

**The Future that Never Was: Reactionary Fan Controversies and Affective Attachments to  
Speculative Fiction**

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# **The Future that Never Was: Reactionary Fan Controversies and Affective Attachments to Speculative Fiction**

Max Dosser, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2024

In the past decade, speculative fiction media that feature diverse characters or storylines have been increasingly met with reactionary fan backlash in the form of review bombing, boycotts, doxxing, and death threats. This dissertation analyzes the communication of reactionary fans during controversies surrounding popular speculative fiction media to explore the motivating affective economies of contemporary reactionary social movements. Considering the connection between speculative fiction fans and reactionary groups, this dissertation poses the question: What is the relationship between the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion? While speculative fiction has been dismissed as escapist and nonpolitical, many of its authors, editors, and fans have long used the genre to advocate for their visions for the future. Through examining representative archival fanzines and professional speculative fiction magazines as well as reactionary fan discourse circulated via social media, this dissertation further theorizes revanchist nostalgia. Revanchist nostalgia not only aims to restore an imagined past but also to punish the ones who made that reclamation necessary. While different in scale and consequence, the affective economy of revanchist nostalgia is key to both fan controversies and broader reactionary incidents such as the 2017 Unite the Right rally and the 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. Research on social movements often considers how affect is mobilized in support of progressive causes, but with this dissertation, I argue that both speculative

fiction and affect are politically ambivalent and capable of being utilized to motivate reactionary and progressive causes. In considering reactionary fandoms in tandem with white supremacists, men's rights activists, and other more explicitly political groups driven by revanchist nostalgia, this dissertation reads fandom as political and the political as fandom to demonstrate how reactionaries function as anti-fandoms that are motivated by hatred, disgust, and sadism toward others. Through considering extremist groups as (anti-)fandoms, this dissertation exposes the affective networks that bond reactionaries together, empower them to propagate their hateful rhetoric, and mobilize them against the increasing diversification in fan communities and beyond.

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## Preface

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## 1.0 Introduction: Let's Start with the End, Why Don't We?

*"Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters."*<sup>1</sup> – Svetlana Boym

### 1.1 As The Clocks Strike Thirteen

In July 2020, I posted a review of the conclusion to Michael J. Sullivan's epic fantasy sextet, *The Age of Empyre* (2020), to the website Goodreads. Goodreads is a social cataloging website where users can log what they are currently reading and what they want to read, set reading goals for the year, as well as interact with other users through liking and commenting on their updates, reviews, and posted quotations. Upon finishing a book, a user can rate it one-to-five stars—with one being the lowest and five being the highest—and, if desired, post a written review. While I had rated many of Sullivan's previous books highly, I had many issues with the second half of his *The Legends of the First Empire* sextet and gave *The Age of Empyre* two stars—the lowest rating I will give on the site. My central critiques were that the overuse of prophetic characters removed the protagonists' agency; that Sullivan elevated a flat character to a central role and *told* the audience her many virtues without *showing* them; that the emotional impact was dampened due to poor pacing; and that the conclusion, despite coming at the end of a series stretching nearly a million words in length, felt rushed and unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> To read my full review as well as the comments, see Max Dossier, "Agency? You'll Find None Here," Goodreads, July 26, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1915443324>.

Almost a year after I posted the review, on May 28, 2021, a user I did not know liked my review and commented on it. As I always experience a rush of glee when one of my reviews is liked, I checked the comment. In it, the user (Steven) appeared to have written his own review, where he laid out many complaints. Some of his early critiques mirrored my own, such as the series losing steam in the second half and the lack of satisfactory conclusions for characters. Following a line break, however, Steven wrote, “Then there’s the SJW propaganda.” Steven proceeded to write that, in the novel, “All the men are either idiots, terrible fathers or evil. Or dead. All the women are hero’s *[sic]*, strong and brave.” He ended his comment by saying, “The first Riyria stories are good. But this book is like the Last Jedi, totally kills a story in the worst way possible and gives no good conclusion.”<sup>3</sup>

While there is a lot to unpack in Steven’s comments, three things stick out to me. The first is the “SJW propaganda” line. SJW is a pejorative term meaning “social justice warrior.” Those on the far-right generally apply it to people who promote socially progressive views. From this invocation alone (along with his next complaint that the female characters are strong and brave heroes, implying he would like to see fewer female characters with that characterization), Steven’s ideology comes into focus. The second is how he compares *Age of Empyre* to the film *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017). Even before the premiere of *The Last Jedi*, there was a backlash driven by racism and sexism focused on the characters of Rose Tico (a character played by Asian American actress Kelly Marie-Tran), Finn (a Black stormtrooper), and Rey (a female character many describe as a “Mary Sue,” which means a younger woman who unrealistically excels at everything). What makes Steven’s comment stand out is not the fact that he invoked *The*

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<sup>3</sup> *Riyria Revelations* is the collective title of Sullivan’s original series, to which the *Legends of the First Empire* sextet acts as a prequel, set 3000 years in the past. It is unclear if Steven is referring to the original *Riyria Revelations* series or the first half of the *Legends of the First Empire* series in his comment, as some fans refer to all novels set in this fictional universe as “Riyria.”

*Last Jedi*, as *The Last Jedi* has become a popular talking point among many reactionary fans, but that he compared the two media texts at all. *The Last Jedi* is the middle film in a trilogy, one that specifically does not tie up storylines or offer conclusions; while *Age of Empyre* is the finale of a series, one in which most of the characters will never be seen again. This brings me to the third point and something I have often asked myself since this comment was posted: Did Steven think he was posting his own individual review or, in offering my critiques, did I somehow open a space for people with Steven’s ideology to believe they had found a like-minded reader? The question connects to *The Last Jedi*, as I have found—through discussion with colleagues and popular reviews of the film—that when reactionary fans latch onto valid criticisms aimed at a piece of media, there is a tendency of those offering the valid criticism to pull back and instead praise the text so as not to be associated with a far-right ideology. The dialogue becomes more of a binary—good or bad, progressive or reactionary.

The example of Steven’s comment is only one of a great number that illustrate the reactionary tendencies of a section of speculative fiction fans. When nonbinary performer Mason Alexander Park was cast as the character Desire in Netflix’s adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* (2022-present), many fans complained about “the Left” and “SJWs” ruining the series.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Desire was written as a nonbinary character in the original comic book series, so their complaints about harming the integrity of the series only thinly veiled their actual contempt for nonbinary gender identities. Additionally, while the release of Kevin Smith’s animated series *Masters of the Universe: Revelation* (2021) was met with praise from critics, many fans were outraged. They claimed that the series was marketed as a He-Man series but, instead, centrally

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Sneider, “‘The Sandman’: Neil Gaiman Chides ‘Fans’ Criticizing Casting of Nonbinary and Black Actors,” Collider, June 2, 2021, <https://collider.com/the-sandman-netflix-cast-nonbinary-neil-gaiman-comments/>.

