recommended that true equity of representation required a massive structural overhaul:

Because if you're not providing overall the equipment or the scaffolding [...] that marginalised people are going to need in order to succeed and also not burn out on all of the emotional labour that they're giving into this industry ... that's more than just a hiring process, right? And that sometimes also can require a totally fundamental retooling of how it is that we're thinking about these institutions, including media institutions. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Diana's contributions and insights helped hone my own thinking about diverse representations, power imbalances and structural inequalities in media systems. Their nuanced and complex analysis highlighted issues of cultural parity which required more than a superficial fix.

As I've written previously, fans don't just draw attention to the structural inequalities within mainstream media but also the ones which exist within mainstream fandom spaces. Prior to recording the episode with **Marita**, a white polyamorous fan, I had encountered a discussion on Twitter about *Archive Of Our Own* (A03), the massive fanfiction platform, and its complicity in racism. This occurred amidst the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the US and elsewhere. While I was familiar with A03, I didn't participate in its community. Consequently, I relied on other people's perspectives to build my own understanding of the platform and its fans. In these Twitter posts, a few fan researchers (elmyra, 2020;

Nadkarni, 2020a; 2020b; Pande, 2020; Stitch, 2020) criticised A03 for protecting queer white fans' explorations of gender and sexuality in ways which marginalised readers and writers of colour – a topic **Milena** and **Diana** have discussed in different contexts as well (see below and Chapter 10).

At the time, this was a perspective I hadn't encountered before and brought it up with Marita, someone who spends a lot of time reading and writing fanfiction. She had complicated feelings about the issue. She acknowledged that as a white person who hadn't critically looked at A03's practices, it wasn't necessarily her place to talk about it. On the other hand, she sympathised with both sides of the issue:

I definitely think a lot of the criticism that has been made is absolutely fair and very, very much correct. I do think in the response of A03, I can see where some of that is coming from. Like the argument that nothing can be all things to all people. And especially if you're an archive essentially. A lot of the proposed suggestions that I've read from people arguing that A03 is racist and should adopt some different policies [...] do not seem feasible to me. – Marita

Marita was responding to the critiques which asked A03 to install a system that made it easier to report and delete stories and comments which many fans of colour construed as racist. However, Marita believed that such tools could be misused to harass queer fans who were exploring sexuality in ways which didn't meet with everyone's approval:

We've talked a lot about [...] fanfic communities as positive spaces. But they are absolutely a space that's rife with bullying and just general very hateful speech and very hateful mentalities and a lot of targeting of people etc. for various different things. And I think that taking away a lot of that and giving mods more power and making it more structured and less in very, very, very big quotation marks "free" could very much lead to people getting banned over silly things. And a lot of purity culture specifically. I know that's what a lot of queer people are worrying about around A03 because you tend to create content that might be questionable in various ways. And I know that there's a lot of concern about that. Adding the ability to delete comments is great. I love that. Turning off and on comments is also great. It's just that we have those theoretical conversations and we don't actually talk about the work. – Marita (MF Episode 17)

I didn't know enough about the debates and arguments within A03 to have an informed opinion about the issue. As someone who had largely been an observer to the ongoing fracas, I had no personal stake in the platform's systems. I appreciated that Marita presented me with another perspective on the issue, especially her point about the different ways in which fan harassment occurs. However, this bit of the conversation also left me a tad discomfited in ways I didn't/couldn't fully articulate or understand at the time. On revisiting this conversation, my own racial background and intersectional priorities led me to an interpretation which Marita may not have intended at all. I realised what exactly had made me uncomfortable. This viewpoint seemed to place the concerns of one marginalised identity – queer fans – over the perspectives of another – fans of colour. I do think conversations

like this, where fans don't necessarily agree with each other, can highlight issues which are otherwise ignored. However, owing to my overall ignorance of the platform and my inclination towards not creating a space of conflict with my co-participants, I think there was a valuable opportunity lost to challenge and expand each other's thinking through our conversation.

In my attempt to wear the hat of an ethical researcher, I missed out on an avenue to explore this topic in further detail at the time. However, I *was* able to fully articulate my discomfort and the reasons behind it when I revisited our conversation. Fans may not always agree about their ideas of inclusion, who they want to include and how – similar to debates in more traditional activist spaces too. But such encounters can potentially provide learning opportunities. I'm not sure if this was the case for Marita, but I definitely appreciated this minor point of contention in being able to clarify my own ideas about intersectional identities.

Unlearning entrenched ideas doesn't happen overnight and progress isn't always linear. Both Marita and I acknowledged our own prejudices and blind-spots in our conversation as we expanded the range of diverse identities in our understanding of the world. Both of us were attempting to move towards inclusivity and equity through our imperfect understanding and conversations. The critical aspects of fandom aren't perfect or omnipresent but such imperfections can nevertheless help fans gain a more nuanced understanding of intersectional issues in different ways.

9.3.2 Lack of intersectional solidarity

Conversations with co-participants drew attention to hierarchies of marginalisation in different contexts. For most of the episode with **Diana**, a fellow fan and fan studies researcher, we discussed representations of queerness in media. At one point, however, I brought up Rukmini Pande's academic work on race and racism which highlighted the structural whiteness within both the academic field of fan studies as well as within large parts of the online fan community of Western media (see Chapter 8). I mentioned one of Pande's conclusions where she studied slash ships in fanfiction communities and found that relationships featuring white people were more popular than those featuring characters of colour – irrespective of how big/bad a role these characters played in canon (Coker and Pande, 2018; Pande, 2017; Pande and Moitra, 2017). Diana shared their own research findings which corroborated Pande's point in different ways:

I have participants who have told me that they will experience more policing in fandom. So if they write characters of colour, they will, for example, receive fewer kudos. If we're talking about Archive Of Our Own, the fanfiction platform, kudos are like likes on Facebook. And so they feel like those fics receive fewer kudos. Or they'll receive fewer comments or the comments won't be as positive. – Diana

Diana's intersectional considerations – where they didn't just care about the identities they were personally invested in – helped shed light on a more negative aspect of fandom:

Even though AO3 in general is branded as a positive environment. That's not the case for fans of colour a lot of the times [...] I've had participants of colour who have told me that they also will face harassment for writing white characters. White fans will come after them and say, "You shouldn't be writing for these characters." Which is ridiculous! – Diana (MF Episode 9)

The marginalisation which occurs in larger social structures is replicated within some fandom spaces, no matter how progressive they're perceived to be. Diana highlighted the irony of this occurring on the fanfiction website *Archive Of Our Own* which is heralded as a positive and safe environment for fans. However, it is seemingly only positive for white fans who uphold the dominant discourse rather than fans of colour who challenge it.

Diana further observed how fandoms replicated the limitations of mainstream media and society. Apart from the dominance of structural whiteness within fandom, they pointed out the hierarchy of marginalisation within queer communities where femslash i.e. female/female fanfic as well as polyamorous, asexual and nonbinary representations were largely absent. They also outlined the problems with many trans representations in fanfic:

When trans characters are depicted [...] if folks are trans women or trans men, some of the same sort of dominant narratives around trans experiences are reflected in fandom. And this can be especially interesting in explicit sex scenes. A lot of times if you have a trans man or a transmasculine person, they will have had top surgery if they're doing a sex scene. Whereas your physical features don't have anything to do with your gender identity. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Diana drew attention to the nuances and complexities of the politics of representation. By discussing their own research and experiences, they shared their analyses of the hierarchies of marginalisation within intersectional identities. Such public conversations about the lack of intersectional solidarity in fandom spaces can act as a tool of education about the issues which impact people from different backgrounds.

9.4 Journeying towards complexity and nuance

Examining a text or an idea from multiple perspectives – especially those which are otherwise silenced – is an essential aspect of critical literacy. These alternative viewpoints allow for a more nuanced understanding of the text or issue (Bonsor Kurki, 2015; Gounari, 2009; McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004; Mulcahy, 2008; Wohlwend and Lewis, 2011). Alternate explanations can help people delve into the complexity of situations (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). Adopting and seeking out multiple, even contradictory viewpoints allows readers to see the diverse possibilities of an issue based on diverse contexts of the people (Mulcahy, 2008).

Since fan communities are spaces filled with diverse voices, this also leads to diverse interpretations (Jenkins 2006). Fans use fan texts to negotiate cultural representations, seek information, and develop interpretations and judgements. Depending on their interests and backgrounds, fans come to different conclusions

and offer different opinions of the same text or event (see Chapter 7). While an openness to multiple and conflicting interpretations is evident among some fans, others challenge opinions which go against their own (see Chapter 10). Although not all fans are open to interpretations which don't mirror theirs, for those who are willing to consider alternate explanations, these interpretations can either inform/reformulate their thinking or enable them to better articulate their opposition to the ideas

Okolosie (2014) pointed out that although the term intersectionality leads to many debates, the public nature of these arguments introduces new people to this concept; in turn, they can reflect on its relevance in their own lives and understanding of the world. Such debates about intersectional identities exist in fandom spaces too. De Kosnik (2016) thought that when it comes to issues of inclusion and exclusion, these debates are a good sign since these issues aren't being dismissed or ignored. She believes that such examples of individual as well as collective political work in fandom can change the way fans engage with culture and diversity (ibid).

Flourish Klink was a nonbinary co-host of *Fansplaining*, a podcast about fandom. In the episode "Letting Harry Potter Go" they explained how important the books in general and the character of Nymphadora Tonks in particular were in helping them come to terms with their gender identity. As a teenager, Flourish even adopted their name from a bookstore named Flourish and Blotts in the Potterverse. However, after Rowling's messages in 2019-2020, they found they could no longer engage with the character or the series which meant so much to their own sense of self (Klink and Minkel, 2020). Lark, a trans co-host of *The Gayly Prophet*, shared similar feelings of hurt and betrayal. However, he believed that the hugely global and popular nature of *Harry Potter* offered opportunities for education and politicisation. He thought that fans could not only use the *Harry Potter* framework to educate people about transphobia but also to critique other problematic elements in the text as well as the real world (Blount and Grey, 2020c).

Cho and colleagues situated intersectionality in the midst of the diverse and sometimes oppositional interpretations it encompasses. By framing intersectionality as a process of collaboration and literacy, they concluded that "intersectional insights and frameworks are put into practice in a multitude of ways, from the top down to the bottom up, and in highly contested, complex, and unpredictable fashions" (Cho et al., 2013: p. 807). Hancock (2016) noted that contemporary notions of intersectionality involve both collective negotiation as well as contestation. Dialogue and debates in interpretive communities have resulted in expanding the complexities of intersectional knowledge and understanding (ibid). Collins (2015) suggested that researchers should acknowledge the inconsistencies in intersectionality and make "good faith" efforts to use the appropriate theories and methods when faced with uncertainty. Springgay and The Torontonians (2014) argued that doubt can help subvert established norms and offer surprising solutions to the limitations of traditional forms of knowledge and existence. While they were talking specifically about

public education and artistic contexts, this grappling with uncertainty applies to intersectional knowledge too.

Hancock (2016) believes that intersectionality can be considered a meme which has gone viral thanks to people who aim to increase visibility and inclusion of marginalised perspectives. She described intersectionality as a social literacy where not just university academics but an array of scholars and activists popularise the understanding of the concept. Although intersectionality has its origins in black feminism, their work over the years has led to its application to diverse groups of individuals. This is especially evident in digital media spaces which respond to popular culture in creative ways, thanks to which knowledge of intersectional feminism has travelled into realms populated by non-academics (ibid). Here, people analyse and critique an array of media texts for gaps and educate themselves as well as each other in order to expand their understanding of intersectional feminism (Kanai, 2019; Leiser, 2018). According to Hancock (2016), different literacy stewards have taken on the mantle of creating and sharing knowledge about the concept of intersectionality. I focus on how fans practice this literacy stewardship in complex and dynamic ways which welcome multiple, collective and even conflicting interpretations (ibid).

9.4.1 Points and counterpoints

Fan conversations are often full of contradictions – for every point, there’s likely someone who will offer a counterpoint to the same issue. Over the course of recording *Marginally Fannish* and listening to other fan podcasts, I began to appreciate the nuance these conflicting viewpoints offered. Such contradictions offered an incomplete yet more complex picture of the different identities and issues we/they were exploring.

