

Introduction

Confessions of an Aca/Fan

Hello. My name is Henry. I am a fan.

Somewhere in the late 1980s, I got tired of people telling me to get a life. I wrote a book instead. The result was *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992).

This past year, I completed a new book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Intersect* (2006), which is in some loose sense a sequel to *Textual Poachers*.

Poachers described a moment when fans were marginal to the operations of our culture, ridiculed in the media, shrouded with social stigma, pushed underground by legal threats, and often depicted as brainless and inarticulate. Inspired by work in the Birmingham cultural studies tradition, which helped reverse the public scorn directed at youth subcultures, I wanted to construct an alternative image of fan cultures, one that saw media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative. *Poachers* defines fans as “rogue readers.” When I was writing the book, a number of fans were nervous about what would happen if their underground culture was exposed to public scrutiny. They didn’t love the media stereotypes of “Trekkies,” but they weren’t sure they wanted to open the closet doors either.

Convergence Culture describes a moment when fans are central to how culture operates. The concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry. New technologies are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. Powerful institutions and practices (law, religion, education, advertising, and politics, among them) are being redefined by a growing recognition of what is to be gained through fostering—or at least tolerating—participatory cultures. Many had argued that *Textual Poachers* should have been informed by political economy perspectives, often

with the false assumption that if I had done so, I would have seen that fandom was created entirely from the top down by the studio's marketing efforts. *Convergence Culture* is very engaged with media industries, providing a more nuanced picture of how they think about their consumers. The picture that emerges is more complex and contradictory than would have been envisioned by either audience ethnographers or political economists a decade ago. *Convergence Culture* documents the struggle to define the terms of our participation in contemporary popular culture.

This book contains selected essays written primarily in the years between *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture*. These essays formulate and reformulate my understanding of the interplay between the media industries and their consumers; they map my progression from the theories of audience resistance and appropriation that shaped *Poachers* toward new theories of audience participation and collective intelligence that have influenced *Convergence Culture*; they represent different experiments in how I negotiate my multiple identities as fan and scholar; and they represent my efforts to push these ideas into new spaces beyond the university bookstore ghetto. Some of these essays first appeared in other people's anthologies, decontextualized from the larger body of my work. Others appeared in small-circulation publications or were addressed to publics far removed from the academic world. My hope is that people reading this book may see the connections between these various projects.

Participatory culture is anything but fringe or underground today. Fan fiction can be accessed in astonishing quantities and diversities by anyone who knows how to Google. Media producers monitor Web forums such as "Television without Pity," planting trial balloons to test viewer response, measuring reaction to controversial plot twists. Game companies give the public access to their design tools, publicize the best results, and hire the top amateur programmers. The amateur subtitling and circulation of anime arguably helped to open the market for Asian cultural imports. And meetup.com formed as a way for collectors to trade Beanie Babies; its impact was first demonstrated by X-Philes as they lobbied to keep their show on the air; but it became a central resource in the 2004 presidential campaign. News stories appear regularly about media companies suing their consumers, trying to beat them back into submission, and the blogging community continues to challenge the mainstream news media and shake up the political parties.

At the same time, academic research on fan creativity, online communities, and participatory culture has become central to a range of different disciplines. In education, James Paul Gee, David Buckingham, and their students are exploring fan and gaming communities as sites of informal instruction.¹ In legal studies, Rosemary J. Coombe has explored the challenges grassroots expression poses to our traditional understandings of intellectual property law.² Steve Duncombe has written about zines as forms of subcultural expression and grassroots activism.³ Kurt Lancaster has explored the ways people “perform” their relationships to the television show *Babylon 5* through fan costuming or role-playing games.⁴ Robert Kuzinets has pioneered an entire field of marketing research focused on the cultures of committed consumers, whether understood as brand cultures or fan cultures.⁵ Anthropologist Geraldine Bloustein uses amateur video-making to study the ways adolescent girls experiment with their identities in both public and private.⁶ In philosophy, Thomas McLaughlin sees fan communities as among the most active sites of vernacular theory-making.⁷ David A. Brewer and Carolyn Sigler have explored the roots of fan fiction in the responses of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers to works now considered parts of the literary canon.⁸ And the list goes on and on. Fandom has provided a powerful lens for understanding important intellectual questions.

I can take neither the credit nor the blame for this explosion of academic interest in fandom. *Textual Poachers* was itself inspired by the shift in Cultural Studies toward audience ethnography represented by such writers as Ien Ang, Janice Radway, John Tulloch, David Morley, and John Fiske, among so many others.⁹ Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* came out a little over a month before *Poachers*, and Constance Penley was already touring the conference circuit talking about her close encounters with homoerotic “slash” fan fiction.¹⁰ Something was in the air in the early 1990s that would have resulted, one way or another, in the academic “discovery” of fandom. After all, the two have shadowed each other from the start: media scholars have long sought to escape the stigma of fandom, often at the expense of masking or even killing what drew them to their topics in the first place; and fans have often been hypercritical of academics because of their sloppiness with the details that are so central to fan interpretation. These conflicts unfold in the customer reviews on Amazon.com anytime a fan reader responds to an academic account of popular culture. Yet, since

the 1990s it has become increasingly possible for people to merge the roles of fan and academic, to be explicit about the sources of their knowledge and about the passion that drives their research, and to seek collaborations between two groups that both assert some degree of expertise over popular culture.