focused on the female character Teela in an attempt to be “woke.”<sup>5</sup> To express their displeasure, fans “review bombed” the series on review-aggregation websites like Rotten Tomatoes. Review bombing is an increasingly common tactic among “toxic” and “reactionary” fans—the distinctions and overlaps between these are more fully discussed in a later section—to express their displeasure with a media text, especially when the text “promote[s] diverse representation, in front of and behind the camera, or fail[s] to align with specific, traditional views of a franchise’s canon.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond these examples, there is the coordinated effort to make Paul Feig’s female-led *Ghostbusters* (2016) reboot the most “disliked” film trailer in YouTube history, far-right activist Jack Posobiec’s filing of a civil rights complaint over a women-only screening of *Wonder Woman* (2017) to steal press attention from the film advertised to be about female empowerment, the outpouring of racism in various online spaces after the *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-2024) trailer revealed the central character of the series was played by a Black woman and the captain was an Asian woman, and, unfortunately, many, many more.<sup>7</sup>

These examples complicate the understandings of fan activity written about in fan studies literature. Early fan studies scholarship demonstrated that fans were not passive, uncritical consumers but rather active participants, and these scholars often lauded fandoms as feminist and transgressive for producing fan fiction that placed women in lead roles, queered main characters, and integrated disability into series that avoided it.<sup>8</sup> According to Mel Stanfill, however, the view

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Welk, “Why is Kevin Smith’s ‘Masters of the Universe’ Series Being ‘Review Bombed’ by Fans?”, *The Wrap*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.thewrap.com/kevin-smith-masters-of-the-universe-review-bombed-by-fans/>.

<sup>6</sup> Caron Wildy, “Rukmini Pande, Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 35 (2019).

<sup>7</sup> Mike Sampson, “Why the ‘Ghostbusters’ Trailer is the Most ‘Disliked’ Movie Trailer in YouTube History,” *Screen Crush*, April 29, 2016, <https://screencrush.com/ghostbusters-trailer-most-disliked-movie-trailer-in-history/>; Jordan Zakarin, “How the Alt-Right and Nostalgic Trolls Hijacked Geek Pop Culture,” *Syfy Wire*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/how-the-alt-right-and-nostalgic-trolls-hijacked-geek-pop-culture>.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 85-107; Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*, (New York: Verso, 1997).



of fandoms as transgressive and progressive overlooks a great deal of fan activity that is anything but.<sup>9</sup> The above examples also reveal the influence of affect. Even within Steven's post, there is clearly anger and resentment over what he labels SJW propaganda. Through the descriptions of reactionary fan activity, the attachments to both speculative media texts and a past that was largely white and male are evident.

Scholars have increasingly acknowledged popular culture like speculative fiction as a "source of knowledge" and a "motivating force" for not only for scholarly work but also social action.<sup>10</sup> Laura Podalsky proposes that affect—a key aspect of social movements—can be "put into circulation through great art," including films and other media texts.<sup>11</sup> As popular culture "refers to those systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about," these can include a wide array of literature, film, television, podcasts, and video games.<sup>12</sup> While speculative fiction is often seen as a marginal genre with a small but dedicated fan base, Sherryl Vint has illustrated that speculative fiction, while once seen as a part of "subculture," has risen to be integral in "mass culture."<sup>13</sup> Claire Sisco King argues that speculative fiction films such as *The Omega Man* (1971), *Armageddon* (1998), and *I Am Legend* (2007), while typically dismissed by reviewers and critics as silly and insignificant, actually "make arguments about cultural memory, the national masculine, and civic duty."<sup>14</sup> In fact, speculative fiction metaphors and models have

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<sup>9</sup> Mel Stanfill, "Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 123.

<sup>10</sup> Ria Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 25. See also, Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, "The Culture That Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies" in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, eds. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3-26.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Sherryl Vint, *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 163.

<sup>14</sup> Claire Sisco King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 164.

evolved from being allusions to specific media texts to a “part of popular consciousness, a way of seeing the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Speculative fiction author Fredrik Pohl argues that speculative fiction is “the very literature of change.”<sup>16</sup> It has the potential to provide visions of the past, present, and future that challenge our cultural norms and allows audiences to engage with topics that often border on the taboo.<sup>17</sup> Speculative fiction can interrogate our conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, power, capitalism, warfare, and language, and consuming speculative fiction media can alter the affective responses audiences may have to various cultural identities.<sup>18</sup> As a cultural technology, speculative fiction has near limitless potential to imagine potential futures.

While the potential of speculative fiction is clear, there is a vocal contingent of speculative fiction fans and creators who reject media texts that imagine worlds that embrace diversity. When the media to which they are attached veers toward more socially progressive and diverse ideas, reactionary fans tend to, well, react. These fans seem to long for a return to a past where the majority of speculative fiction writers were white men, when speculative fiction was “fun” and not “message fiction,” and when white male characters were heroes and/or saviors—a past that never truly existed. As Elizabeth Sandifer argues, the idea that speculative fiction is “an apolitical genre of thrilling adventure fiction is simply not supported by any sort of historical reality.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, many of these speculative fiction fans want a return to a past where white men reigned supreme in their

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<sup>15</sup> Jesse S. Cohn, “The Fantastic From Counterpublic to Public Imaginary: The Darkest Timeline?” *Science Fiction Studies* 47, no. 3 (November 2020): 448.

<sup>16</sup> Frederik Pohl, “Pohlemic: Cyril Redivivious,” *Science Fiction Chronicle* 17 (1996), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning From Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 260.

<sup>18</sup> Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Scotts Valley, CA: Eruditorum Press, 2017), 356.

fiction—just as many reactionary groups want a return to a past before the Civil Rights Movement, before feminism, and before the age of “political correctness.”<sup>20</sup>

In this dissertation, I explore the connections between fan-driven controversies centered on speculative fiction media and reactionary groups at large through examining the tension between the liberatory potential of speculative fiction and the nostalgic desire of reactionary fans. Specifically, I probe how the nostalgic longings of speculative fiction fans relates to the revanchist nostalgia so many reactionary groups share. How does affect organize these reactionary communities? Why does nostalgia function in this way for reactionary groups in particular? What can fan controversies in the seemingly “marginal speculative fiction community tell us about the larger affective economies of reactionary groups? These questions inform this dissertation’s overarching research question: “What is the relationship between the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion?” While, as Calum Matheson writes, “It is perhaps too messianic a role for communication scholars to predict and prevent acts of violence,” understanding the relationship between nostalgic attachments and reactionary groups will enable scholars as well as the public to better understand these reactionary groups’ formation, communication, and continuation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 31-69; Eefje Steenvoorden and Eelco Harteveld, “The Appeal of Nostalgia: The Influence of Societal Pessimism on Support for Populist Radical Right Parties,” *West European Politics* 41, no. 1 (2018): 28-52.

<sup>21</sup> Calum Matheson, “‘What Does Obama Want of Me?’ Anxiety and Jade Helm 15,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 145.

## 1.2 Speculative Fiction: What's in a Genre?

While I primarily use the term speculative fiction in my work, “SF” evokes science fiction in particular for many people. Science fiction has been given a multiplicity of definitions by different scholars. Adam Roberts notes how the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* quotes sixteen separate definitions, and Tom Shippey’s collection on reading science fiction opens with a list of definitions, including Kingsley Amis’s “Science Fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesised on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology”; Theodore Sturgeon’s “A science fiction story is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content”; and Brian Aldiss’s “Science fiction is the search for a definition of [humanity] and [its] status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Roberts and Shippey each offer a compromise: Roberts writing that science fiction “involves a worldview differentiated in one way or another from the actual world in which its readers live,” and Shippey with, “Science fiction contains, must contain, some element known not to be true to the-world-as-it-is.”<sup>23</sup>

The “element known not to be true” that Shippey describes is present in many conceptions of science fiction, and it likely comes from Suvin Darko’s seminal definition of science fiction as “the *literature of cognitive estrangement*.”<sup>24</sup> For Darko, this strange newness is called a “novum”

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<sup>22</sup> Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell* (London: Four Square Books, 1965), 14; Quoted in James Blish, *The Issue at Hand* (Chicago: Advent, 1964), 14; Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 25

<sup>23</sup> Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2; Shippey, *Hard Reading*, 209.