Like me, **Milena**, a fellow fan and fan studies researcher, loved the empowering potential of fan activities. At the same time, they weren’t sure whether only fanon i.e. fan-created/accepted canon was enough:

I have days when I’m very much, “The author is dead and I can do with the text whatever the hell I want!” It is mine now. But I also have days where I’m like, actually no. Authorial intent matters to the extent that it matters that people should want to put good representation into the world and it matters that we get canonical representation in media and not just fanon. Because again, we come back to that the conversation I can’t have with my parents; the conversation so many kids can’t have with their parents because those parents have never seen a queer character on television. – Milena (MF Episode 20)

Milena pointed out that as revolutionary as diverse and inclusive representations in fandom can be, not everyone can/does enter these spaces which means not everyone has access to these ideas. While growing up, Milena’s parents had never encountered a queer person in media, let alone real life. As a result, Milena couldn’t talk to their parents about their queer identity because they had no understanding of queerness. They theorised that having better queer representation in

mainstream media could have offered their parents an avenue to understand their child's identity.

Before we recorded our episode, Milena sent me a piece of their own writing – a deleted extract from their review of a book about queer representations and fandom. In it, they cautioned people against making definitive statements about both the liberatory potential of fandom as well as glorifying fan interpretations over canonical ones. Instead, they argued that there needs to be more nuance in these considerations:

*Statements such as “The straight viewer is always assumed to be the default viewer, while queer viewers are assumed to co-opt the text for their own interests, even in instances where either interpretation is equally valid” cry out to be unpacked. *Who* assumes a default and a co-opting viewer? Who makes straight and queer interpretations? And above all, who has the *power* to judge the validity of each of these?*

[...]

We can scream from the rooftops that our queer readings are equally valid but as long as there are still kids being kicked out of their homes because their parents have never even seen a queer character on television the simple truth is: they are not. Yes, we may find comfort and community and even family through those readings. But on their own their power to improve our material circumstances is limited. – Milena (email correspondence)

Milena's insights – both before and during the episode – challenged the tendency within the field of fan studies to present fandom participation as an entirely emancipatory process. When I began the project – and, to an extent, even throughout writing the thesis – I was prone to making the kinds of definitive statements about fans and fandom which Milena criticised. I still sometimes inadvertently stumble into the “describing fandom as a monolithic experience” trope even though I know it categorically is not. I'm focusing on a small specifically-constructed part of fandom – so I'm aware that my argument about fandom and fan podcasts is limited. Milena's point helped me more explicitly articulate the nuance within my thesis, even though the ways in which I've done this are still quite imperfect.

Another co-participant who more directly challenged mainstream fandom discussions about the politics of diverse representations was **Lorrie**, a Korean-American *Harry Potter* fan. Her conversation and contributions about the character of Nagini urged people to be more critical of critique itself in order to come to a more complicated understanding.

We first meet Nagini as Voldemort's pet snake in the *Harry Potter* books and movies; a snake who is eventually killed in service to the primary antagonist's cause. In the *Crimes of Grindelwald* prequel to the books, we learn more details of Nagini's story arc including that she was in fact a woman who was cursed to periodically transform into a snake. Eventually, she is unable to transform back, gets stuck in a snake's body, and becomes Voldemort's pet in the books. In the film,

Korean actress Claudia Kim was cast to play her, a decision which caused a furore among a vociferous portion of the *Harry Potter* fandom.

In the episode “Harry Potter and the People of Colour”, the co-hosts of *Woke Doctor Who* explained their criticisms about what they felt was a problematic new direction given to the character. Eugenia, a Chinese-American fan, was visibly upset about this layered objectification of an Asian woman who is constantly exploited by men. Both of them criticised the casting of an Asian woman to play a character who is weaponised by and subservient to a white man. They argued that this character’s story arc fell prey to orientalist notions and stereotypes of East Asian women being sacrificed to further the story of white men in Western media (Eugenia and Toya, 2019b). A lot of fans online seemed to share these sentiments which influenced my own understanding of the character. Since I wasn’t an Asian woman who had grown up in a Western country, I didn’t have enough knowledge about the context and took the mainstream fandom critique for granted.

Contrary to these other perspectives, Lorrie wholeheartedly loved Nagini’s character, something I’ve explored in previous chapters (see Chapters 4 and 5). When I suggested the *Woke Doctor Who* episode for us both to listen to before recording our conversation, she was uncomfortable with the hosts’ hostility in general and their criticisms about Nagini in particular. In our episode, she went on to problematise the mainstream fandom opinion of Nagini. She also shared her own unabashed love for the actress, the character and her story arc in the movie.

Lorrie was puzzled by the utterly negative reactions to the casting of the character and was upset that people had written off the character before even watching the movie. The backlash against Nagini’s storyline and casting felt unintentionally racist to her. In her view, some of the critics she encountered seemed to want to erase marginalised identities from their media altogether instead of dealing with the discomfort that problematic representations could bring up. Lorrie believed that much of the criticism was reinforcing the structural inequalities the fans were arguing against:

Some of the kinds of critiques that I saw said things like, “Oh yeah sure great what a positive, strong, independent woman!” And to me what that said is okay then you tell me then how do you want us to be shown in the story for your satisfaction? You make up the character that you can tell me, okay now you can come be in the story. – Lorrie (MF Episode 12)

Lorrie had written a blog post which she shared with me prior to recording our episode. In it, she elaborated on her critique:

Here is what I really hear:

This role should have gone to a white woman for the comfort of viewers who are uneasy with the images in their own heads of Asian women.

What I hear is: People were happier when there was no Korean woman in Potterverse. They don’t want us if it makes them feel uncomfortable. – Lorrie (Kim, 2019b)

On hearing Lorrie's rationale, I realised that I had accepted mainstream fandom's opinions uncritically without interrogating them. Fandom discourse, even when seemingly progressive and critical of problematic racial representations, can sometimes leave little room for alternative perspectives. Lorrie's viewpoint highlighted the need for nuance in discussions about diversity even within fandom spaces. While I still think those fans who hate Nagini's representation are entirely entitled to their interpretations, this conversation reminded me of the importance of being critical of critique and not attributing monolithic perspectives to all of fandom.

I really appreciated that the conversations with Lorrie and Milena helped me become a more critical thinker, especially when I had to critically reflect on my own assumptions. Both of them invited people to consider the multiple and complex sides of any identity or theme. They drew on their own experiences and perspectives in order to offer points and counterpoints about a range of issues. Such perspectives went beyond simplistic explanations and brought nuance and complexity to the fore.

9.4.2 Multiple conflicting interpretations and diverse worldviews

My co-participants and I didn't always agree but even our disagreements helped us articulate our own positions better and learn from each other. **Aparna** and I are huge fans of children's books. We've also been steeped in spaces and conversations about the importance of diverse books and own voices both in Indian and international contexts. While researching for our episode about the representations of race in media, we encountered different sources and subsequently arrived at different conclusions about white picture book creators writing about characters of colour. We then shared our different opinions in our episode.

Aparna had then-recently read about the history of the picture book *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and the associated controversy in the book *Fierce Bad Rabbits* (Pollard, 2019). In our episode, she described what she'd learned – the book was initially commended for being one of the first picture books which featured a black American protagonist. However, when some fans discovered that the author was white, they began questioning his motives for representing a black child. They argued that it was merely a diversity tick-box exercise.

While I understood Aparna's larger point about which people get to represent whose stories, I had recently encountered a video that presented a different perspective about the same issue. In response to Aparna's point, I signposted "Is this inclusive? Why only 4% of children's book heroes are BAME" (The Guardian, 2019). In this video, black British journalist Grace Shutti shared how important the picture book *Amazing Grace* was during her own childhood. She grew up in predominantly white Britain and it was one of the rare books which reflected someone she could identify with – both in terms of race and personality – in an otherwise white reading landscape. In the video, she went on to interview Mary Hoffman, the white writer, who expanded convincingly on her reasons for featuring a black female protagonist in the book. I concluded that while people

from dominant cultures writing about marginalised cultures could be problematic, it could also be meaningful if done respectfully and sensitively. Aparna combined both our points in her own reflection:

The most important thing is probably an authentic representation. If you're writing outside of your identity, you owe it to your readers to authentically represent them. Because the job of creating media is one of privilege. The creative fields are one of privilege. So it's already somebody who does it will be from a certain privilege and has been for the longest time so to break away from that, like you said, will take [...] time [...] But meanwhile whatever representations are being included should be done more mindfully. – Aparna (MF Episode 2 Part 1)

By sharing our different resources and providing rationale for our differing positions, Aparna and I were able to add nuance and complexity to each other's points and to learn from each other's perspectives. Our disagreements helped us challenge and expand each other's ideas as well as articulate our own positions and beliefs better. The fandom framework provided us with a space to share and access alternate interpretations. We were able to examine an idea from multiple perspectives and arrive at a more nuanced understanding.

With another co-participant, our disagreement about the same issue emerged via our deep emotional bonds with a fictional world. Beginning in December 2019, J. K. Rowling's tweets met with controversy among a portion of the *Harry Potter* fandom for allegedly being transphobic (Gardner, 2021; Romano, 2020). Usually, I find it easy to refuse to engage with problematic creators whose works I have no emotional investment in. However, *Harry Potter* was different. The books provided me with hope and comfort during a troubled childhood and during a difficult 2020. I found the discussions about Rowling and *Harry Potter* immensely depressing. At the same time, I found it easy to divorce Rowling from her work. But the books themselves? It's not that I'm *unwilling* to let go of them; I'm *unable*. They form too core a part of my identity. For me, *Harry Potter* has always gone side-by-side with its fandom. I've learned so much from fannish conversations and critiques which have made my politics and ideas about equality, oppression and privilege more inclusive. Of course, I say this as a cis woman who isn't directly impacted by the messages in the same way a trans fan would be. Other fans – both trans fans and allies – have shared their own ethical discomfort about continuing to engage with the Potterverse – something I've explored in previous chapters (see Chapters 3 and 6).

Harry Potter played a formative role in **Rita's** life too. But unlike me, she couldn't separate the art from the artist. In our episode, she announced she would no longer talk about J. K. Rowling's works on a public forum. Rita pointed out that despite good intentions, fans discussing these works contributed to increasing Rowling's social, cultural and financial capital, something she was no longer comfortable doing. Moreover, she thought that while we as adult fans may be able to examine Rowling's messages more critically, this may not be the same for much younger people who idolise the creators of their beloved worlds. As Rita outlined, she worried that encountering problematic ideas uncritically may shape people's own beliefs in prejudiced ways:

We were talking about how painful it was for us, how formative it was for us. But we are removed from that formative era in our lives. Whereas a lot of children who are engaging in that still are in that era. So her beliefs would influence their beliefs. Because we remember what it's like to idolise someone. And that's the thing that when we love media now, we idolise creators [...] In today's realm of cultural production, we are so connected to the people who create them. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

Consequently, she found it both emotionally and morally impossible to continue engaging with *Harry Potter*. Our disagreements didn't invalidate our different perspectives and experiences. Neither of us had changed our stance at the end of our episode conversation. However, we did emerge with a greater understanding of and respect for each other's conflicting opinions. Especially when talking about things like inclusion and equity, fan discussions can provide room for debates and a multiplicity of opinions, leading to more nuanced understandings of different topics.

Fans' different priorities can also offer previously-unconsidered insights. Conversations where fans provide the rationale for their differing positions can help people see a more complex picture. **Diana**, a queer fan, criticised the way in which mainstream books, movies and TV shows for children capitalised on superficial diversity without explicitly representing queerness:

Nothing angers me more than when Disney gets credit for having 2 women kiss in the background of a school pick-up scene and that's the first time there's ever been a quote unquote "gay kiss" in a Disney film. "Wow! We should all be so excited!" I am not excited about that. I think that's devastating. – Diana

In response, I wondered at the logic of such decisions:

Just the existence of a gay character or any sort of queerness doesn't make it political. Or doesn't make it unsuitable for children. – Parinita

Diana drew on their own identity, knowledge and politics to push back against this assertion:

I mean I think everything is political and so I think it is a huge political act to not represent anyone who's queer or only represent whiteness, right. And to me, that's the harmful political act. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

As a cisgender heterosexual woman, my social contexts shaped my knowledge and perspectives. While media and fandom *do* help me address my ignorance in different ways, I'm still in the process of unlearning my conditioning and mainstream society's messages which I often don't even realise I've internalised. I agreed with Diana's point when it came to the politics of representation of diverse marginalised identities. However, it was our episode about queer representations in media which allowed this conversation to occur – one which forced me to carefully consider what I said and what I meant. Creating the podcast has helped me appreciate the need for nuance even when talking about diversity. These multiple perspectives from diverse sources helped bring some much-needed

nuance to my ideas about what inclusion and exclusion means to different groups of people.

