Fans have routinely been depicted according to a familiar catalogue of stereotypes. Conan O’Brien’s Triumph the Insult Comic Dog taunts costumed Star Wars fans camping out waiting for the premiere of the latest installment of the series. Buffy the Vampire Slayer spent the sixth season of the show being harassed by a trio of nerdy fannish villains who are easily manipulated by the threat of damage to a vintage (Star Wars) action figure. The Simpsons features the obsessively fannish Comic Book Guy, who in one episode is known as “The Collector,” a masked villain who kidnaps Lucy Lawless, television’s Xena: Warrior Princess. In light of these recent representations of fans, the by now infamous 1986 Saturday Night Live sketch in which William Shatner tells his adoring audience of convention goers to “Get a life!” would seem to be a reasonably credible reflection of the commonly held stereotypes of the media fan. Jon Lovitz in pointed rubber Vulcan ears, Dana Carvey in an “I Grok Spock” t-shirt, and Kevin Nealon quizzing fellow fans on Star Trek trivia bear a certain resemblance to the much more recent fannish villains of Buffy, itself a show known for its devoted fan following.

Media fandom is certainly nothing new, though its specific manifestations may have changed with time. Nor is academic interest in the various activities that constitute media fandom a new development. It’s by now not unusual for fans to assume (or perhaps fear) that their various activities and productions may be used as fodder for academic inquiry by scholars and students in such fields as media studies, cultural studies, gender studies or sociology. Despite this increased attention to the study of fandom and fan cultures within academic circles (including a number of works which directly challenge the veracity of these stereotypes), as well as greater general awareness of and participation in fandom and the increased public accessibility of discussions of fandom and of fan-produced materials via the Internet, the negative stereotypes remain remarkably entrenched. Fans of television, that perennial “bad object” and scapegoat for society’s ills, often find ourselves confronted with mild puzzlement or outright condescension when admitting to our passionate emotional and intellectual investment in the shows themselves as well as in the communities that spring up around them.
Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Tony Kushner, best known for *Angels in America*, has claimed that in today’s culture it is easier to “come out” as a gay man than as a socialist. This is not to deny that we live in a culture that remains profoundly homophobic, but rather to highlight the degree to which socialism has been marginalized and pathologized within contemporary American society. According to Kushner, much of the horror at the revelation of his commitment to socialism stems from the potential inherent in socialism to upset traditional, familiar, naturalized relationships of production and consumption. The other driving force behind this stigmatization comes from the historical baggage that has become attached to the idea of socialism through years of misrepresentation, consistent pathologization, conflation with communism (that absolute Other to the American self), and an often deliberate ignorance of socialism itself.

Though the stakes are arguably somewhat different, it may well be that the same can be said for “coming out” as a media fan: it is easier to “come out” as a homosexual in contemporary American culture than as a fan of popular culture. Fans are not necessarily socialists, nor are they necessarily gay (or straight). However, the stigmatization of media fans has roots similar to those of the socialists Kushner discusses. The weight of stereotype and misrepresentation, as well as conflation with other forms of obsessive behavior work to support the marginalization of fans. As Joli Jenson has argued, this construction of the fan as Other is essential for the maintenance of an “us” that can be by contrast rational, stable—legitimate. Matt Hills takes this idea a step further, arguing that academic inquiry into fandom (often undertaken by self-identified scholar-fans) utilizes this same mechanism of constructing fans as Others in order to maintain a sense of legitimacy for their interpretations of fandom over the interpretations of fans themselves (the fan-scholars).

Furthermore, the disruptive potential of active fandom tends to generate a measure of horror among those interested in maintaining the status quo with regard to the relations of production and consumption within the media arena. Much of the academic attention on fandom has focused on the area of fanfiction, specifically on slash fiction. Early studies of fan cultures, such as those of Camille Bacon-Smith, Henry Jenkins, and Constance Penley, which introduced the world of fandom to academia, tended to focus on the psychological or sociological roots of the phenomena of slash and other forms of active fan participation. What they do not question is the potential that such active fandom has to alter the very nature of production and consumption. Claiming ownership of characters from favorite shows, indeed claiming the right to play freely with them, to place them in a variety of situations (including erotic ones), and to recreate them through a variety of means, both narrative and artistic, turns consumers into producers. The text in play is no longer limited to that which is generated by the creators of the official program,
Fans at a convention examine the wide variety of merchandise available for purchase.

but extends to the secondary artifacts generated by the fans themselves (secondary, that is, in order of creation, not necessarily in importance or influence). Thus the very existence of this type of fan activity possesses radical potential that threatens to dethrone the institutionalized authors and owners of texts in favor of a more truly democratic and interactive field of cultural production. The early studies of fandom mentioned above, while they are unquestionably important contributions to the field, also suffer from being written before the emergence of the Internet drastically and permanently altered the face of fandom. More than anything the Internet, and the proliferation of blog and Live Journal culture gives shape to this radical potential.