<sup>24</sup> Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4.

or “a discrete piece of information recognizable as not-true but also as not-unlike-true, not-flatly- (and in the current state of knowledge)-impossible.”<sup>25</sup> A novum could be as simple as a sink being able to switch between dispensing salinated and non-salinated water or as complex as a spacecraft that is able to accomplish faster-than-light travel due to a material that, when subjected to an electric current, can manipulate the mass of an object within a certain field. In both cases (for the former, at least as was the case in 1953 when *The Space Merchants* was published), there is an element that is not present in our world but one that we understand to be potentially possible. When we move from the not-quite-impossible to the flatly impossible, many contend we move from the realm of science fiction to fantasy, as Gary K. Wolfe argues that “the criterion of the impossible” is the first principle of fantasy.<sup>26</sup>

The move from one genre to another is important for many scholars, though it is not as present in Darko’s theory. This absence is largely because Suvin excludes fantasy and space opera from his definitions of science fiction as he believes they are “science fiction committing creative suicide.”<sup>27</sup> Isiah Lavender III, however, argues that in Darko’s attempt to garner high regard for science fiction, he sets up a binary between everyday forms of fiction and science fiction that could be complicated.<sup>28</sup> To better parse the definition, Lavender turns to Samuel R. Delany’s definition, which, rather than focusing on the *estrangement* of science fiction, proposes the main difference comes from “subjunctivity,” a concept that focuses more on the writing and language of the genre. Within Delany’s framework, the naturalistic fiction kind of subjunctivity depicts events that “*could have happened*,” fantasy is linked with events that “*could not have happened*,” and the science

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<sup>25</sup> Shippey, *Hard Reading*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Gary K. Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 68.

<sup>27</sup> Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 27-28.

fiction kind of subjunctivity portrays “*events that have not happened.*”<sup>29</sup> The difference here stems from fantasy being an imagined past—events that *could not* have happened—while science fiction are events that *have not* happened, with an implied *yet*.

In terms of this dissertation, the distinction between fantasy and science fiction is not overly significant. While Carl Freedman calls J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (complete with orcs and elves) fantasy and C.S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet* trilogy (featuring angels and the wizard Merlin) science fiction, how I use genre is more slippery.<sup>30</sup> My aim for this research is not lay out a classificatory system for what makes science fiction and what makes fantasy then apply it to texts, as this inevitably leads to contradictions and exceptions. Rather, I discuss hypothetical genre characterizations and ask what it means to read “a particular work in terms of that characterization,” which will allow me to make “claims about what that work ‘is like’ when it is read in terms of the hypothesized genre.”<sup>31</sup> So while I generally agree with Delany’s subjunctivity and I follow Lavender in acknowledging that the label science fiction “must necessarily be permeable because it may overlap with other genres such as fantasy, magical realism, westerns, and in some cases fictional autobiography,”<sup>32</sup> I believe more can be gained from asking what it means to read a text as a genre than from assigning texts to genres based on particular traits.

In reading these works as genres, however, I do need to address genre characterizations, especially how fans have conceived of these genres. Neil Gaiman notes that the many editors and writers in the 1960s attempted to rebrand “SF” as “speculative fiction” rather than “science

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<sup>29</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction (Revised Edition)* (New York: Berkley Windover, 1977), 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Carole Blair and Davis W. Houck, “Richard Nixon and the Personalization of Crisis,” in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric*, ed. Amos Kiewe (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 98. For more on this approach, see Adrena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Kevin Alexander Pabst, “Genre in Crisis, Crisis as Genre: Contemporary Disruptions and Constructions in Bodies of Popular Music” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 58.

fiction,” but that it never quite caught on.<sup>33</sup> I, however, argue that through utilizing *speculative fiction*, I avoid much of the scholarly debate on what fits into one genre or the other. Is *Star Wars* a fantasy set in space (à la *Alien* [1979] being a horror film set in a science fiction milieu) or is it a soft science fiction series? Is Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) fantastical historical fiction as she claimed or is it a science fiction novel as many academics argue? Using “speculative fiction” as the broader genre with which I read these texts enables me to engage with media that may not fit one or the other slot perfectly—media that, regardless of precise genre, produces reactions in fans based on the imagined pasts, presents, and futures they depict. *The genre of speculative fiction allows the audience to ask, “What if my world were like that?”*

The “What if” question, however, can be applied to many texts, not just speculative fiction ones. One may ask that about *Blood Meridian* (1985), *Moby-Dick* (1851), or even historical accounts of ancient wars. This is evident in how speculative fiction alternative histories such as *Man in the High Castle* (1962) have similarities with counterfactuals, a sub-genre of historical nonfiction writing.<sup>34</sup> If romantic comedies ask what if two people met, had a series of mishaps, and ultimately fell in love; historical fiction asks what if there had been other people and other events we never knew occurred; and counterfactuals asks what if history had happened differently, what makes speculative fiction different? Perhaps since all fiction imagines something as “otherwise,” what speculative fiction does is imagine what it would be like if *the rules governing the world were otherwise*, while genres such as romance, drama, thrillers, etc. ask what would happen *given the rules of our world* if X. This conception enables speculative fiction not only to

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<sup>33</sup> Neil Gaiman, foreword to *The Einstein Intersection*, by Samuel R. Delany (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), vii.

<sup>34</sup> Gary K. Wolfe illustrates how the genres of historical fiction and science fiction overlap greatly—particularly counterfactuals and alternate histories—and argues that authors of these types of stories have the tendency to write in both genres during their careers. *How Great Science Fiction Works* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2016), 19-26. For more on the connection between science fiction and historical novels, see Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 44-61.

imagine what may happen, but it can imagine fundamentally different worlds. Even this distinction, however, could be potentially argued to apply to multiple genres. While it may be easy to agree with Jacques Derrida that “every text participates in one or several genres,” and even as I am fairly agnostic in what constitutes speculative fiction, in order to read certain texts or publics as particular genres, it is important to ask: what makes a genre?<sup>35</sup>

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue that “a genre does not merely consist of a series of acts in which certain rhetorical forms recur. ... Instead, a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic.”<sup>36</sup> This means that rather than genre being a label for a text, it is “a description of recognizable forms that recur in the public imaginary.”<sup>37</sup> Rick Altman has suggested that genres come from the audiences who harbor expectations about them, and Carolyn R. Miller, in her taxonomy of genre relationships, pays particular attention to the audience-producer relationship in genre formation.<sup>38</sup> This audience can be understood as *fans*, and the ways that they can exert their expectations, desires, and demands on the speculative fiction genre is vital for considering how affects and a nostalgia for an imagined past bind these reactionary fans together as they act to impede social progress.