9.5 Chapter Summary

Creating a deliberately-curated space for discussions of intersectional issues can be valuable while simultaneously being limited and incomplete. Even fans who are interested in exploring these topics can still exhibit failures in imagination and empathy. Additionally, it's usually left up to fans from marginalised groups to undertake the emotional labour necessary to both draw attention to gaps as well as face the psychological toll of constantly talking about diverse representations. People don't necessarily have shared understandings about social justice and equity, and conversations about them are frequently imperfect and incomplete.

Moreover, such discussions don't always take the needs and priorities of diverse identities into consideration. Even in media and fan spaces which claim to include a diverse range of marginalised identities, hierarchies of marginalisation emerge. Some lives and experiences are privileged over others. Fans can still have gaps in their understanding of diverse identities – gaps that they don't always want to fill.

At the same time, such contradictory viewpoints about the politics of representation – if shared in an environment respectful of different opinions – can be a valuable opportunity to think about different sides of an issue. In my own case, accessing complex and nuanced considerations helped me move beyond limited black-and-white understandings of diverse identities. I also found that disagreements presented learning encounters which allowed me to understand and empathise with other opinions, even when I didn't agree with them.

Conversations full of multiple, conflicting interpretations and diverse worldviews can challenge monolithic ideas of inclusivity. Inclusive intersectional considerations and contexts don't require people to have the exact same viewpoints. People don't have to think the same way in order to move towards a shared goal of improving the diversity of representation in media, fandom and political spaces. Their differing opinions can challenge, expand and inform each other's perspectives without necessarily seeking to change them.

Chapter 10 “We’re Not Doing It Alone”: Imagining Otherwise With Hopepunk

10.1 Introduction

Following on from the previous chapter, the one thing I’ve most grown to appreciate throughout this podcast/research project is growing comfortable with uncertainty and imperfection. Thanks to my co-participants and other scholarship – both academic and fannish – I’ve been able to challenge some of my inclinations to want definitive all-or-nothing answers and solutions to complex issues. For me, encountering and understanding a hopepunk worldview, which I expand on later in this chapter, felt like a huge sense of relief. Hopepunk welcomes doubts and failures. Hopepunk has room for multiple interests, diverse worldviews and contradictions aplenty.

Spaces where people gather to discuss and debate intersectional issues and attempt to be inclusive of diverse priorities aren’t going to be without their problems. No space is a perfect, conflict-free utopia, full of people who always do, say and think all the correct things all the time. However, the discomfort these conflicts lead to can result in valuable opportunities for an intersectional education. Being open to challenging and expanding your ideas in fandom, intersectional feminist, public pedagogical and activist spaces allows people to grow more attuned to gaps and silences in their understanding of different lives and experiences. Such an education involves an unending, lifelong process of unlearning and relearning things as well as reflecting on our assumptions in light of new information. There is no end point where you will have identified and addressed every single problematic, flawed belief – there will always be new things to learn and unlearn.

This chapter explores both the negative and positive aspects of fan conversations in spaces full of people from differently marginalised and privileged backgrounds:

- The first section challenges the idea that fandom spaces are an inclusive space for fans from diverse identities. The different kinds of conflicts and hostilities fans engage in – even in spaces which claim to represent diverse interests – demonstrate that fandom isn’t a progressive utopia for everyone
- The next section, somewhat belatedly, introduces the concept of hopepunk. It’s a theory I only encountered a few months after I had already finished recording the podcast. However, much like with intersectionality and critical literacy, the more I read about the topic, the more I realised how evident it was in the fan spaces I inhabit. It is also a concept which continues to resonate with me in real-world political contexts. The fans I was looking at, much like many political activists, acknowledge the limitations of the unjust structures in media, fandom and society but still manage to find creative ways to resist them. Drawing on this theory, I write about how fan spaces can both demonstrate and enable a constantly-evolving intersectional education across time and space

- The final section focuses on the importance and impact of radical imagination in fan/activist spaces. By challenging taken-for-granted narratives of our history and our future, fans can both envision and create a more radically inclusive world – both fictional and real

10.2 Problematizing the perception of an inclusive fandom

Public learning can be feminist and critical but this kind of public pedagogy doesn't always result in resistant readings; it can quite easily reproduce dominant norms and values (Burdick et al., 2013). As Dennis (2015) and Feria-Galicia (2011) cautioned, participating in social media spaces doesn't necessarily guarantee empowerment or resistance. Using technology isn't inherently revolutionary or emancipatory and audiences aren't always critical or subversive (Buckingham, 2015a; Gainer, 2010; Gounari, 2009; Hinrichsen and Coombs, 2014; Kafai et al., 2011; Pangrazio, 2016). People on the internet are not averse to displaying bigotry and hatred. Accordingly, unadulterated enthusiasm about the potential of online spaces needs to be tempered with some awareness of the darker side of online interactions.

The first wave of fan studies researchers and the scholars inspired by them (including myself when I was writing my master's dissertation) tended to promote an overly utopian conception of fandom (Thomas, 2011). However, fans are not always critical and open-minded when it comes to their favourite texts. Sperrb (2010) studied fans who nostalgically defended Disney's controversially racist and long-out-of-distribution film *Song of the South*. Young (2014) investigated George R. R. Martin fans who ridiculed and dismissed concerns about racism and representation in his books and television series, and positioned both as normatively white. In North American and British media, whiteness is often assumed to be the default – even if the source text explicitly includes characters from racialised backgrounds. In *The Hunger Games* book series, the character Rue is described as black. But the casting of black actress Amandla Stenberg to play her in the film adaptation caused borderline (and sometimes outright) racist outrage from many white fans online (Garcia and Haddix, 2014; Jenkins, 2017; Pande, 2017; Wanzo, 2015).

Fan studies also tends to promote the idea of media fandom exceptionalism where media fans – as opposed to sports fans or video game fans – are universally progressive and create extraordinary fan texts (Pande; 2017; Pearson, 2010). As seen above, this is patently untrue. There are hierarchies within both fan spaces and fan studies where some fan experiences and identities are privileged over others (Annett, 2011; Pande, 2017; Stein, 2011). The belief that fandom is progressive, inclusive and subversive is usually perceived only through the lenses of gender, sexual orientation and whiteness (De Kosnik and carrington, 2019; Pande and Moitra, 2017; Russo, 2017).

Pearson (2010) challenged the conception of fan communities as egalitarian spaces and contended that hierarchies, cliques and conflicts abound even within such environments. De Kosnik found that a few people in fandom communities were critical of the tendency of some fans to co-opt the language of social justice to

collectively attack others they deemed problematic. They argued that these fans appeared to be less interested in social justice and more interested in personal validation (De Kosnik, 2016). Pitre (2018) studied the queer fans of *Steven Universe*, an animated children's TV show which overtly explored LGBTQIA themes and subverted gender stereotypes seen in mainstream media. He found that fans of a progressive and inclusive show could nevertheless attack fellow members for having diverse interpretations which didn't reflect their own. Sperb (2010) problematised the perception of online fan communities of media texts as critically utopian filled with members eager to collectively and democratically create and share knowledge. His study of the fandom of a racist Disney movie found that fans silenced dissent and rejected differing interpretations.

Some fans have drawn attention to the unequal treatment within fandom spaces. A *Black Girl Nerds* episode explored the sexism and harassment which female fans faced in offline fandom spaces. The guests pointed out that the harassment was especially worse when the women inhabited other intersectional identities which marked them out as different – be it disability, race or fatness (Broadnax, 2016). The co-hosts of *Woke Doctor Who* outlined the differences in criticism when it came to changing the race of characters in the *Harry Potter* canon. They discussed the furore among certain fans in response to black actress Noma Dumezweni being cast to play Hermione Granger in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. However, as they expanded, this outrage was largely missing when the character of Lavender Brown was recast with white actress Jessie Cave in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, despite being played by a black actress in the previous 5 movies (Eugenia and Toya, 2019b).

Prior to our episode on race (MF Episode 2), **Sanjana** shared a Reddit thread titled “Does anyone feel as if POC are very underrepresented in certain fandoms?” (killmongerrrr, 2019). Here, while there were many fans of colour sharing their experiences of marginalisation and alienation within fan spaces, some (presumably) white fans either responded defensively, claimed they didn't want to offend people of colour by representing them insensitively or offered colourblind statements which suggested they didn't want to focus on characters' races. One Redditor's frustration to such responses was palpable: vibridropp observed, “People view the mere existence of people of color as political”.

Daniels (2013) pointed out that it is people of colour who are left to notice matters concerning race on the internet while white users are more likely to consider the internet as a utopian, colourblind space. Fans of colour who are particularly vocal about issues of race and representation are criticised for being killjoys (Pande, 2017; Woo, 2017). While white fans may believe that fandom is a space which doesn't have any politics, for fans of colour, these spaces are often automatically political. Pande (2017) argued that while fan studies positions fan spaces as progressive, inclusive and subversive, these characteristics are only limited to specific groups of fans, ignoring the experiences and perspectives of fans of colour who feel like outsiders. Consequently, the idea of fandom as a safe space only applies to a certain kind of fan (Jenkins, 2017).

Until the beginning of this project, I was more likely to think of fandom as a utopian place than not. I began my fan studies journey when I first encountered Henry Jenkins' work (Jenkins, 2006; 2012a; 2012b; Jenkins et al., 2009; 2016). As an early fan scholar, his work has shaped the field of fan studies scholarship. As much as I continue to love his research, other people's problematisation of the field of fan studies has helped expand my thinking. Specifically, Rukmini Pande's work on race and racism in fandom and fan studies (Pande, 2017; Pande and Moitra, 2017) helped me shift my perception of whose experiences are granted more legitimacy in Western media fandom and scholarship (see Chapter 8).

10.2.1 Not a progressive utopia for everyone

Most of my thesis has largely focused on the more positive aspects of fannish conversations since that has mainly been my experience in online fandom spaces. At the same time, I've also encountered plenty of research, articles and other fans' first-person accounts which outlined the ways in which fandom can be reactionary and hostile. This negativity hasn't played a huge role in the fan podcasts I listen to or on *Marginally Fannish*, potentially because fan podcasts are such deliberately-constructed spaces. Unlike many social media posts, podcasts require people to spend time listening to episodes rather than immediately reacting based on brief, decontextualised information. However, this section explores fan encounters which problematise the perception that fandom is wholly inclusive for everyone.

Many fans have proposed that online fan communities are utopian spaces. However, like all utopian narratives, there is an underbelly of identities for whom things aren't really working. **Robert**, an SFF fan, shared his own experiences which bolstered this idea. Science fiction fandom, especially *Doctor Who* fandom, is perceived as being welcoming to autistic people. Many male autistic fans have found solace in the show as well as its online fan communities (Manning, 2015). However, in our episode about disability in *Doctor Who*/fandom, Robert described how fandoms can be exclusionary even to identities they are widely presumed to include. He believed that it was largely uncontroversial to point out that the fandom has been an unwelcoming space to women and people of colour. However, he questioned the idea that *Doctor Who* fandom was wholly inclusive to autistic enthusiasms and expressions:

To say as an autistic person, your own experience in the fandom has been very negative specifically around things that manifest as a result of that condition and sometimes explicitly around having that condition, is something that I think people would probably be more reluctant to accept. – Robert

Robert was aware that this was a contentious sentiment which went against mainstream perceptions of *Doctor Who* fandom. He supported his claim by drawing on his own experiences as an autistic *Doctor Who* fan. Robert discovered *Doctor Who* during a difficult adolescence when he experienced ableism in his family. Subsequently, Robert turned to the show and found it comforting to his experiences and identity of being on the autistic spectrum. At the same time, he found its online fandom extremely uncomfortable as an autistic person. The way

he expressed his fannishness – by becoming wholly obsessed with certain parts of the canon – stemmed from his autism. However, such tendencies were often dismissed or denigrated by fellow fans – fans who simultaneously promoted the perception that the space welcomed autistic people:

I think autistic people would find Doctor Who important. Because becoming invested in a special interest to a huge extent is something that's quite fundamental and quite distressing if it's invalidated, I suppose. Or if it's not seen to be important. So I think when people say from an outside perspective that it is not important at all; if hearing that the button is on the wrong way on the 1966 version of the TARDIS console is clearly not as important for social justice as more or less anything else at all. And if for reasons that make sense within an autistic lens, it is something that's a passionate concern to you, it can still be very taboo to say that this matters to me. It distresses me that you say it doesn't matter.
– Robert (MF Episode 10)

Robert's point presented me with a whole new perspective. Until our conversation, I'd encountered critiques and conversations about online fandom through the lens of gender (see Chapter 6). In these discussions, transformative fandom – writing fanfic, creating fan art etc. – was seen to be the remit of female fans whereas male fans were presumed to be more interested in detailed, obsessive knowledge of canon – knowledge which was often used to gatekeep female fans and exclude them from fannish spaces (Broadnax, 2016; McGuire, 2018; MF Episode 4; Molinsky, 2017a; 2018b).