Thus the accusation that fans need to “Get a life!” is one that comes from a place that is more complex and conflicted than simple derision. As Matt Hills points out, some scholars have even begun to argue that fandom itself has been normalized within culture. Indeed, many of the negative representations of fans mentioned above are endearing, demonstrating both a love for (or even envy of) the fan as well as a desire to maintain a distance from him. Yet we should be careful to avoid both overestimating the degree to which active fandom has become mainstream and over-romanticizing the radical potential contained in fandom. As Anik LaChev notes in her essay contained in this issue, fan fiction is not necessarily politically progressive, but has just as much potential to be conservative and reactionary. Therefore it is possible for fan productions to support the status quo in content; it is also possible for fandom as a whole to be coopted back into the very system that it threatens.

A second thing the above comparison makes clear is the commonality of the rhetoric of “coming out,” in fan cultures, with its obvious parallel with sexual identity. Fans often refer to the process of revealing their participation in media fandom as coming out, which, like the revelation of queer identity, is not a single act, but something that must be reiterated multiple times as the contexts shift. To claim the label of fan remains on some level to claim an identity in a marginal space, outside of the mainstream, to admit to participating in behaviors that are outside of the culturally sanctioned norm. It is not only a statement that indicates one’s interests, but, like so many other categories, one that helps to define one’s identity. Yet unlike other markers of identity, such as gender or race, one’s fannish interests (like one’s sexuality) are not readily visible, but must be self-proclaimed. This correspondence between queerness and fandom, which Brigid Kelly discusses in her contribution to this issue, is perhaps one factor that explains the emphasis on slash in academic analyses.

However, regardless of the emphasis on investigations of how identity influences or is influenced by participation in various fan activities, many areas and avenues of inquiry remain unexamined. Among these are analyses
of fandom that examine the issues of race and nationality. Henry Jenkins uses the above-mentioned SNL sketch to point out a number of commonly held stereotypes about fans (e.g. that fans are socially awkward, sexually and emotionally immature males, and mindless consumers who fail to distinguish fantasy from reality). One aspect that he does not mention is that the fans depicted in the segment are noticeably Caucasian. Surveys continue to show that active fans (those who write fiction, produce fan art, and participate in discussion board communities) tend overwhelmingly to be white and female. However, for all the attention to gender, little investigation has been done of the racial dimension of this.

The intention of this issue is to look into these gaps, as well as the areas where fandom intersects with other areas of study, to move beyond simple pointing out of the existence of a phenomenon toward looking into what it does, what work it performs culturally. It is with these various theoretical gaps and overlaps in mind that each of the contributors approaches the general topic of television fan cultures. The decision to limit the area of inquiry in this volume to television fan cultures is, in many ways, a practical one rather than a decision based on any pressing ideological distinction between television fandom and other areas of media fandom (films, books, anime, manga, etc., all of which are important components of media fandom in its broadest sense). Television, however, remains an easily accessible and widely varied source of inspiration for fan communities.

Looking at the interaction between fandom and genre, Louisa Ellen Stein’s essay analyzes Smallville and The O.C., two teen shows that are generically quite different. Stein introduces the notion of transgenericism to discuss how some television shows blend generic traits in such a way that the specific synthesis of the various generic elements impacts the meaning of the show itself. This in turn shapes the range of interpretations open to fans of the show. Thus, she argues, the queer content that circulates around the two shows, can and does function quite differently, both metaphorically and thematically in the different contexts.

Also addressing issues related to genre, Hollis Griffin challenges two common assumptions about slash fiction: that it is a practice limited to heterosexual women, and that it is restricted to science fiction and fantasy programming. The majority of analyses do identify heterosexual women as the primary authors of slash. Donald Symons even denies that slash could appeal to gay (or straight) men despite its depiction of explicit sexual relations between men due to fundamental differences between male and female psychology. Drawing specific examples from soap opera slash written by gay men Griffin demonstrates the falseness of this claim, exploring the appeal of both the soap characters and settings, as well as the narrative structure of the genre itself. Though admittedly a minority in the slash writing arena, gay men do constitute a distinct and vibrant presence within that arena.