While a connection between speculative fiction fans and “real world” social progress may seem a stretch to some, speculative fiction is an expression of culture that engages and critiques “the gendered, racialized and ableist systems of power in which we live.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, Jutta Weldes

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 230.

<sup>36</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action* (Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association, 1978), 17.

<sup>37</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 22.

<sup>38</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1996); Carolyn R. Miller, “Where Do Genres Come From?”, in *Emerging Genres in New Media Environments*, eds. Carolyn R. Miller and Ashley R. Kelly (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Chaya Porter, “‘Engaging’ in Gender, Race, Sexuality and (Dis)Ability in Science Fiction Television through *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*” (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2013), x.



notes that the relationships between speculative fiction and world politics “are more numerous and more complex than is generally assumed,” and that scholars should stop assuming popular culture like speculative fiction is shallow and frivolous.<sup>40</sup> It is important to note that while speculative fiction has transformative potential, it is also a reflection of culture and therefore does not wholly depart from reactionary ideologies. For example, the speculative fiction genre gave a literary home to the eugenicist elements of H.P. Lovecraft, the thinly veiled racism and misogyny of Robert A. Heinlein, and the homophobia of Orson Scott Card. This, however, does not lessen the potential of speculative fiction as an object of study and transformation. The alternative worlds of speculative fiction—be they imagined pasts, presents, or futures—provide storyworlds for audiences across the political spectrum to achieve “profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life.”<sup>41</sup>

Speculative fiction—science fiction in particular—is often associated with the future and there is an assumption that, due to this, speculative fiction is predictive. While this can happen, such as much of our social lives being tied up in cell phones and computers as seen in early cyberpunk novels, this is not the goal of speculative fiction. Kim Stanley Robinson was not trying to predict that we would have a habitat on Mars by 2026 when he made that the setting of his 1992 novel *Red Mars*. Rather, Robinson was speaking to the audience in 1992 about ecological and social issues that mattered to them *then*. As Annette Kuhn illustrates, speculative fiction mirrors “attitudes, trends, and changes in society” and expresses “the collective psyche of an era.”<sup>42</sup> This can particularly be seen in how fans and others use speculative fiction. Jesse S. Cohn notes how

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<sup>40</sup> Jutta Weldes, “Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations,” in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Explore Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, ed. Jutta Weldes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 1

<sup>42</sup> Annette Kuhn, “Part I: Reflections – Introduction,” in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), 16.

Donald Trump's "alt-right fandom" depicted him as "God-Emperor Trump" during his presidential campaigns, borrowing from Frank Herbert's *Dune* novel series (1965-1985) and the table-top game *Warhammer 40,000*.<sup>43</sup>

Cohn referring to Trump's supporters as a fandom is important to consider for this dissertation, as while I deal with more traditional media fandoms, I also ask what it means to read a public *as fans*. Mel Stanfill asks, "Is white supremacy a fandom?" and I propose to use this dissertation to read these reactionary groups as just that.<sup>44</sup> Beyond Trump being crowned "God-Emperor Trump" by his fans, additional examples of reactionaries interacting with speculative fiction include how the "alt-knights" (a paramilitary group founded by white nationalist Kyle Chapman) edited themselves into still images from *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and Zack Snyder's *300* (2006) as well as how men's rights activists' have adopted the terminology of "the red pill" from the film *The Matrix* (1999) to represent their realization that "feminism is toxic, rape and sexual discrimination are myths, and men's victimization is to women's advantage."<sup>45</sup> *The Matrix* invocation is notable as the red pill was originally intended as an allegory for transgender transitions, yet the idea has been coopted by groups who harbor anti-trans sentiments. Speculative fiction is "a mode of cultural expression,"<sup>46</sup> and these examples make it clear that scholars cannot look to specific political meanings *within* speculative fiction media texts. Rather, scholars must look to how fans utilize and circulate these texts, often in ways that conflict with their intended meanings.

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<sup>43</sup> Cohn, "The Fantastic From Counterpublic to Public Imaginary," 452.

<sup>44</sup> Stanfill, "The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary," 124.

<sup>45</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 71.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 511.

### 1.3 Affect, Nostalgia, and Culture

The terms “affect” and “emotion” are deployed by scholars frequently but with different, often contradictory meanings based on the approach to affect one takes. Broadly, there is “affect studies” inspired by Silvan Tomkins; there is the Spinoza-cum-Deleuze understanding of *affectio* versus *affectus*; there is the more explicitly psychoanalytic work such as Sigmund Freud’s theorizations of melancholia and mourning and Lacan’s *Seminar X* on anxiety, which is different still than the way these terms and those like “flat affect” are used in psychology; and many more.<sup>47</sup> Sara Ahmed writes that she has “never found intellectual conversations about definitions particularly inspiring in part as they often end up as self-referential, as being about the consistency or inconsistency of our own terms.”<sup>48</sup> I tend to agree with Ahmed, particularly as, according to Brian Massumi, “to get anywhere with the concept [of affect], you have to retain the manyness of its forms. It’s not something that can be reduced to one thing.”<sup>49</sup>

That said, I find myself drawn to Ahmed’s theorizations, as she is not interested “in distinguishing affect and emotion as if they refer to different aspects of experience.”<sup>50</sup> This aligns with other scholars such as Jonathan Flatley, who states that a clear conceptual distinction between affect and emotion is not central to his scholarship and uses the two interchangeably, as well as Ria Cheyne, who acknowledges multiple conceptions of affect proposed by scholars such as Sianne Ngai and Deborah Gould before writing that she will use the vocabulary of emotion as a

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<sup>47</sup> A clear example of the differences in these conceptions can be seen in how Tomkins’s theorization of affect and emotion is that emotion is said to be representable while affect is more prelinguistic, acting as a motivation system that drives actions, while Brian Massumi writes that affect being prelinguistic is a common misconception and that “Every act of language involves an expression of affect.” Silvan Tomkins, “What Are Affects” in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 33-74; Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), 212.

<sup>48</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 210.

<sup>49</sup> Massumi, *The Politics of Affect*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 208.

way of making “it easier to talk about what affect might do in concrete terms.”<sup>51</sup> An argument that Ahmed makes implicitly in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* but more forcefully in *The Promise of Happiness* is that affect is “sticky”—it is “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.”<sup>52</sup> This contrasts with Massumi’s work, where emotion is “subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of experience which is from that point onward defined as personal.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, Ahmed argues that the affect/emotion distinction can be seen as a gendered distinction, where emotion is supposedly more in line with “touchy feely” styles of thought such as feminism and queer studies than the more impersonal, “masculine” affect. Even so, Ahmed acknowledges that a difference between affect and emotion does exist, but that “while you can separate an affective response from an emotion that is attributed as such (the bodily sensations from the feeling of being afraid), this does not mean that in practice, or in everyday life, they are separate. In fact, they are contiguous; they slide into each other; they stick, and cohere, even when they are separated.”<sup>54</sup>

A definition of affect I find particularly useful and utilize in this dissertation is from Caitlin Bruce. Bruce understands “affect to be the representational (usually described with language of the emotions, with linguistic referents) and nonrepresentational attachments, forces, and energy that push and pull communicative encounters.”<sup>55</sup> This definition gets to the fact that affect is present in every communicative event and can often be considered as a motivating force.

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 12; Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 230.

<sup>53</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 231.