In those heady early days, we used to call ourselves Aca/Fen, a hybrid identity that straddled two very different ways of relating to media cultures. (“Fen” was widely accepted—among fans—as the plural of “fan.”) Today, the two do not seem very far apart. When I present my work at “Console-ing Passions,” an annual cultural studies conference that has become one of the key centers for feminist work on television and new media, many of the other speakers are open about their fan-nish pleasures. When I speak at “The Witching Hour,” a leading gathering of *Harry Potter* fans, I find myself sharing crumpets with academics from a range of disciplines. And when I read online publications such as *Swoosh* (for *Xena: Warrior Princess* fans), *Slayage* (for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans) or *Joystick 101* (for gamers), academics, media makers, and fans trade insights on a regular basis. In the early days, I remember the anxieties academics felt as fans invaded their discussion lists for media studies. Now, we couldn’t keep fans at bay even if we wanted to, and the fans who have crossed over have proven their value many times over. Indeed, many of them have gone to graduate school and become important cultural critics.

Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers is divided into three parts. “Inside Fandom” includes those essays that deal most directly with the politics and poetics of fan cultural production. When I first began my career, it was taken for granted that audience ethnographers stood outside the communities they researched, neither touching nor being touched by what they saw. The language of audience research drew heavily on the traditions of sociology and sought to efface the experiences and emotions of the researchers themselves. Given this context, my decision to “out” myself as a fan in the introduction to *Textual Poachers* proved controversial. This insider approach to media ethnography was embraced by many as opening up a space for more engaged writing about fan communities, but it was criticized by others for pretending to “have it all” or “going native” or simply “slumming it,” all terms suggesting that, by definition, academics cannot be fans. My writing was informed by new work in anthropology that sought to acknowledge more directly the researcher’s stakes in encounters with other cultures, by work in gender

and sexuality studies that wrote about culture from specific epistemological standpoints, and, more generally, by a shift toward autobiographical perspectives in cultural studies and critical theory. Stylistically, these essays were inspired by the “new journalists,” writers like Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe who used evocative language and provocative techniques to show us what it felt like to be a participant in significant cultural practices or a member of a subcultural community.¹¹

Matt Hills has criticized the first generation of fan researchers, myself included, for pulling back from the affective dimensions of fandom in favor of a focus on the cognitive dimensions of meaning production.¹² Meaning in that sense is divorced from the emotional investments fans make in particular texts or in their own cultural practices. Fans would reject such a clear separation between feelings and thoughts: their favored texts are both tools for thought and spaces for emotional exploration. I see the essays in this section as struggling to find critical language and rhetorical forms that communicate those investments to readers who are not part of the communities being described.

“Going Digital” includes essays about the impact of digital media on our everyday lives. This section trace both my own tentative steps into the digital realm and the process by which fans learned how to use new media resources to increase their visibility and expand their influence over popular culture. The fan culture I described in *Poachers* was pre-digital. Most zines were reproduced by photocopying and distributed through the mail or passed hand to hand at conventions, usually called “cons” by fans. Over the past decade, fandom has both been reshaped by and helped to reshape cyberculture. I wrote one of the first ethnographies of an online fan community, alt.tv.twinpeaks, and as the decade continued, I became very interested in mapping what digital theory could teach us about fandom, as well as what fandom could teach us about the place of digital technologies in our everyday lives. In more recent work, I have examined new sites of audience expression—game modding, blogging, digital filmmaking—that have emerged as everyday people have gotten their hands on the tools of media production and distribution.

“Columbine and Beyond” explores the public policy debates that emerged in the wake of the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, especially those concerning the impact of popular culture on teens and the censorship of computer and video games. These essays illustrate a shift in my focus away from writing intended primarily for circulation within the

scholarly community and more toward journalism addressing a larger public. John Hartley has coined the term “intervention analysis” to refer to a mode of scholarship that seeks to mobilize and amplify the perspectives of media consumers in order to ensure that they get a fair hearing by people in power. Many of these essays reflect an effort to intervene in public policy debates that have a significant impact on the communities I research. The essays here were published in *Harpers*, *Salon*, and *Technology Review* and in a range of publications aimed at teachers. They were intended as resources for parents, youth, and educators. These essays also reflect on my own public activities—testifying before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, defending *Grand Theft Auto 3* on *Donahue*, joining amicus briefs to challenge court decisions, designing educational games, and promoting media literacy education. If the first two parts of the book reflect my efforts to explore and redefine the line separating academics and fans, the third part reflects my efforts to break down the walls that prevent scholars from having a more direct role in shaping and guiding our media environment.

Each essay is prefaced by some personal reflections on how it came to be written. It is hard to imagine providing any kind of intellectual context for these essays that doesn't deal with my personal stakes in the content. What I write about is deeply personal. As you will see, several of these essays were created in collaboration with members of my family, and others reflect upon the role that media plays in the life of our family. A few are written as first-person narratives describing this strange character, “Professor Jenkins,” and his misadventures in public life. Even where these essays are not explicitly personal, they deal with forms of culture that have captured my imagination and sparked my passion. To me the essence of being methodologically self-conscious is to be honest about how you know what you know. And most of what I am writing about here I know from the inside out.