Robert's insight added a disability lens to the conversation. He problematised the division of fannishness along gendered lines, an idea which has not only become normative within fandom spaces but also within fan scholarship (Derecho, 2006; De Kosnik, 2016; Handley, 2010; Rosenblatt and Tushnet, 2015; Viars and Coker, 2015). He wrote fanfiction to fix the inconsistencies he noticed in canon, combining transformative fandom with detailed knowledge. In fact, he found it quite strange that these two practices were supposedly oppositional. By connecting this obsessiveness with his special interests, Robert shed light on autistic experiences in fandom. He highlighted the fact that autistic expressions weren't always wholly included or understood in considerations of social justice in *Doctor Who* fandom, leading one to question which people were excluded from ideas of society and equity.

Fandom can be immensely unsafe based on fans' different contexts and identities. Like me, my co-participant **Milena** curated their online fandom to be a safe and friendly space. However, in our conversation, they shared examples they'd encountered as both a fan and a researcher which called the idea of fandom as a utopian ideal into question. Milena drew attention to the fact that even a deliberately-constructed fan space can be hostile to fans from differently marginalised identities. They described an instance where they found that fandom could be exclusionary to specific identities. They were a fan researcher whose PhD project explored sexual consent in fanfiction. Over the course of our conversation, Milena shared how they were discomfited by some of their research findings and were only later able to analyse and unpack both their feelings as well as their data:

I interviewed a bunch of fanfiction readers and writers. It was in a particular fandom – the Dragon Age video game. There’s a significant subgenre of slave fic in that fandom. And one of my interviewees brought it up as a “Oh yes this is a great way of exploring issues of consent.” And it has never sat right with me. Because obviously slavery is something that in the real world is a deeply racialised history that something many people still feel the after-effects of today both in the US and in Britain and in other places around the world. And taking that concept and going, “Oh let’s enslave the pretty elves, and then have fun sexy times with them” never quite sat right with me. – Milena

In this case, as a queer white fan in a fandom culture where whiteness and queerness was a dominant structural force, Milena had to actively work to understand the perspectives of fans of colour and the ways in which some mainstream fandom norms harmed them:

It’s taken me a little time to work through it – why and how it’s a problem. A lot of the reasons it is a problem is this is the kind of fic that is primarily written by white women, maybe occasionally nonbinary people. And they may be queer, they may be straight, I don’t know. But it’s the kind of thing where white women get to take this trope, completely divorce it from its historical context and from its real-world effects today, get to deracialise it, and then make it part of their “Ooh exploring consent issues” toolbox. Whilst just completely ignoring both the trauma that that inflicts on fans of colour and the general reproduction of white supremacy it perpetuates. So yeah fandoms are not always not always fun and happy places. And it’s very difficult sometimes to have those conversations. – Milena (MF Episode 21)

Milena challenged this widespread practice of employing the framework of slavery and glossing over its real-world racialised history. They pointed out how this traumatised fans of colour and upheld white supremacy even in fictional fandom spaces. In Chapter 9, I wrote about how **Diana**, a fellow fan and fan researcher, found that fans of colour were often policed and harassed by white fans in Western media fandoms. In our episode, they also pointed out that the field of fan studies itself has historically overlooked these racialised conflicts and issues owing to its own blind-spots and biases:

Fandom is a really useful context through which to problematise the idea of canon. But also there is a fan studies canon. And fan studies canon is super white and male. I get that Henry Jenkins was a pioneer in fan studies. But also he is kind of a utopian dude and that’s just not real. – Diana (MF Episode 9)

Diana drew on a broader, more diverse range of scholarship and participants’ experiences in order to challenge some of the foundational myths of fan studies which position fandom as all-positive and progressive. This is something Milena and I were also able to unpack after critical reflection.

By discussing how only some fans’ perspectives and practices matter at the expense of others – be it along the lines of race, queerness or disability – Robert, Milena and Diana highlighted how fan spaces are not equally enjoyable or

equitable for everyone. Some identities are privileged over others in ways which reflect the hierarchies in spaces outside the fandom communities.

10.2.2 Conflicting fandoms

I've previously written about the empowering potential of fans' intersectional interpretations where fans read their specific identities into canonical characters and events (see Chapter 7). However, not all fans are open to multiple interpretations which deviate from the canon or from their own opinions. **Anna M.**, a pagan fan and scholar, highlighted how some fans can get quite hostile when their beliefs are challenged:

A couple of years back, I pitched a topic for the Tolkien Society Seminar in Leeds. My topic was "Tolkien the Pagan?: Reading Middle-earth Through a Spiritual Lens." I was trying to promote a conversation about non-Christian interpretations of Tolkien's work. Because the Christian view is so prevalent that there seems to be no space for much else and I was trying to create that space. – Anna M.

Anna drew attention to the fact that in some instances, the dominant view within fandom – or, as in her case, the intersection of fandom and academia – becomes so entrenched that challenging it results in conflict. She shared how her nonconformist interpretation of *Lord of the Rings* was attacked on a public forum:

Within the first couple of days, on Facebook, that post had over 200 comments. Most of them very aggressively denouncing the choice of topic saying that Tolkien's texts are Christian only. That if you are a non-Christian reader, you can't possibly understand what he is getting at and what Middle-earth is all about. Which, to me, was quite jarring. And I was quite taken aback at the vehemence with which these people defended or claimed the texts for a specific group of people. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

While Anna herself was open to viewing texts through multiple spiritual lenses which went beyond her own, her experience demonstrated that not everybody was as accommodating. Her point further illustrated how for many fans, some identities and perspectives are more deserving of respect than others. Her detractors would rather silence the interpretations and identities of those on the margins rather than create a space where multiple interests flourish.

By drawing on their own observations and experiences, different co-participants highlighted how fans from dominant cultures further marginalised people inhabiting a range of identities. In different episodes, a few co-participants like Milena, Anna M. and Diana brought up the toxic nature of fandom which the specific context of our project had largely bypassed. Anna also pointed at how a group of angry fans railed against the decision to cast Jodie Whittaker as the first female Doctor in *Doctor Who* because it didn't match their expectations of what the protagonist of the series should look like (MF Episode 3). **Lisa** and **Tam**, both of whom were SFF media fans, highlighted how the female-dominated and queer-positive reboot of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, an animated show for children, had received flak from a certain section of male fans online for not

representing the titular heroine in feminine or sexualised enough ways (MF Episodes 11 and 16).

Such hostile attitudes also emerge in purportedly progressive factions of fandom. **Aparna** loved *Steven Universe*, another animated children's TV show which has been heralded for representing gender and sexual diversity. When we were discussing the practice of queerbaiting in media, Aparna highlighted the toxic entitlement of some of her fellow fans of the show:

It also has been swinging a little bit in another direction where people are being called out for queerbaiting where it's not [...] Steven Universe [...] is one of the most diverse shows I have ever encountered. One of the storyboard artists, Lauren Zukoff [...] posted art about 2 characters who are shipped in fan circles. And that upset fans of another ship with one of those characters. And she was accused of queerbaiting and was trolled on the internet, so she had to leave Twitter. – Aparna (MF Episode 22)

Contrary to what I wrote in Chapter 4, fans' emotional investment in their favourite fictional worlds and characters doesn't always – or even frequently – result in positive consequences. Vietnamese-American actress Kelly Marie Tran (who portrayed Rose Tico in the new *Star Wars* trilogy) and black American actress Leslie Jones (who was a part of the female reboot of the *Ghostbusters* movie) have both been bullied off social media by racist and misogynistic fans (Grady, 2018; Silman, 2016). However, as Aparna highlighted, in the case of *Steven Universe*, queer representation didn't seem to be the goal as much as fans wanting their own romantic relationship preferences to be realised onscreen. When this didn't happen, it led to harassment and bullying. Through this example, Aparna presented another side to the story of fan critiques where the framework of diverse representations could also be used in negative ways.

10.3 Hopepunk in fandom

SFF writer Alexandra Rowland (2017) coined the term hopepunk to problematise the dystopia/utopia binary in media narratives as well as in political activism and discourse. In light of the varied oppressions in the US – and elsewhere – Rowland acknowledged that it could often feel pointless to hold onto hope amidst established structures and people's complacency within them. But, they argued, fighting against these unjust systems without the promise of a future where everything will be perfect is precisely the point of hopepunk:

The work is never finished. The work will never be finished. There will never be a nice, comfortable utopia where we can rest on our laurels and sip strawberry daiquiris by the pool and trust that now things are Fine and we can all relax. Utopia is not a stable system. It doesn't last. The best we can hope for is five minutes, an hour. – Alexandra Rowland (2019)

Rowland emphasised the importance of community in hopepunk – where people work together to take care of each other and make the world better. They argued that people don't need to be perfect and there's room for them to make mistakes. What makes their acts hopepunk is learning from those mistakes and continuing to resist cynicism and despair (Rowland et al., 2018). Since Rowland first coined the

term in 2017, hopepunk has attracted the attention of different writers, readers, fans and academics (Bailey et al., 2020; Bell, 2019; Blount and Grey, 2021; Hiu et al., 2019; Newitz and Anders, 2019a; Rowland et al., 2018). Different people have tried to understand and expand the concept by applying it to a range of SFF media, fanfiction and real-world contexts. Rowland welcomes these multiple interpretations and expansions since they don't claim ownership of the concept (Bailey et al., 2020).

While people begin from the same premise, their interpretations and understanding of the concept differs based on their own priorities and interests. One of the hosts of *The Fantasy Inn* podcast, for example, proposed that hopepunk challenged the idea that monolithic utopias worked for everyone; rather, hopepunk offered room for multiple solutions for different people (Hiu et al., 2019). For a co-host of *Our Opinions Are Correct*, hope was different from optimism; while the latter believed that things would get better, a hopepunk worldview didn't brook with such certainty. Instead, it signified accepting the fact that you may never win, that society would never be fully equal, but you fight towards equality nevertheless. Hope was what made the fight possible (Newitz and Anders, 2019a).

Romano (2018) proposed that according to a hopepunk worldview, people develop better social, cultural and political structures by working together. This process is never-ending – there is no fixed, permanent endpoint to work towards. Instead, people constantly respond to ongoing social, political and cultural injustices in order to create a more equitable future for everyone. Similarly, Ramos (2020) described the political possibilities of hopepunk in challenging imbalanced power hierarchies in social and cultural contexts. She placed struggle and solidarity at the heart of hopepunk movements – where different groups of people with different priorities and interests work collectively to create a better system than the one they currently inhabit.

I first encountered the term hopepunk a few months after I finished recording *Marginally Fannish*. The more I researched, the more I thought about its relevance to my own project and thesis. Apart from fictional media texts and real-world contexts, I think hopepunk has a role to play in fandom itself. As the co-hosts of *Our Opinions Are Correct* pointed out, neither utopias nor dystopias are realistic and both are highly contextual. They don't have universal applications and different people are impacted differently in both situations (Newitz and Anders, 2019b). In SFF narratives, real-world histories, contemporary societies as well as fandom communities, a certain group of people has lived in seemingly utopian ways while at the same time other groups of people have more dystopian experiences.

As I've written in the previous section and in Chapter 9, fan spaces aren't perfect and they're always incomplete. Even when fans adopt a more intersectional lens to explore issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in different cultural, social and political contexts, they/we always have new things to learn and unlearn. Despite this, there are fans – hopepunk fans, if you will – who work towards creating a more inclusive, more equitable environment for everyone through their conversations and art.

The perception of fandom as resistant doesn't need to be completely tossed out. There are now more conversations about the need for improved and diverse representations within both fandom and fan studies, thereby challenging the normative notion of a fan (Busse and Gray, 2011; Chin and Morimoto, 2013; Pande, 2017). Fan activities and texts which respond directly to the politics of representation can highlight marginalised perspectives and raise awareness about race, racism and representation (Jemisin, 2010; Klink, 2010; Pande, 2017). Feminist and anti-racist conversations which are becoming increasingly visible online have also made their appearance within both fandom and fan studies (De Kosnik and Carrington, 2019; Woo, 2017).