<sup>55</sup> Caitlin Bruce, “The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 2015): 45.

The idea of affect as motivating has led to a large amount of scholarship on affect and social movements. Gould argues that social movements can provide affective pedagogies that authorize the ways participants and supporters feel and emote.<sup>56</sup> Scholarship has often centered anger as a key affect in social change.<sup>57</sup> In tracing the history of emotion, Daniel M. Gross turns to Aristotle who believed anger requires a public stage, assumes asymmetrical power, and presumes “*a contoured world of emotional investments.*”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps most importantly for this dissertation, anger can also lead to the “angry white male,” whose anger becomes violence “as an antidote to feminism and black power.”<sup>59</sup> While this is a gesture that anger can serve both liberating movements *and* regressive movements, anger (and emotions in general) can be rallying points for many minority groups.<sup>60</sup>

More recent scholarship has illustrated how anger works with other emotional formations such as pride and grief in both sparking and maintaining social movements.<sup>61</sup> As Claudia Garcia-Rojas argues, the “affective economies of anger, sadness, rage, and loss [often] go unaccounted for in White affect studies”—which makes up a large part of affect studies, as scholars tend to ignore women of color in their citational practices.<sup>62</sup> Affective economies of reactionaries involving *clusters of affects* is particularly important moving forward. As I demonstrate with the

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<sup>56</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 213.

<sup>57</sup> Isaac West, “Reviving Rage,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 97-102.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion*, 16

<sup>60</sup> This brings to mind Lauren Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 273-301; Helena Flam, “Emotions’ Map: A Research Agenda” in *Emotions and Social Movements*, eds. Helena Flam and Debra King (New York: Routledge, 2005), 19-40 in how emotions can uphold social structures through attachments to normativity.

<sup>61</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*; Erin J. Rand, “Gay Pride and Its Queer Discontents: ACT UP and the Political Deployment of Affect” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 75-80.

<sup>62</sup> Claudia Garcia-Rojas, “(Un)Disciplined futures: Women of color feminism as a disruptive to white affect studies,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3 (2017): 264. For more criticism on the tendency of affect studies to ignore social difference and largely center whiteness, see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

various fan controversies, the affective economies are driven not just by anger, but by clusters that include hatred, disgust, melancholy, fear, mourning, cruelty, sadism, joy, shame, and pride.

Nostalgia is central to my writing about reactionaries, because much of their ideologies are rooted in a return to a romanticized past. As Svetlana Boym describes it, nostalgia “is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>63</sup> Boym contends that nostalgia has elements of both mourning and melancholy, and melancholy has been shown to be central to white male victimization. As Kelly argues, “Masculine victimhood encourages white men to speak about common human vulnerability as if it were structural oppression.”<sup>64</sup> This felt victimhood encourages white men, who are well-off and privileged members of society, “to interpret the presence of difference and uncertainty as threatening the subject with unjust marginalization.”<sup>65</sup> In experiencing these threats from social and cultural change, white men fall back on nostalgia and yearn to return to the “good old days,” an imagined past of unchallenged white male supremacy.<sup>66</sup> The appeal of nostalgia is that it “both defends against feelings of loss and evades the threat of feminism by refusing to move forward.”<sup>67</sup>

While there has been a rise of white masculine victimhood in recent years, Sally Robinson argues that this crisis of masculinity has been present in various manifestations for decades as “white men in post-sixties [US] American culture produced images of a physically wounded and

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<sup>63</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, “The Wounded Man: *Foxcatcher* and the Incoherence of White Masculine Victimhood,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 164.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Elliott Johnson, “The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump’s Demagoguery,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 231.

<sup>66</sup> Wouter P.C. van Gent, Elmar F. Jander, and Joost H.F. Smits, “Right-Wing Radical Populism in City and Suburbs: An Electoral Geography of the Partij Voor de Vrijhei in the Netherlands” *Urban Studies* 51, no. 9 (July 2014): 1789.

<sup>67</sup> Kelly, “The Wounded Man,” 164. See also, Susannah Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

emotionally traumatized white masculinity.”<sup>68</sup> Stephanie Coontz illustrates that there is a unique melancholy in the US for the 1950s with its supposedly tranquil lifestyles, family dynamics, and conservative cultural ideals, but that, in reality, this golden age never existed and has been distorted to fit various political ideologies.<sup>69</sup> The period of the 1950s is also an imagined golden age for many reactionary fans in speculative fiction, and this is no coincidence. Lauren Berlant argues that the return to this period is a return to a time before feminism, Civil Rights, and queer activism threatened the heterosexual, white male supremacy.<sup>70</sup> The men who claim victimization of their privileged identities may not necessarily align themselves explicitly with men’s right activists, white supremacists, or the alt-right, but they “express melancholy and harbor fantasies of persecution” in very similar ways.<sup>71</sup> The reactionary fan controversies I analyze deal with fans who are openly aligned with these groups as well as those who claim they only want their speculative fiction media to be great again. Their version of “great,” however, is often rooted in the logics of violence/exclusion, just as explicitly right-wing activity is.

#### **1.4 Reactionaries: The Far, the Wing, and the Alternative**

While speculative fiction and affect are given many definitions by many scholars, I have found that, similar to “toxic masculinity,” the “far-right” and the “right-wing” are not. I mention toxic masculinity in this comparison, as I argue the lack of definitions for far-right and right-wing

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<sup>68</sup> Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>71</sup> Kelly, “The Wounded Man,” 175.

in much academic work is because the appeal in using the terms “lies in [their] ability to summon a recognizable character type,” much like how Carol Harrington describes the appeal of invoking “toxic masculinity.”<sup>72</sup> Far-right and right-wing often equate to supporters of neo-Nazism, white supremacy, and neofascism. Alternatively, and more simply, the lack of definitions may be because far-right and right-wing are both largely self-explanatory—these terms refer to politics that are further along the left–right political spectrum than the “typical” political right.

The “alternative right” (usually referred to as “alt-right”), however, is frequently defined by scholars, but not always in the same manner. George Hawley opines that the alt-right is difficult to pin down as “there is no Alt-Right equivalent of *The Communist Manifesto*,” but he offers the loose definition that the alt-right “includes anyone with right-wing sensibilities that rejects the mainstream conservative movement.”<sup>73</sup> This definition becomes less concrete as the “mainstream” conservative movement shifts and fractures in response to the prominent political figures on the right.<sup>74</sup> Bharath Ganesh contends that while the alt-right is challenging to define, “it can be understood as an umbrella term for a set of radical right social movements active primarily (but not exclusively) in Anglophone countries.”<sup>75</sup> Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, on the other hand, argue that the alt-right is “a loose collection of social media users and boards, public personalities, and content platforms that often adopt libertarian or far right advocacy” and “commonly espouses claims, including but not limited to, support for white supremacy, opposition to feminism, rejection of identity-based rights, exclusive immigration policies, and an abhorrence

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<sup>72</sup> Carol Harrington, “What is ‘Toxic Masculinity’ and Why Does it Matter?” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 2 (2020): 8.

<sup>73</sup> George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>74</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld, “How Political Violence Went Mainstream on the Right,” Politico, November 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/11/07/political-violence-mainstream-right-wing-00065297>.