Matt Hills turns toward questions of hegemony and hegemony theory’s relevance in fan studies, investigating the impact of negative stereotypes about fans as well as the increasingly common notion that television and media fandom has become a central component of social interaction, particularly for young people. Hills traces these two conflicting sets of drives through a series of interviews with a young woman who explicitly attempts to separate herself from fannish behavior and interests. This investigation of the functioning of hegemony with regard to self-identification and affiliations signals the continued importance of hegemony theories to the study of fan cultures.

Looking at Buffy the Vampire Slayer fandom, Dawn Heinecken reveals the social commentary evident in the subgenre of Buffy/Spike sadomasochistic narratives. While on the surface, she contends, these works may appear to uncritically embrace standard gender roles, when examined more closely they contain articulate critiques of these roles, particularly of the care-taking duties traditionally assigned to women. In addition, these sexually violent narratives work to criticize social constraints on female sexuality, and to encourage a more positive view of the female body in culture.

Brigid Cherry uses a case study of Stargate SG-1 fans to investigate specific ways in which the Internet’s promise as a globally unifying resource
for fans is often thwarted by the persistence of national broadcast and satellite systems which results in differing access to source materials (i.e. the canon texts), and how these differences impact fan participation. Anik LaChev also highlights the role played by cultural positioning in fandom, pointing out that the fan communities and their focal points vary from culture to culture. Her discussion also reveals how despite international participation in Internet fan communities, the academic study of fandom is often inhibited by the geographical and national nature of academic publishing.

TelevisionWithoutPity’s discussion boards on Smallville provide Brigid Kelly with a focus for her discussion of the metaphoric aspects of “hot gay sex” in the show’s slash community. Kelly argues that the Smallville text itself establishes a particular affinity between queer subjectivity and that of the fan. Further, it is both the characters (Clark and Lex) and the fans themselves that are affected by the transformative nature of fandom.

A well-known fan writer as well as an academic, Anik LaChev points to a number of significant concerns for the field of fan studies. In arguing for greater attention to fan fiction as a genre from the field of Literature Studies, LaChev delineates a number of ways in which fan fiction (both the product and its process of production) differs from traditional print fiction, as well as ways in which the two are similar. In addition to addressing the various emergent narrative forms within fan fiction, she uses her own experience studying fan writing within the German University system to discuss the impact of cultural and personal positioning on the content of the resulting work. This issue closes with Mary Jeanne Wilson’s insightful review of Matt Hills’ important 2002 book Fan Cultures. Hills’ book is both a review and analysis of previous works in fan studies as well as a much needed general theory of fan cultures, and thus provides a fitting conclusion as well as jumping off point for further study.

There is truly no such thing as Fan Culture, but rather a loosely connected group of things that might be called fan cultures. While much of the focus in fan studies, indeed many of the contributions to this issue, has been on fan fiction, there is a multitude of other ways in which fans can live out their fandom. Many fans never write fiction, many never attend conventions, choosing instead to produce fan art (using a variety of media, both digital and otherwise), fan videos (often in such forms as re-editing of the text or more technical exercises in effects production), to pursue costume making, doll modification or collecting, to participate in discussions, either on boards or in person, or simply to watch a show avidly. Fandom is not a unified thing. It is often irreverent and playful, and there are often squabbles among various groups dedicated to one fandom or pairing within a fandom. It is not utopian or entirely democratic. Indeed the phenomenon of “Big Name Fans” demonstrates a kind of hierarchy within fandom itself. Fandom is eclectic, dynamic, and unquantifiable. It is neither static nor singular. As such it cannot be exhausted by a single analysis or a single collection. “Coming out” as a television fan may be a difficult and unpopular move. And academic studies may
never be able to fully erase the stigma attached to media fandom, anchored as it is to the concept of the rational self for which the obsessive, frivolous fan is an Other. However, the sheer volume of fan-created material and the enormous momentum that fan cultures have acquired, as well as their potential to force us to rethink the relationships between viewers and the shows they embrace makes further attempts to understand the cultural function of fandom imperative.

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Notes