Fan texts are products of their time; subsequently, fan interpretations and conversations are constantly in flux and can respond to an array of social, cultural and political contexts across space and time (Thomas, 2011). Discussions and debates about media and fan texts as well as issues of oppression and equity can help make fans more politically aware (Russo, 2017). The kinds of conversations which are prevalent within fandom can help both fans as well as the researchers who study them learn new ways of thinking about an issue. Jenkins (2017) acknowledged that early fan scholars – including himself – overlooked racial analysis within fandom. However, he is now using his clout in the field of fan studies to include and promote the voices of fan scholars of colour and from contexts beyond the US. In 2021, he hosted a “Global Fandom” series on his website where he invited fans and scholars from across the world to share their perspectives (Jenkins, 2021).

As writer Rebecca Solnit (2016) pointed out, this kind of critical, consciousness-raising work by different people – including fans – “seems insignificant or peripheral until very different outcomes emerge from transformed assumptions about who and what matters, who should be heard and believed, who has rights.” She proposed that this work of creating a better society is never finished – there will always be something new to understand which may make people uncomfortable and will require them to work against oppressions they haven't yet encountered (Solnit, 2016; 2017; 2019b; 2019c). Echoing Solnit, writer Rene Eddo-Lodge (2018) added, “feminism is a constant work in progress. We are all still learning.”

Davis (2008) argued that intersectionality is successful because it is ambiguous and incomplete, allowing for multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations, which encourage further discussions in a range of fields and projects. She thought that this incompleteness also discourages researchers from becoming complacent since the work of feminism is not considered to be completely done (ibid). Much like hopepunk, this is also a feature of public pedagogy where there isn't one fixed end-point to work towards. People don't become critically literate in a neat, linear, pre-determined and definitive way. There is no established, finite entity or one correct universal model for critical literacy (Luke, 2012; Peters and Lankshear, 1996). Rather, this is an open-ended and ambiguous experience, one which is ever-evolving and never entirely finished (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013).

In their preface to the book *Problematizing Public Pedagogy*, Burdick and colleagues (2013) emphasised the need to consider knowledge as always partial and incomplete without a final correct answer. This belief, they argued, leaves people open to imagining new possibilities and learning new perspectives. Consequently, education becomes an ongoing process and knowledge constantly evolves (ibid). These arguments also apply to intersectional considerations in fan spaces where ideas of inclusivity, diversity and equity are a work in progress.

10.3.1 Constantly evolving education across time and space

As fans from dominant cultures exposed to diverse conversations and perspectives, some of my co-participants and I were better able to recognise our own privilege and ignorance when it came to certain identities. However, as I've explored both in this chapter and Chapter 9, this sort of education about intersectional experiences in fan spaces isn't guaranteed. It requires an active and ongoing effort to seek new perspectives and be open to unlearning previously taken-for-granted knowledge. It also entails being open to confronting some of our assumptions about both our favourite fictional media as well as our own interactions in the real world.

Talking about diversity, equity, marginalisation and dominance more purposefully helped me unveil and understand some of my own preconceived notions. These observations emerged thanks to my collective negotiation with my co-participants and other fan texts throughout the course of the project. Since I was steeped in such a wide range of ideas via different sources, during the post-production and analysis process, I found that I was constantly problematising what my co-participants and I said in different episodes. This allowed me to seek more information and stories – knowledge which prevented me from becoming too complacent in my understanding of the world and demanded a more nuanced engagement with my beliefs.

In episodes with **Sanjana** and **Aparna**, my Indian co-hosts, we signposted the different resources we'd found helpful in our own journeys towards intersectional literacy and understandings of intersectional solidarity. In one of our episodes, I shared how the internet – both within and beyond the context of fandom – was an important learning resource which provided me with an alternative to mainstream media. This resonated with both of them. All 3 of us spoke about how encountering marginalised perspectives in both local and global contexts helped us question some of our assumptions and recognise our privileges. Throughout our research and conversations, the more we spoke about different identities, the more we realised how we were a part of the dominant culture in so many instances. Even in cases like gender, where we were marginalised, we were often still more privileged than women with other intersecting marginalised identities like class, caste, religion or gender identity.

Such considerations emerged through the framework of discussing representations of diverse groups in media. As we learned to be more critical readers of the texts we were discussing, we also grew more critical of our own limitations and experiences as women and feminists; and tried to move towards a

more inclusive and intersectional politics. At the same time, we acknowledged that even though we were actively trying to unlearn some problematic ideas we'd internalised, it was still a long, difficult, and quite realistically a lifelong process. There would always be different identities about whom we'd need to shift and broaden our ideas:

Thinking about the fact that this is us who are actively reading and trying to get a hang of it. This is us still battling what we've been learning. Which is why popular media plays so much of a role in the way we think because that is the fastest way we learn and that's probably the fastest way in which we'll unlearn everything else as well. Or come up with a broader view of things. – Sanjana (MF Episode 19)

As Sanjana pointed out, we had been conditioned by media representations to think about diverse identities in narrow ways for most of our lives. Even though we have been actively thinking about these ideas, it was still a struggle against our lifelong conditioning. Decolonising our brains required us to unlearn ideas about different identities like religion, sexuality, disability and gender among others.

By discussing how different cultures are represented and misrepresented in mainstream media, we were able to identify and challenge some of our internalised ideas both about identities we inhabited as well as ones we didn't. In our episodes, we talked about how our minds were colonised in many different ways and we had internalised all sorts of attitudes – homophobic, patriarchal, racist, ableist – because of the societies and systems we inhabited. Analysing elements in fictional worlds offered us opportunities to develop a better understanding of otherness and norms within both the fictional world and its manifestations in the real world. The analyses and discussions helped us identify patterns of erasure and dominance and what these said about which culture is the default and which is othered.

Most of this particular sub-section has featured Aparna, Sanjana and me due to our prolonged participation over 10 months. We had more time and space to explore and articulate how our participation had enabled us to educate ourselves about diverse identities – complete with the successes and pitfalls we encountered throughout. Even early on in the project, however, **Anna M.**, a fan and scholar, drew attention to the fact that nobody could be always educated about every single thing. There would always be more to learn:

We see the core idea be it feminism or being a fan or environmentalism as the defining trait of the people within the community, often overlooking other areas of their beliefs, of their attitudes that might not be as positive or as palatable. I also feel that we as a society really don't take kindly to people's complexity. That you can't be all good. There will always be, unfortunately, a side of your life where you're not as educated, not as aware and not as considerate as you perhaps could have been. But that need not condemn you entirely. – Anna M. (MF Episode 3)

As Anna pointed out, perfection wasn't the point; an acceptance of blind-spots and biases – both other people's as well as your own – complemented by a willingness to fill gaps in your knowledge and lived experience could help make spaces more

flexible and dynamic. Such a view meant that these conversations would inevitably be an ever-evolving work-in-progress, able to respond to a range of different contexts.

10.3.2 Marginally hopeful

In one segment of our episode, **Lorrie**, a Pottermore fan, and I discussed the real-world parallels of fascism in the movie *Crimes of Grindelwald*. Based on the global political climate of the time – 2020 – as well as the plot of the movie, I couldn't help but make a connection between the fascist framework of the movie and its iterations in the real world. To me, Grindelwald's rise was a scary reminder of the ways in which Narendra Modi and Donald Trump rose to lead their countries and the aftermath of their time in power. The way in which Grindelwald allowed latent anti-Muggle prejudice to fester in public was similar to their Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric in the real world. I proposed that getting rid of the leaders in India or the US wouldn't get rid of the hatred and bigotry they had stirred up in people. Lorrie had a slightly different, more hopepunk opinion:

Yes and no because also what those kinds of leaders are exploiting is fear and prejudice and tendencies that humans always have within us. And that's overpowering empathy and generosity that we also always have within us. So partly if there's encouragement of certain elements in human nature backed up by politics, backed up by the law and enforcement, humans we can be manipulated in a number of different directions. We have a lot of that in us already. – Lorrie

By challenging my point, she presented an alternate view:

But the same people that can be manipulated to be very, very bigoted could also in other contexts or just through peer pressure be made to be much more accepting. – Lorrie (MF Episode 12)

Lorrie didn't present an overly positive vision which believed in the inherent goodness of people. She acknowledged that people could be riled up to do horrific things. At the same time, she also believed in the possibility that people could be more empathetic and compassionate. The structural forces – government, media, law, culture – can help us move in either direction. It's the people within these structures who can create better alternatives.

As I've explored throughout these last 2 chapters, fandom isn't all positive. But it isn't all negative either. Our episode conversations challenged this binary thinking. A hopepunk theorisation of fandom – and the real world, as Lorrie described – has room for both. Amidst those structures, spaces and conversations which perpetuate hierarchies and power imbalances, there are still people who attempt to create a more inclusive environment for all. In the case of fan podcasts, neither the hosts I listened to nor my co-participants and I intended to come to perfect solutions through our discussions about different identities and issues. Through our incomplete and imperfect conversations, we were trying to gain and share a better, more complex and nuanced understanding of different lives. The ideas and conversations we encountered opened our minds up to new possibilities and introduced us to new ways of thinking about the world.

Like most fans, my co-participants and I were enthusiastic about the things we loved. Through our conversations and critiques, we illustrated why diversity and equity in media representations mattered. We did spend a lot of time critiquing under- and misrepresentations of different identities in some of our favourite fictional media. At the same time, we also highlighted our favourite examples which offered a picture of the kinds of complexities and nuances we wanted to see more of in mainstream media and society; which offered us a fictional roadmap to the kind of real-world changes we needed in our lives (see Chapter 3). **Milena**, a queer fan and activist, and I ended our episode by talking about the importance of things which brought us comfort and hope:

We really need unapologetically fluffy, hopeful, optimistic media. The world is on fire and sometimes you just need to be able to curl up in a corner and go I'm reading this fluffy thing and I'm just going to make myself feel better doing that. And then I'm going to go and fight the rest of the world. – Milena (MF Episode 21)

Milena highlighted that while building counternarratives to established structures in media, fandom and society, people can't always be fighting. Even among narratives of resistance, there needs to be room for joy because it's these feelings of hope which make the resistance possible. Having something to fight towards makes it easier to contend with the seemingly never-ending nature of fighting against the way things are. Milena underscored that activism which works towards more inclusive structures isn't – and shouldn't be – devoid of joy.

Another co-participant, **Deb**, a middle-aged fan from the US, drew on both fictional and real-world contexts to illustrate the different ways people challenge established structures. When I complained about how much Molly Weasley, a decidedly maternal character in the *Harry Potter* series, is taken for granted by her family and the other resistance fighters, Deb shared another analysis:

She's making sure that the Order is functional both psychologically by sitting and chatting with Tonks and helping her work through her feelings. She's keeping the kids fed and under control and working through. She's making sure that everybody has what they need. – Deb

By outlining the different ways in which people can – and do – contribute to protest movements, Deb asserted that all avenues were important in the journey towards a better world:

And pulling that to the world that we're living in right now, I'm thinking about in the US right now we're experiencing large-scale protests against police brutality and systemic racism like we haven't seen in a really long time. And I saw a tweet recently that really struck me in terms of Molly. And it said that, "The revolution isn't one lane. There are many lanes to a protest and you can't be in all of them at once. But they all move the revolution forward." And I like that idea paired with Molly and this idea of radical hospitality. Her lane may be seen as this traditionally feminine lane but it's absolutely vital to move the revolution forward. Without her, it all falls apart. – Deb (MF Episode 14)

Deb drew on the diverse activities employed by activists in the real world to better illuminate how fictional contexts also illustrated their importance. When applied to a fandom context, Deb's argument can be used to understand how conversations about diversity and equity are yet another way to contribute towards shifting the public cultural imagination in ways which question old ideas and develop new ways of looking at the world.

Since I started working on this podcast in December 2019, every month there has been some news event – usually more than a dozen at a time – which has contributed to the overall, as writers/vloggers John and Hank Green would call it, “world suck” (Green, 2021). I'm usually the sort of person who believes that people working to make the world better for everyone outnumber the people who are working to make it better only for themselves. But I found myself growing increasingly despondent in light of the public health and political challenges in India and elsewhere. And I began to wonder: what's the point of spending what little energy and brainspace I had on a fan podcast that largely focuses on cultural representations and marginalised perspectives in media?