<sup>75</sup> Bharath Ganesh, “Weaponizing White Thymos: Flows of Rage in the Online Audiences of the Alt-Right,” *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (November 2020): 892.



for political correctness.”<sup>76</sup> While much work on reactionaries deals with online activity, following the Unite the Right rally in 2017 and the storming of the US Capitol in 2021, it is clear that the so-called “alt-right” increasingly has a presence beyond the internet.

While there are “significant connections between the ‘alt-right’ and radical pro-white movements,” many scholars caution against the use of “alt-right.”<sup>77</sup> Stephanie L. Hartzell illustrates the difficulty in assigning terms such as “alt-right” and/or “white supremacist,” as using alt-right often obfuscates its pro-white ideology and white nationalist roots, but erasing alt-right in favor of white supremacist or white nationalist “elides sustained, nuanced investigation into the strategic ways that white supremacy maneuvers rhetorically into mainstream public discourse by disarticulating pro-whiteness from white supremacy.”<sup>78</sup> As Alexandra Deem argues, “catch-all phrases” like alt-right reference “an emergent political sensibility that resists containment in established parties or formal organizations, but nevertheless displays the drive of a semi-unified social movement.”<sup>79</sup>

While parsing through the various manifestations of the far-right is important, the subjects involved in the controversies I study would not all classify themselves as part of the alt-right or even the far-right. Mike Wendling illustrates how the alt-right’s ideals are shared “by a host of people, including mainstream politicians ... and some who only have a dim idea of what the alt-right actually is.”<sup>80</sup> There are other people whose agendas and principles overlap with the alt-

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<sup>76</sup> Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 3.

<sup>77</sup> Stephanie L. Hartzell, “Alt-White: Conceptualizing the ‘Alt-Right’ as a Rhetorical Bridge between White Nationalism and Mainstream Public Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, nos. 1/2 (2018): 7.

<sup>78</sup> Hartzell, “Alt-White,” 9.

<sup>79</sup> Alexandra Deem, “The Digital Traces of #whitegenocide and Alt-Right Affective Economies of Transgression,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 3185.

<sup>80</sup> Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 5.

right's but who vehemently deny a connection with the alt-right—including far-right activist Milo Yiannopoulos, who threatened legal action over the connection.

Due to this, I tend toward the use of the term “reactionary,” which has generally referred to a person who wants to return a previous status quo, a status quo that is often imaginary. This conception of reactionary, however, overlooks right-extremist movements that do not look to the past. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Manifesto del Futurismo* (1909), for example, rejected the past and imagined a radically different, violent future, and many current extremist groups imagine futures of enforced inequality without the restorative elements traditionally considered part of the right’s ideology. Instead, I use “reactionary” to describe an affective network bonded together by a shared “structure of feeling.”<sup>81</sup> My version of reactionary overlaps with the political formation of the right, but it is not the same thing, as it is not a conscious organization.

This idea of a conscious organizations versus ideological connections brings to mind a common thread among a large portion of the fans involved in the controversies I study: white masculinity. Kelly describes how “white masculinity has become organized around melancholic attachments to an imagined past when white men were supposedly whole.”<sup>82</sup> This establishes a clear connection between white masculinity, reactionaries, and affect. In fact, Kelly goes on to illustrate how incels (involuntary celibates) and right-wing doomsday preppers are often “animated by narratives of white masculine victimhood and share a strong affinity with other men’s rights organizations and members of the alt-right movement.”<sup>83</sup> This is an example of people sharing ideals with the alt-right without actually *being part* of the alt-right, at least as far as these individuals would identify themselves. The logics of violence/exclusion do not necessarily belong

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<sup>81</sup> Raymond Williams, “Film and the Dramatic Tension,” in *Preface to Film*, eds. Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom (London: Film Drama Limited, 1954), 1-55.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 86.

to the alt-right, but rather men's right activism and reactionary controversies like GamerGate are "gateway drugs" and "sirens" that lead participants to white nationalism and the alt-right.<sup>84</sup>

One thing these groups often have in common, at least in online spaces, is that they act for the "lulz," which largely equates to "trolling." Trolling is an internet pastime where a person intentionally provokes ire in others supposedly just for the fun of it. This kind of trolling can be accomplished through posting content that one may or may not agree with just to see the reactions of others or commenting something inflammatory on a post and purposefully acting unaware of the meaning when people respond to it. Trolling is seen in memes, Reddit threads, blog posts, tweets, comment threads, and more. Many scholars are prone to discount these communications, as they are "for the lulz" and thus not serious, merely infuriating. This tendency even impacts the scholars who study reactionaries, such as Sandifer, who seems to dismiss the trolling by white supremacist Vox Day as "just" attention seeking behavior.<sup>85</sup> Hahner and Woods, however, note that even if trolling is supposedly ironic, "the force or intent of those actions is not," as trolling can mask serious and harmful intentions.<sup>86</sup> As Ganesh argues, these groups often direct their trolling (which is a way of directing their rage) against equality, the left, and immigrants.<sup>87</sup> This trolling is an attempt to "take back" or to "make great again" their country, their culture, and, in the case of many of the controversies I discuss in this dissertation, their fandom.

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<sup>84</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 59; Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk*, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk*, 379.

<sup>86</sup> Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*, 112.

<sup>87</sup> Ganesh, "Weaponizing White Thymos," 898.

## 1.5 Toxic and Reactionary Fans

Fans are integral to the way speculative fiction operates, due to the many fan-run magazines, conventions, and websites, as well as the sales of novels, films, and merchandise that provide the livelihood for their creators.<sup>88</sup> The depiction of fans as a positive force in the industry aligns with what Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington term the “Fandom is Beautiful” phase of fan studies, where fan activities that were once subject to ridicule and dismissal were recast as “creative, thoughtful, and productive.”<sup>89</sup> These early studies were enthusiastic about the potential of fans, with scholars praising fans as liberal, transgressive, and “rebels in the cause of a women’s art/communication system.”<sup>90</sup>

The idea that these fandoms are uniformly progressive and transgressive is limited, as it overlooks a great deal of fan activity that is anything but. Recent scholarship demonstrates how fandoms default to a place of whiteness, excluding fans of color,<sup>91</sup> and have started questioning if fandoms are as progressive regarding gender and sexuality as early fan studies work implied.<sup>92</sup> Stanfill argues that one reason the assumption that fandoms are liberal and progressive exists could be the fact that the scholars who originated fan studies were *themselves* progressive, so they

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<sup>88</sup> Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, “Why Study Fans?” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York, New York University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>90</sup> Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>91</sup> Examples include Rukmini Pande, “Squee from the Margins: Racial/Cultural/Ethnic Identity in Global Media Fandom,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 209–20; Rebecca Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2015); Benjamin Woo, “The Invisible Bag of Holding: Whiteness and Media Fandom,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2017), 245–252.

<sup>92</sup> Examples include Kristina Busse, “Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 73–91; Victoria Gonzalez, “Swan Queen, Shipping, and Boundary Regulation in Fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 22 (2016); Julie Levin Russo, “The Queer Politics of Femslash,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York, NY: Routledge), 164–55.

focused on texts and fan communities that appealed to their own sensibilities.<sup>93</sup> This is important to consider moving forward because Henry Jenkins maintains that fans choose “media products from the total range of available texts precisely because they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing [their] pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests.”<sup>94</sup> When these media products are embraced by more diverse groups of fans or when they introduce themes that were either not present or not *as* present originally, certain fans tend to react negatively.

The idea of fans reacting negatively brings me to “reactionary fans.” Before getting into this concept, however, I should note that not all fan controversies are fans reacting against progressive values. For example, after finishing the Netflix series *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018-2020), I was interested in learning more about the background and production of the series and went to read about it online. Many Reddit threads and blog posts described the *She-Ra* fandom as “problematic” and “toxic” because its fans would attack other series and fans of other series for not being as progressive as *She-Ra*. *She-Ra* is an animated series produced by DreamWorks Animation, is primarily aimed at children and young adults, and features characters who openly express their identities across the LGBTQ spectrum. *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020) is yet another animated series produced by DreamWorks Animation that streams on Netflix, is primarily aimed at children and young adults, and features LGBTQ characters. In fact, *Kipo* is lauded as being only the second animated children’s series in which a character says that he is gay, as the first to feature a gay Black protagonist, and as a showcase for “casual queerness.”<sup>95</sup> Rather than the fans praising both series, however, many Reddit users noted how whenever Netflix tweeted about *Kipo* or when *Kipo* was nominated for an award over *She-*

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<sup>93</sup> Stanfill, “The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary,” 126.

<sup>94</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 34.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Pulliam-Moore, “*Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*’ Casual Queerness is Fantastic,” io9, January 23, 2020, <https://gizmodo.com/kipo-and-the-age-of-wonderbeasts-casual-queerness-is-fa-1841157244>.

*Ra*, there would be hateful comments in the replies dismissing the accomplishments of one series because they viewed the other as superior.<sup>96</sup> Having a preference for one series over another appears to be a small thing, but I use this example to demonstrate how fans began to describe *She-Ra*'s fans as "toxic," even though the *She-Ra* fans were championing a progressive series. This behavior is more in line with what Jonathan Gray describes as anti-fandom, where fans vocally dislike a media text or genre, a concept I discuss in detail in Chapter Three.<sup>97</sup> The main point of this example is that not all *toxic* fandoms are *reactionary*. Rather, as Stanfill argues, "reactionary fandoms, as sites of domination, are inherently toxic, [but] nonreactionary fandoms can also be toxic."<sup>98</sup>

Reactionary fans have broadly been defined as fans who want to return a previous status quo, particularly regarding the popular culture texts they are attached to. An example is sports fandom: Even while fan studies purported fans to be leftist and progressive, sports fandoms were often elided in scholarship due to the open racism displayed toward athletes of color as fans openly longed for the past, with its supposed the supremacy of white players.<sup>99</sup> Another example is how many fans of *Star Wars* want a return to when the heroes of the galaxy were white men, with virtually no characters of color in sight, and the one prominent female character (despite being an instrumental part in saving the galaxy) was relegated to awarding the men rather than receiving any laurels herself. This is, of course, only one reading of the ending scene of *Star Wars: Episode*

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<sup>96</sup> This is an example of what Vivi Theodoropoulou describes as fandom for one artifact being expressed as an anti-fandom for another that could be perceived as the beloved's rival. "The Anti-Fan within the Fan: Awe and Envy in Sport Fandom" in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 316-27.

<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 840-58.

<sup>98</sup> Stanfill, "The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary," 125.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Serazio and Emily Thorson, "Weaponized Patriotism and Racial Subtext in Kaepernick's Aftermath: The Anti-politics of American Sports Fandom," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 151-168; Poe Johnson, "Playing with Lynching: Fandom Violence and the Black Athletic Body," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 169-183.

*IV – A New Hope* (1977). Another could be that Leia is demonstrating her authority over these men—she has the authority to grant these awards while they are merely her soldiers. I bring up both readings as one is not more correct than the other, but it might be that a key part of reactionary fandoms is the insistence that there is only one correct reading. In this dissertation, I pose the question of why these reactionary fans appear to latch onto a single interpretation and decide the range of other possible readings are worthy of their vitriol.

One of fan studies' most important contributions is further demonstrating how popular culture has an impact on the world. Stanfill argues that fandom is “political when anyone uses popular culture to transform the world—traditionally excluded or not.”<sup>100</sup> The “traditionally excluded or not” is in response to scholars such as Jonathan Dean and Liesbet van Zoonen, who posit that fandom is political when dealing with injustice or when excluded fans take part.<sup>101</sup> This view is only true if we see fandoms solely as progressive, when in reality, it neglects to consider how reactionary fans can and do use popular culture to encourage others to lash out at feminists, people of color, and the LGBTQ community for threatening white, heterosexual male supremacy. As can be seen an unfortunate number of times in recent years—from GamerGate to ComicsGate to any number of popular culture controversies—“men act on the fantasies cultivated in popular media.”<sup>102</sup> This is important, as it is not only fan communication that influences reactionary fans but often the media itself. Reactionary fans, while having much in common with more traditional hate movements, have a distinct advantage over them—while they may have “physical reminders in the form of police mugshots, swastika tattoos, and rap sheets leave a trail that can follow any

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<sup>100</sup> Stanfill, “The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary,” 128.

<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Dean, “Politicising Fandom” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2017): 408-424; Liesbet van Zoonen, “Popular Culture as Political Communication an Introduction” *Javnost—The Public* 7, no. 2 (2000): 5-17.

<sup>102</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 56-57.

single individual's involvement, participation in reactionary fandom can be erased with a change in IP address and simple denial."<sup>103</sup>

## 1.6 The Confluence of Speculative Fiction, Affect, and Reactionary Fandoms

Although much work has been done on speculative fiction fans, affect theory, and reactionaries separately or in pairs, few have looked to how these three areas intersect and inform one another. This dissertation does just that by reading reactionaries as fandoms, by examining the affective economies of reactionaries, and by proposing that nostalgia is a form of speculative fiction. In order to analyze these conceptual relationships, I utilize rhetorical criticism as one important method, though my work is not limited to it. Rhetorical criticism "illuminates the persuasive mechanisms that the alt-right uses to attract new members and direct public attention and conversation," and these persuasive mechanisms are affective.<sup>104</sup> Rhetorical criticism is particularly useful when it comes to analyzing affect in online communication.<sup>105</sup> As Ahmed theorizes with affective economies, "emotions *do things*" and while they do not reside inside subjects, "they still work to bind subjects together."<sup>106</sup> Zizi Papacharissi calls these bound subjects "affective publics" and argues that they "leave distinct digital footprints."<sup>107</sup> My method involves gathering these digital footprints and analyzing them. As affect circulates between bodies and

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<sup>103</sup> Bridget M. Blodgett, "Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 195.

<sup>104</sup> Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*, 16.

<sup>105</sup> Linda Åhäll presents affect itself as a method. In drawing on Ahmed's work as I do, I agree with Åhäll and view my work as a subset of "rhetorical criticism" that deals with affect in online communication. "Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion" *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 1 (March 2018): 36-52.

<sup>106</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119.

<sup>107</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 2016): 312.



accumulates value, it is not necessarily important to find the *first* post that sparked a controversy or to catalog every message sent during a controversy. Affective communication—which is neither tangible nor testable in traditional ways—will be seen throughout the controversies, not just at the start, so I select posts that act as what Kenneth Burke would call “representative anecdotes” of the reactionary fan discourse, focusing on posts from a variety of sources and posters that received significant audience and/or media attention.<sup>108</sup> As more messages are produced, the anger, hatred, and other affects will become increasingly evident as the sticky affects bind these reactionary fans together. Through following the flow of discourse, I not only unpack the content but also illuminate broader cultural implications.