Then, one weekend, this quote by writer and activist bell hooks popped up in my email inbox and stopped me short: “The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is. It's to imagine what is possible” (in Kleon, 2021). I had lost sight of how much media representations influence mainstream culture which in turn influences mainstream politics. Discussions about media representations can act as excellent consciousness-raisers with real-world implications. As Rebecca Solnit reminded us in *Hope in the Dark* (2016), even in the midst of struggles for a better world, it's important to celebrate the changes which we have witnessed as a result of past activist work in social, cultural and political contexts.

Popular culture and conversations shape people's imaginations – in ways which can both limit and expand them. Ideas which promote radical empathy and respect for diverse experiences don't just materialise out of thin air. There are millions of people working towards making their vision of an equitable world real. As Deb pointed out above, there are different paths to a revolution. Talking about intersectionality and different marginalised perspectives on the podcast and in this thesis didn't seem quite so pointless anymore. Intersectional fan podcasts inhabit a strange space – part love, part criticism, part art, part activism. Art can be an important form of activism – to shift ideas, change conversations, and expand imaginations; to create a space for anger and joy. And both anger and joy are necessary to imagine and build a world more equal and more just than the one we currently inhabit.

You can see examples of this better-than-the-past world in fandom spaces. It's something a few co-participants and I brought up in our episodes. **Rita**, a fan from the Philippines, and I spoke about how we had noticed that online fandom engagement with beloved media had evolved over the last decade and a half we had been a part of these spaces:

It kind of makes me feel so jealous that I am not part of this online community. Because you're right, it does critically engage [...] The way that fandom has engaged with this discussion of problematic authors is something that I don't know if I would have seen a couple of years back; 10 years back. I don't know if there would be fans who would say, no,

actually I can disengage from this because this is problematic. And not just say, "Oh this is problematic" but give out reasoned arguments as to why it is. – Rita

As Rita pointed out, and as I've written about in Chapter 4, an increasing number of fans are able to balance love with critique wherein they demand better from their favourite media and its creator:

Fans are reading up. Fans don't just know the book, they know the context that the book exists in and they know the discourses around that book. That's part of what being a fan is. That's part of the obsession that comes with fandom. And the fact that they're marrying that with critical engagement is just something so beautiful and gives me hope for the world in this year of our lord 2020. – Rita (MF Episode 20)

Rita emphasised that the adoration of a favourite world doesn't necessarily leave fans ignorant of its shortcomings. The more people explore gaps and highlight imperfections, the more the mainstream – both fanon and canon – can shift and expand to incorporate an increasing diversity of identities and perspectives.

Alison, a middle-aged SFF fan from England, noticed this shift in both canon and offline fan spaces. She had been attending in-person fan conventions and events since she was in her 20s. In our episode, she spoke about how she had experienced sexism, classism and sexual harassment by fandom gatekeepers which made her feel excluded and unwelcome in these spaces. At the same time, she highlighted the real-world impact of conversations about inclusivity, diversity and social justice on these fandom communities:

I went away [from fandom] for 10 years – it was just too awful. When I came back, one of the most wonderful things is firstly how much more diverse fandom is. Those people I was first encountering are much more now the older fans. Younger fans don't put up with that kind of stuff as much. And while certainly some spaces in fandom can be really toxic and very alienating for women, by and large the fandom circles that I move in are much more intersectional, much more aware of white privilege and male privilege and the privilege of the able-bodied versus people with physical and mental disabilities. And while I do think class privilege is very much still there, it is getting better. – Alison

Along with SFF fandom spaces becoming more inclusive, Alison also spoke about how science fiction and fantasy texts themselves were becoming more representative of diverse identities. She pointed out that traditionally in such spaces, women's interests weren't taken seriously and men's interests were privileged:

I'm delighted that that has been overturned because of the amount of women's writing that is being recognised and particularly [...] the way that black women and East Asian women, their writing has been recognised – and disabled women [...] that's been wonderful. And that has to be because more people are engaging with the writing [...] Writing by women is not just writing for women. It's writing for everybody in the way that writing by men has traditionally been seen as writing for everybody.

And, of course, within that we've got nonbinary and LGBTQ people's writing being valued far more than it ever has been. – Alison (MF Episode 4)

Alison acknowledged that this increasing diversity does result in reactionary statements and attitudes. However, she hoped that those ideas continued to be challenged by more progressive ones. Even though these fan spaces still aren't wholly inclusive of all identities, the conversations challenging inequalities within them did somewhat succeed in creating a better, more inclusive space. Such conversations have also influenced the kinds of stories which are published, who writes and reads them, and which ones become popular. As Alison described, ongoing discussions among diverse groups of people can have an impact on making pockets of the real world more inclusive for diverse groups of people. Fan visions of a world – fictional or real – which address existing inequities can offer the first step in being able to work towards that future.

10.4 Fan visions of a radically inclusive world

According to Nash (2017), intersectionality can be seen as something which imagines and works towards an alternate world that prioritises social justice and dignified lives for all people. Russo (2017) proposed that a framework for intersectional world-making can help people not only question the way things are but also provide alternatives to dominant norms about gender, sexuality, race, class and disability. Latta (2020) proposed that educators should create spaces for radical imagination which allow their students to envision new social systems as well as develop ways wherein they can work towards these new futures and cultures of equality. He asserted that progress towards social justice requires people to imagine possible futures where existing oppressions aren't an entrenched part of society.

Progressive activists understand the realities of existing systems. While their work responds to these structures, it isn't beholden to them. Working towards a radically inclusive future motivates activists to fight *against* something as well as inspires them to fight *for* something (Scurr and Bowden, 2021). Their conversations urge others to think about the world – past, present and future – in new ways (Turner III, 2018). Imarisha (2018) believed that people need imaginative spaces which allow them to question what they have been told about the world they live in and to devise different ways through which the world can work. She proposed that activists working for social change are constantly dreaming new futures and bringing them into being through their cultural and political activities:

Every time we imagine a world without poverty, a world without borders, a world without prisons, a world without capitalism, a world without oppression, that's science fiction. Because we've never seen that world. But we strongly believe that movements for change absolutely vitally need imaginative spaces that allow us to throw out everything we're told is possible and start with the question "What is the world we want to live in?" rather than "What is a realistic way we can get out of this system?"

Because we know that all substantive social change was considered to be utterly unrealistic at the time people were trying to make it happen.

Giroux (2012) described how protests across the world are acts of radical imagination where the protesters are fighting to build a future which is more sustainable and equitable than the present. He argued that “a collective language of critique and possibility” (Giroux, 2019) can not only help people challenge existing social, political, economic and environmental inequalities from a variety of standpoints but also encourage them to believe that a better culture and society is possible. Such expanded imaginations create possibilities for social transformation (ibid).

People have also written about the importance of hope in activism. Giroux (2004) extolled the value of “educated hope” which allows people to acknowledge present injustices and then act towards alternative futures in social and political movements. Duncan-Andrade (2009) advocated for a critical hope – “the enemy of hopelessness” – in spaces and movements where people are committed to collectively transforming unjust and unequal systems. Stetsenko (2020) noted that in visions of an equitable future, there isn’t an authority figure to outline the terms and constraints; rather communities of people have to come up with their own ideas through dialogue and debates which lay the groundwork for a political imagination.

Writer Rebecca Solnit (2016) argued that hope is a political choice which makes political resistance possible. She believed that resistance occurs in diverse spheres – activism, art, culture, academia, social media – all of which are important in introducing new ideas, shifting conversations, expanding imaginations, and remaking taken-for-granted aspects of the world. Sara Ahmed (2013) also outlined the political importance of hope in feminist movements which allows people to envision equitable futures and fight towards them even in the face of bleak, seemingly desperate, existing realities. In writer Rene Eddo-Lodge’s (2018) vision of an intersectional feminist future, everyone’s different needs are prioritised in ways which suit them best. She acknowledged that her demands may appear unrealistic. At the same time, she believed that conceptions for a feminist future must necessarily be utopian so that people are encouraged to resist existing structures and societies in order to make new ones.

Culture is therefore both a “site of contestation and a site of utopian possibility” (Giroux, 2004: p. 60). Such political imagination is evident in fan texts exploring issues of diversity and equity in both fictional and real-world contexts.

Fan podcasts create imaginative spaces for fans to envision and share their ideas for a world which is more inclusive than the one which currently exists. In fan spaces, debates and discussions about the fictional world and their parallels in the real world provide opportunities for fans to think about alternatives to established social, political or economic structures (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2018) found that when fans restory existing narratives by inserting their own priorities and perspectives into their favourite media, such counternarratives can inspire people to imagine a better, more equitable future in the real world.

Some fans emphasised the importance of imagining futures which were different from the present. The “Can We Survive Capitalism” episode of *Our Opinions Are Correct* argued that most science fiction worlds seem unable to imagine a post-capitalist society without some miraculous invention or system which takes care of contemporary issues and needs. The hosts argued that it’s important to imagine alternative economies in our mainstream fiction so that these ideas seep through to mainstream consciousness, allowing people to envision other ways of existing in the world (Newitz and Anders, 2018).

Fans have highlighted the practices of Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism as a way to imagine more equitable futures. In the “Fantasy, Imagination and Indigenous Futurism” episode of *Reading, Writing, Rowling*, guest Amy H. Sturgis discussed the potential of science fiction and fantasy to imagine alternative possibilities and a better world. She outlined the ways in which indigenous fans and writers decolonise SFF by highlighting stories in which indigenous people thrive and their cultures and knowledges flourish – narratives which are missing in current mainstream SFF spaces. Such explorations allow people to go beyond their preconceived notions of indigenous people in the contemporary world (in McDaniel and Granger, 2017). In the “What Is Indigenous Futurism?” episode of *Our Opinions Are Correct*, guests writer Rebecca Roanhorse and journalist Julian Brave NoiseCat offered their own interpretations of indigenous futurism which drew on their different experiences and expertise. As a journalist, Julian wrote against the narrative that indigenous people’s contributions only belonged in the past. Rebecca believed that retelling and reclaiming these stories in ways which centre indigenous perspectives, sciences and knowledges in the future help people reframe them in the present (in Newitz and Anders, 2020b).

Other fans urged people to rethink the narratives we take for granted about the past too. In the “Christian Mythology in Fantasy” episode of *Breaking the Glass Slipper*, guest Jeanette Ng implored people to question what we have been told about women’s roles in history. She explored the different ways in which women in Christian history used religion to negotiate patriarchal systems. In many contexts, women turned to religious life as a form of resistance against the social expectations of marriage and childcare. Jeanette signposted new research which problematises the limited narratives featuring women. Scholars have found that these women made significant contributions to art, scholarship and theology and used their work to talk back to the men in power. Once Jeanette learned that women had always found workarounds for established social structures which oppressed them, she found this system of “alternate patriarchies” a hopeful one. She argued that this meant that these social structures weren’t set in stone which in turn meant that new systems and ways of resistance would also emerge from our current systems (Leigh et al., 2018a). By highlighting the gaps in existing structures and looking at the past and future, fans found different opportunities to imagine and share a world more complex than the one they have long been led to believe.

Freire (2018) contended that by incorporating the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups of people, conversations draw on multiple intelligences in order to understand unequal existing realities and imagine a more just and

equitable future. By talking to others and creating their own texts, fans encourage people to question the status quo and invite them to imagine alternatives to a range of established norms and values (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Gainer, 2010; Janks and Vasquez, 2011; Shor, 1999). Freire (2018) emphasised the importance of hope in such critical and transformative conversations. People talk to each other in the hope of changing an unjust world; if they didn't think their dialogue mattered, it would be hopeless work (ibid). Ramos believed that stories can identify, challenge and transform established systems, arguing, “both hope and storytelling are radical strategies that use narratives and discourse to transform our perception and reality of what is possible” (Ramos, 2020: p. 34). Fans combine conversations, hope, storytelling and critical insights in order to imagine differently.

10.4.1 Reimagining historical worlds

As someone who wrote comics about historical events in India, **Sanjana** was interested in exploring how mainstream narratives about history – both in media and in the classroom – portrayed women in limited ways. Even though she researched history more than a lay person, Sanjana still hadn't heard of most of the women she encountered while researching for one book in particular:

Recently we were doing a comic on women pathbreakers in India and I had not heard of any of these women [...] And it was so sad that we didn't study these women or nobody told us about these women [...] We are not telling stories of the past. We are not telling Pandita Ramabai's story [...] Savitribai Phule's story [...] I feel like there is some role for content creators to play to break or reinforce stereotypes. And to tell these stories [...] They deserve being told. – Sanjana

Sanjana lamented the lack of knowledge about these stories of Indian women from history in more mainstream avenues. She outlined how the biases and blind-spots of history textbooks became the biases and blind-spots of mainstream media and subsequently our imaginations. She went on to share one of the stories she had learned about social activist Pandita Ramabai's intellectual accomplishments in the face of structural and social barriers in India. This prompted **Aparna** and me to make connections with examples we had come across thanks to both fan podcasts as well as social media spaces – where people drew attention to forgotten stories:

In history, we don't learn these things. Like Savitribai Phule, she's from Maharashtra and she is the first woman teacher in India. And she was also a Dalit woman. And we don't learn about the Dalit woman-ness [...] If you go and look at women or trans women or trans men or nonbinary folks, that gets so much more invisible. – Parinita

These links about the erasure of certain identities and experiences emerged via our conversation with each other. This enabled us to highlight how an absence of these stories influences the minds of people from both dominant and marginalised cultures:

We heard this podcast episode of Breaking The Glass Slipper (Leigh et al., 2019b) where they were talking about the erasure of trans people from

history or from popular culture [...] In India, it's true for so many Dalit, Adivasi women. A lot of the smaller sections of Indian society have been completely glossed over. Their contributions to the freedom struggle have been completely glossed over. So nobody gets to read about them. There is a very limited idea of what these people, of what all of these identities mean or stand for. – Aparna (MF Episode 19)

We used the fan podcast framework to shed light on lesser known parts of history. Talking about these issues helped us articulate our ideas about whose stories, whose voices, and whose lives matter. By sharing the stories which had taught us to consider the past anew, we hoped to challenge ideas which had become normative in many people's imaginations, including our own.

Stories are important but they aren't neutral. **Lisa**, an SFF fan who was also a trained fighter, pointed out how the absence of diverse stories about women's roles in history shape the kinds of stories we tell ourselves about women leaders and fighters today. She appreciated the fact that an increasing number of researchers from marginalised groups were now drawing on their own backgrounds and interests to explore gaps in history and subsequently finding different kinds of stories:

Like Melisende of Jerusalem, one of the queens of Jerusalem who was queen in her own right, who was her father's heir had to marry a warrior because she was legally not allowed to lead men into battle even though she had the ability. But she is acknowledged in all of history as being this incredibly powerful female queen who defended Jerusalem and defended her lover and her sisters and everything. And probably killed multiple people by her own hand. But no one's ever heard of her [...] Kara Cooney, who is an Egyptologist, just wrote a great book When Women Ruled The World. It's about female pharaohs who were leaders and most of them weren't ever qualified to lead men into battle. So they had to wield military power at a distance – at a remove. But they were genuine rulers. – Lisa (MF Episode 11)

Lisa's point was one raised in some of the fan podcasts we listened to as well. In our episode, we discussed how recent research had led to new findings of the existence of female Viking warriors, female pirates, female samurai fighters, and prehistoric women hunters – something which challenged the norms people – both historians and not – had long taken for granted. She pointed out that when we don't see such diverse stories and histories in mainstream spaces, it perpetuates the same stereotypes about women. By shedding light on lesser-known real-world histories as well as highlighting the people whose contributions were hitherto erased, Lisa challenged and expanded notions of women's roles and abilities.

When Sanjana and Lisa shared these missing narratives from history, it helped me question the stories and ideas of societies I had long been told. Their contributions which explored and addressed missing gaps in knowledge presented an alternative to established norms and assumptions about women's roles in history. Representing diverse stories allows people to imagine differently. New information about historical social structures can result in new interpretations,

allowing people like me to question the way things are, imagine alternate possibilities, and envision a different world.

10.4.2 Reimagining future worlds

In different episodes, my co-participants and I brought up our different visions of the future which responded to diverse contexts. As we exchanged our ideas with each other, we drew on both fictional and real-world sources. While researching for our episode on the representations of disabilities, **Sanjana** shared how she and **Aparna**, both non-disabled fans, found parallels between the lack of black people and the absence of disabled people in science fiction media:

When we were reading up and listening to some of the fan podcasts in preparation for this episode, one of the themes that kept being repeated and being echoed through all of it was that there is a lack of space given to disability to exist within futuristic and fantasy worlds. And I was discussing this with [Aparna] the other day and she told me about Afrofuturism and how there is this genre born out of the fact that there isn't enough representation of black people in futuristic worlds. And how it's strange that people don't think that racism would be something that gets solved in the 2100s. And how this is similar to disability being portrayed because it doesn't leave any space for normalcy to exist. – Sanjana (MF Episode 6)

The podcast *Our Opinions Are Correct* explored Afrofuturism, a movement that emerged as a response to the erasure of black bodies and contributions in imagined futuristic worlds. Afrofuturist writers actively insert black bodies, black perspectives and black culture into science fiction worlds which have traditionally imagined them out of existence. Guest Shawn Taylor pointed out how even if black people do exist in science fiction, they're usually beholden to current systems of white supremacy. Afrofuturism helps black people “imagine [themselves] out of the constraints of whiteness” in ways which allow them to tell the kinds of stories which they themselves want. Afrofuturist stories envision alternative and more equitable ways of life (in Newitz and Anders, 2019c).

Sanjana drew attention to a recently-acquired insight which helped her notice the erasure of certain identities in SFF media. She hadn't previously noticed the absence of disabled people in the media she engaged with because disability hadn't had an impact on her own life. Fan conversations provided her with an opportunity to actively think about mainstream blind-spots and reconsider them in light of other people's perspectives. Discussing fantastical and futuristic worlds helped Sanjana draw connections between how people from groups which are marginalised in the real world continue to be marginalised in people's imaginations. At the same time, she appreciated that fans were not only identifying this pattern but also challenging it, thereby enabling her to imagine differently and envision a more inclusive future.

Robert, a disabled science fiction fan, had brought up a similar point about narratives of disability in his episode. He drew on his own experiences as he discussed the implications of advanced technology in futuristic worlds being used

to eradicate disabilities like autism rather than being used to imagine creative ways to improve accessibility for disabled bodies and brains. These stories excluded him from their conceptions of humanity in the future. To Robert, an absence of disabled bodies and minds not only signalled that being disabled was a deficient existence but also used technology as a form of eugenics to erase disabilities out of the narrative altogether. However, as a fanfic writer, he tried to create fictional worlds which considered disability a different way of being that deserved to be included in future visions of society:

The sort of science fiction I enjoy and I try to create would probably usually be about explicitly challenging that idea that that's what the future is or has to be. Or that something that ends up looking like that is progress or anything like it. It comes back to the idea of always being told that a progressed world is a world which has eradicated you. And [...] having the self-confidence to say that is wrong. – Robert (MF Episode 10)

Like Robert, an increasing number of disabled science fiction writers are actively inserting their disabilities into their stories in order to imagine more accessible worlds (Sjunneson-Henry et al., 2018).

Robert and I ended our episode by thinking about how conversations about disabilities like depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses had become more public. Such considerations occurred owing to the collective trauma and loss in the aftermath of the pandemic and various political upheavals. Robert had spent a large part of our episode critiquing the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of mental illness in mainstream media and fandom. However, he hoped and believed that such a public discussion of shared experiences could provide fodder for art and stories which imagined a different kind of world, one which included people – like him – that it had previously overlooked.

Robert himself was working on a story which emerged from and responded to the collective trauma. He shared how the public conversations about the state of people's mental health under structural inequalities and public health emergencies had inspired him to write *Doctor Who* fanfiction that explored how to creatively and holistically resolve the trauma in ways which rebuild societies and relationships. While mainstream media and social structures still largely excluded his concerns and perspectives, Robert was creating imagined futuristic worlds which changed this narrative.

Throughout the course of the podcast, Aparna, Sanjana and I became more attuned to the gaps and silences when discussing diversity as we included different identities in our vision of inclusion and equality. By deliberately adopting an intersectional lens in our episodes and thinking from different perspectives like caste, religion, class, sexuality and gender identity, we were able to analyse how marginalisation and privilege intersected in different contexts. This allowed us to analyse media and better understand how, when it came to diverse identities, progress wasn't universally guaranteed. The umbrella of media representations allowed us to hone our own conceptions of inclusion. In an episode where we were exploring representations of gender, Aparna acknowledged that while media was

increasingly representing women's stories, it wasn't enough to just portray a specific kind of woman:

We need to make sure as a community, as a society, that when we finally do reach the point of equal representation, we're not doing it alone. We are representing all genders and we have to have positive representations of Dalit and Adivasi women, women of colour, rural women, poor women. We have to acknowledge that we share our marginalisation with so many other identities. And while seeking fair representation for ourselves, this needs to be something that is as important as our own representation. – Aparna, Episode 19

By outlining her hope for a more equitable media landscape, Aparna suggested that progress needed solidarity among different marginalised identities. She shared her vision of different possibilities to existing realities. Such conversations – albeit idealised ones – create alternative imaginative spaces. They help both participants – and potential audiences – reconsider structures they may have taken for granted and think about different possibilities for their own individual and collective futures.

Ziv, an Orthodox Jewish fan, used the opportunity of our episode conversation to outline his vision for an alternative to the way religious identities are currently in conflict. As a religious person, he acknowledged that religion had room for both positives and negatives. So he understood why many non-religious people found it difficult to engage with and understand religious perspectives:

It's [...] a topic that has so many issues and problems and difficulties because it does very often – and not in all versions of faith but in many versions of faith – have real clashes with humanism and pluralism and respect for other identities. And those can all be so challenging to grapple with. – Ziv

At the same time, throughout our conversation and through his choice of text recommendations, Ziv constantly urged people – both religious and not – including himself to envision and talk about social structures which had room for multiple identities co-existing; about worlds – both fictional and real – where people from different worldviews found a way to come together and live together:

To me personally, that's exactly why I want to see them grappled with. I feel like we need the voices who want to grapple with them, who want to figure out how we can have religion and pluralism at the same time; how we can acknowledge both the people of particular faiths and also the people outside them and respect them both. I feel like the onus of this should fall first and foremost on pluralistic religious people. Although [laughs] I feel very often like that is a small and isolated and beleaguered community. – Ziv (MF Episode 15)

Thanks to my wariness of religion, I hadn't expected to enjoy my conversation with Ziv as much as I did. His thoughtful text recommendations presented me with a way to view the world I hadn't quite had the chance to do before. Our conversation helped expand my mind to see things anew. His desire for a more humanistic and pluralistic version of religion(s) gave me hope. This hope was much needed in the

middle of events in India and elsewhere where such co-existence was growing increasingly difficult. At the same time, as some other co-participants and I had briefly discussed, there were still people from different identities and worldviews coming together to resist groups which sought to divide them.

Our fandom conversations led to different kinds of intersectional analyses and conclusions – some which analysed media, others which analysed our lives. Talking about both fictional as well as real-world social structures offered us opportunities to explore their shortcomings as well as imagine more ideal scenarios. Such discussions allowed us to identify restrictive structures as well as envision alternatives to the established norms that didn't work for us. Exchanging such idealised narratives helped us influence each other's ideas and encouraged us to reconsider normative structures and imagine alternatives to ideas we had long grown used to.

10.5 Chapter Summary

While I have spent a large portion of this thesis expounding on the liberatory possibilities of fan conversations, fandom spaces aren't all positive. They replicate different social hierarchies where some people's experiences and perspectives are privileged over others. Consequently, they can be unsafe spaces for fans from differently marginalised backgrounds. Not all fans are open-minded and welcoming to opinions and interpretations which challenge their own. Ensuing conflicts in fandom can take a toll on people's lives within these spaces. Being a fan of something you love is supposed to be fun. But if you're from a marginalised background, participating in these spaces can be an exhausting experience.

Despite being imperfect spaces full of fallible discussions, fan conversations can nevertheless help people expand their imaginations and find new ways to think about the world. Fandom isn't all positive or all negative. By bringing in their different intersectional considerations into these spaces, some fans try to imagine and create more equitable communities for people from different backgrounds - in fictional, fandom, and in-person contexts.

Seeking new perspectives can help fans learn about experiences which don't mirror their own. However, such an education isn't a given; it requires active commitment and effort. It also entails being open to confronting some of their own problematic assumptions about both their favourite fictional media as well as their own interactions and ideologies in the real world. This openness can allow people to introspect on their own privileges and develop more inclusive political considerations. But it's not all work. Such contexts have room for joy, comfort and hope.

Envisioning alternative structures – both fictional and real-world – can help people think about how to make these visions real. By engaging in acts of radical imagination which challenge the limited stories we've been told about the past and the future, fans from differently marginalised identities can reshape imaginations.

Chapter 11 Conclusion: It's Bigger On The Inside

This thesis explored how fan interpretations and critiques collaboratively negotiate and demonstrate public pedagogy and intersectional literacy. My co-participants and I hailed from various races, ethnicities, gender and gender identities, religions, abilities, sexualities, social classes, ages and geographic origins. Popular media and fandom provided us with a shared language and reason to interact with each other. We adapted our favourite media to foreground our intersectional considerations. By analysing how diverse identities are represented and/or erased in media and fandom, we collectively developed critical literacies. Discussions about our favourite fictional worlds and characters shed light on different real-world experiences and contexts.

Below, I revisit my research questions to briefly contextualise how conversations among me and my co-participants fit within the frameworks of intersectionality and public pedagogy. Although the thesis explored both questions by largely focusing on the example of *Marginally Fannish*, most of the points also apply to the other fan podcasts included in this project. By unpacking and analysing podcast episodes that had unpacked and analysed media representations, the preceding chapters proposed that fan podcasts offer opportunities for a critical intersectional education. Most importantly, this education is happening in public spaces outside academia. Here, there is no one person who is the sole arbiter of knowledge; instead, knowledge emerges collectively through people's encounters with others around shared interests.

This kind of collective and public education is important because once people begin to view media and real-world structures through a critical, intersectional gaze, it's difficult to put this awareness away. Having said that, this education isn't guaranteed. It requires an active effort to constantly reflect on one's incomplete understanding of diverse lives and to fill these knowledge gaps. We encounter new people, identities and ideas throughout our lives. Subsequently, this education also needs to be an ongoing process. The framework of popular media fandom provides a valuable avenue for this ever-evolving education in progress.

Radical imagination plays an important role in such contexts since it helps shift the public cultural imagination in ways which encourage people to question old ideas and think of new possibilities. By identifying the limitations within media, my co-participants and I were able to expand the possibilities within the text and reshape the architecture of our imaginations. As Walidah Imarisha (2015: p. 3-5) declared:

The decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.

Fan podcasts like *Marginally Fannish* use the accessible language of popular media like *Harry Potter* and *Doctor Who* to open up alternative avenues for public pedagogy and intersectional literacy. Debates and discussions about the fictional world and their parallels in the real world provide opportunities for fans to think about alternatives to established social, cultural, political and economic structures.

The kind of intersectional knowledge which emerges in fan podcasts can help people imagine and demand a more equitable world. Collective visions of a world – fictional or real – which address existing inequities can offer the first step in being able to work towards a more radically inclusive future for fandom, media as well as real-world societies.

11.1 How can fan podcasts act as sites of public pedagogy?

The field of public pedagogy investigates how people situated outside formal academic settings engage in critical education by analysing the dominant narratives promoted by popular culture. It also examines how people create their own counternarratives which question mainstream norms and ideas across different personal, social, cultural and political contexts.

This thesis explained how fan podcast episodes act as sources of collaborative and public scholarship. For me and my co-participants, accessing different opinions enriched our analytical process and encouraged new insights to emerge. In light of other fans' viewpoints, we were able to critically reflect on our beliefs and biases. Our episode counternarratives offered a public pedagogical context as we expanded and challenged the implications of diverse media representations. This collective analyses opened up media to new conversations and interpretations.

A shared love for fictional worlds and characters aids this self-directed and interest-based process of critical education. Our emotional investment in our favourite media invited us to engage in in-depth analysis and interpret the representations in distinctive ways. We questioned the dominant narratives by inserting our diverse beliefs into discourses surrounding the media. We used our conversations and critiques to restory canon in ways which spoke to our diverse interests and priorities. These responses highlighted issues which mattered to us and allowed us to bring an array of concerns to the fore.

Since I was equal parts participant and researcher, I had to critically analyse my own fan experiences both in the podcast and in this thesis. However, such autoethnographic reflections are also a feature of fan podcast conversations more generally. While discussing and critiquing the media they loved, my co-participants as well as other podcast hosts and guests drew on various aspects of their own personal experiences. Such reflections placed personal identities in conversation with cultural representations. It also helped us confront some of our internalised ideas not just about other cultures but also about our own identities, resulting in a collective process of decolonisation. By analysing, interpreting and talking about the messages shared by our favourite media, my co-participants and I were able to identify and unlearn some of the default social scripts we had long taken for granted.

Fandom's collective intelligence helps people consider, question and expand preconceived notions about different identities both in the fictional and real world. My co-participants and I collaboratively studied mainstream media norms and ideas of otherness to explore whose lives, perspectives and identities were privileged and whose were erased. As we examined media through the lenses of

different identities – including and beyond our own – we were able to share and learn different ways of seeing and being in the world.

11.2 How may these sites offer opportunities to express and access intersectional perspectives?

Discussions and debates about intersectionality in online spaces have made the feminist theory accessible beyond its academic roots. Here, communities of people create intersectional knowledge together by exploring privilege and marginalisation in different contexts. Intersectional categories are contextual and fluid; this means that people can be marginalised in some settings and privileged in others.

This thesis described how my co-participants and I used our shared interest in media and fandom to co-create knowledge about different identities. Our conversations about the politics of representation drew real-world social, cultural and political parallels to fictional characters and narratives. In doing so, our critiques and recommendations raised awareness about a diversity of experiences in the real world. Placing our media analyses in conversation with the real-world structures we inhabited allowed us to explore the limitations and possibilities of both. As we drew on our identities to share our ideas with each other, different kinds of intersectional literacies and conclusions emerged. Additionally, I wrote about how an exposure to new perspectives in fandom can have real-world impacts. The intersectional knowledge fans create together has helped people discover new facets of their own identities as well as better understand and empathise with previously unconsidered lives.

Fan podcasts offer opportunities to explore more nuanced considerations of intersectionality. My co-participants and I reflected on how our privileges and oppressions intersected and how both were contextual – we were a part of the dominant culture in some spaces and on the margins in others. Consequently, our conversations signalled a need for more nuance and complexity when talking about diversity. Fandoms of globally popular media invite an engagement with multiple viewpoints and different needs. Via the umbrella of media representations, we publicly and collectively expressed and honed our ideas about what inclusion, diversity and equity means to different groups of people.

In fan spaces – much like in other intersectional, public pedagogical and activist contexts – there isn't a shared or perfect understanding of social justice. People argue about how different identities should be represented and discussed. Fans may not always agree about their ideas of inclusion, who they want to include and how. These messy, contradictory and imperfect public discussions on fan podcasts can nevertheless contribute significant insights to intersectional literacy. People don't need to have the exact same viewpoints. Incomplete and unresolved conversations about different identities and issues can open up new ways of thinking about the world. Such a multiplicity of considerations can invite a broader view of intersectionality with room for different identities and beliefs to co-exist.

11.3 Significance

Publicly accessible formats like podcasting have broader implications for knowledge-making outside formal academic contexts. Here, knowledge-creation and dissemination can emerge via conversations. This also influences the people involved – both researcher/host and co-participant/guest – who can simultaneously inform and learn from each other’s perspectives. Much like many other fan podcasts, *Marginally Fannish* employed a hybrid methodology which aligned with my priorities, requirements, politics and philosophies. It allowed me to both include as well as reach people situated beyond academic silos. Non-academic sources and co-participant contributions shared space with more traditional academic resources. This contributes to ongoing conversations about hierarchies and democratisation of knowledge as well as methodological choices and researcher participation.

Additionally, this methodology can be adapted to research alternative spaces and practices of creating knowledge. An unexpected consequence of the project was that after participating in *Marginally Fannish*, at least 2 co-participants – **Anna M.** and **Alison** – went on to launch their own fan/academic podcasts. Both of them drew on their research and personal interests in LARPing (i.e. live action role-playing) in [Time In](#) and children’s fantasy literature in [Fantasy Book Swap](#) respectively. In many of their episodes, they also invited guests to talk to them about specific themes – mirroring collective knowledge-making processes.

Although I stopped recording *Marginally Fannish* episodes after 10 months, multiple co-participants expressed their interest in taking the conversations forward via a new season. Modifying my methodology based on the lessons I’ve learned (see Chapter 2) can help me and my co-participants – both familiar and new – find more media, themes, experiences and perspectives to explore. This could not only make this alternative space of intersectional knowledge an ongoing, public and collective work-in-progress but also result in new insights and learning/unlearning about different identities. And, much like Anna and Alison above, it may even inspire others to launch projects of their own.

11.4 Limitations

What I most appreciated throughout this project was that there doesn’t need to be an individual educator telling people what to think. Rather, people come together and learn how to think by talking to each other and by expanding the range of perspectives they encounter. Engaging with diverse opinions can provide opportunities to think about multiple sides of an issue.

However, this communal knowledge-making doesn’t necessarily result in the outcomes I’ve described above. Communities of people can also come together to promote conspiracy theories and reactionary attitudes. For example, people who participate in online conversations about QAnon, anti-vaccination or climate crisis denials also believe they’re being critical of received information. They too share counternarratives with each other which encourage members to question mainstream ideas, norms and values. Even in many fandom communities, a critical,

intersectional gaze is antithetical to people's idea of fannishness. Countless fans are not interested in scratching beneath the surface of their favourite media or in viewing it through the lens of identities that don't mirror their own. In several spaces, critical and/or intersectional considerations aren't welcome at all.

This project examined a deliberately-curated selection of fans and fan communities – a critical, intersectional bubble, if you will. Analysing other kinds of online spaces or even other examples of fan podcasts may not provide the sort of education this thesis focuses on. Nevertheless, I still think it would be valuable to study how collective knowledge-making emerges in more contentious, less comfortable contexts. Engaging with spaces and communities that go against a researcher's personal philosophies could reveal insights about people's differing experiences, priorities and concerns.

11.5 Further areas of research

As I've reiterated throughout this thesis, learning is enhanced via collaboration. Rather than relying on the priorities of a single educator or the expertise of an individual person, the kind of literacies exhibited in *Marginally Fannish* and other fan podcasts disrupts rigid hierarchies of knowledge. Here, knowledge becomes more accessible to and inclusive of people and practices situated outside formal academic settings. However, this education doesn't need to be restricted to podcasts or popular media fandom. Such public and collective approaches to knowledge-creation around shared interests can be adapted and applied to a wide range of contexts.

In this project, popular media fandom provided a shared interest that people from diverse backgrounds could gather around to discuss. The shared reference point prompted illuminating conversations about both fictional media as well as the real world. The specific media we talked about wasn't as important as what my co-participants and I did through our interpretations. Consequently, such methods can be applied to other spaces which bring together communities of people who enjoy sharing the things they love. Book or cooking clubs, knitting circles or gaming meet-ups, walking groups or science festivals – the framework can be tailored to suit a variety of interests. Here, people can explore themes which most resonate with them, much like my co-participants who offered their own suggestions (paganism, asexuality or women warriors, for example). Researchers who explore these different contexts may be able to reveal new insights into what kind of learning occurs around shared interests and how the people involved negotiate ideas of knowledge and expertise.

In *Marginally Fannish*, apart from theme suggestions, my co-participants and I exchanged fan/media texts with each other prior to recording episodes. Similarly, rather than one person providing all the resources, groups of people can bring their own interests, experiences, literatures and expertise into a space – allowing them to learn from each other in more dynamic and open-ended ways. Researchers can investigate what kinds of ideas and insights this broader base of knowledge results in and how it differs based on the different contexts and people involved. When it comes to intersectional literacy specifically, this format can also shift to

accommodate relevant social, cultural and geographic categories. Future research can study whether this contributes to new understandings about diverse experiences and how it can illuminate different ways of engaging with the world.

Studying how a collectively curated curriculum-in-process can be adapted to a wide range of contexts was beyond the scope of this project. However, this could have applications in different stages of formal education as well as public, artistic, cultural, community, activist and learning spaces. The medium of the podcast provided a valuable vehicle for our conversations. But we could also have shared our ideas via other modes of expression we were comfortable with – a series of YouTube/TikTok videos, a co-authored zine or comic book, a collaboratively-curated Instagram page or an in-person series of workshops. Knowledge as a collective endeavour rather than one directed by a single person in charge can make learning more democratic and responsive to different needs and mediums – be it in classrooms or community centres, museums or places of worship, local libraries or public art festivals, academic research projects or social justice protests. People’s shared interests and diverse priorities can invite innovative forms of communication, education and politicisation.

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