It is important to note, however, that in order to utilize rhetorical criticism, I must reproduce content from social media sites that is troubling and offensive. This move raises the risk of amplifying and spreading the content. George Hawley notes a catch-22 in writing about reactionaries, saying that if he fills his chapters “with the most shocking language that can be found within the Alt-Right,” people would accuse him of spreading its worst propaganda and/or he would be criticized for not examining the views impartially, but if he only cited the most reasonable among the alt-right, he would “be justly accused of whitewashing the most appalling aspects of the movement.”<sup>109</sup> While Hawley largely opts for the latter approach, I follow Thomas Colley and Martin Moore’s example of only reproducing the content that I deem necessary to answer my research questions and endeavoring to be reflexive in my choices.<sup>110</sup> Through doing so, I neither paper over the horrifying nature of the reactionary rhetoric nor provide excessive amplification.

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<sup>108</sup> For more on the method of representative anecdotes, see Barry Brummett, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as Method in Media Criticism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984): 161–76; Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 59-61; Max Dosser, “Streaming’s Skip Intro Function as Contradictory Refuge for Television Title Sequences,” *Velvet Light Trap* no. 90 (2022): 38-50.

<sup>109</sup> Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 7-8.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, “The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: ‘Come on in the Water’s Fine,’” *New Media and Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 5-30.

The fact that many in my scholarly audience study similar phenomena and that I largely write about popular fan-driven controversies means that much of the rhetoric has already been publicized, which should diminish the overall amplification.

Studies of reactionaries tend to approach their subjects from different vantages. One prominent method is seen in Kelly's *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood*, which is rooted in poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, considering the signifier as the agent rather than the individual people. This is illustrated by Kelly stating early on that his book "is not a critique of flesh-and-blood subjects, but rather a series of discourses and images that address white men as if they are victims."<sup>111</sup> Another approach is seen in Sandifer's collection, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right*, where the individual humans are the agents, which can be seen in how she spends 170 pages, the entirety of the collection's eponymous essay, analyzing the writings and personal actions of just three men: Eliezer Yudkowsky, Mencius Moldbug, and Nick Land. The different approaches likely stem from their authors' respective goals. Kelly's goal is to seek an understanding of why the rhetoric of white masculine victimhood is plausible and appealing in our present setting, while Sandifer writes that the two questions that most academics pose regarding reactionaries ("how the alt-right came to happen" and "what to do about the alt-right") are both relatively simple and uninteresting. Instead, Sandifer asks what we do about the alt-right "if winning is off the table."<sup>112</sup>

While I see both methods as valid and producing excellent criticism, I find myself more drawn to Kelly's approach, which gestures to broader cultural implications. Now, this is not to say that Kelly does not focus on individuals, as he often does. In fact, he devotes a chapter to an analysis of Elliot Rodgers and his manifesto and later critically examines a single photo of Kory

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<sup>111</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk*, 1-3.

Watkins. I, too, look to individuals involved in controversies, but, like Kelly, I do not use these moments of individual specificity to cast blame on a single person. Rather, I use these examples as illustrations of broader cultural trends. This goal is shared by Woods and Hahner, who draw from Bruno Latour in their methods. Latour opposes “*freeze-framing*” images, where the artifacts are extracted out of the flow, “as if all movement had stopped,” when in reality, these images circulate and accumulate meaning—much how emotions do in affective economies.<sup>113</sup> Rather than freeze-framing, Woods and Hahner look at the flow of memes and explain the ecology of discourse in which the memes are situated.<sup>114</sup> While Latour and Woods and Hahner are largely discussing images, this method provides a fuller accounting for how communication evolves as various memes, sound bites, and talking points circulate among individuals, be it online or elsewhere. My goal is to not take snapshots of controversies but to zoom out and gain a fuller picture.

## 1.7 On the Things to Come

This dissertation analyzes the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media—attachments that grow so strong that fans experience betrayal when the media does something they did not expect or do not approve of—and how the fans react to this supposed betrayal. Their disapproval often appears to be centered on speculative fiction media that features a more diverse set of characters and values, where their “love” for the media artifact can be used as justification to express their hatred for others. As Poe Johnson outlines, “One of the hallmarks of fan activity is the willingness to transform or destroy a mediated object when it does not do

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<sup>113</sup> Bruno Latour, “What Is Iconoclasm? Or Is There a World beyond the Image Wars?,” in *Iconoclasm*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weible (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 21.

<sup>114</sup> Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*, 89.

what the fan wants it to do.”<sup>115</sup> This willingness to destroy is clearly evident in the reactionary controversies I examine in this dissertation, where fans turn against the media they once loved based on the introduction or the revealing of socially progressive themes.

To demonstrate the relationship between fans’ attachments to speculative fiction and the logics of violence/exclusion, I utilize a complementary case study design. Natalie Kouri-Towe argues that moments of controversy “reveal the resonances of everyday registers of contestation in between repression and liberation,” so, with this project, I focus specifically on controversies within the speculative fiction fan community.<sup>116</sup> Just as speculative fiction is a reflection of the culture in which it is created, the controversies within its fandoms are also tied to the social and political landscape in which they take place.<sup>117</sup> As such, the case studies I focus on are fan-driven controversies that were largely facilitated through social media and were reactions to the increased presence of diversity in a variety of speculative fiction media.

The first criterion for my case studies is recency. While white nationalism and other reactionary ideologies have been part of the United States’ history since before its founding and many trace the birth of science fiction as a genre to the 1818 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, I elect to primarily focus on more recent controversies. This decision can be attributed to the fact that, as Woods and Hahner illustrate in their definition of the alt-right, white nationalism can be rapidly spread through mediascapes—particularly social media. Some of the most popular social media sites for reactionaries are 4chan, Reddit, and Twitter, which launched in 2003, 2005, and 2006, respectively. While newer platforms

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<sup>115</sup> Johnson, “Playing with Lynching,” 177.

<sup>116</sup> Natalie Kouri-Towe, “Textured Activism: Affect Theory and Transformational Politics in Transnational Queer Palestine-Solidarity Activism,” *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice* 37, no. 1 (2015): 30.

<sup>117</sup> Rebecca Williams and Lucy Bennett, “Editorial: Fandom and Controversy,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 8 (2022): 1038.

like 8chan (2013), Gab.ai (2017), and Parler (2018) are also hot spots for far-right extremism around the globe, much of their user base are more explicitly identified with white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and the alt-right.<sup>118</sup> This dissertation looks not only at fan controversies where the far-right extremism is openly acknowledged but also to controversies where the extremism is masked. As such, my case studies span a roughly thirteen-year period, from just after the founding of several popular social media websites (and maybe not so coincidentally the coining of the term “alt-right”) to the end of Donald Trump’s presidency.<sup>119</sup>

The second criterion I use for selecting my case studies is variety. Much scholarship on speculative fiction is focused on literature, and while speculative fiction is likely the best-selling literary genre of the past twenty years, the genre also encompasses many of the top-grossing films worldwide, the highest rated television series, and the most popular video games of all time.<sup>120</sup> As speculative fiction proliferates across various media, I choose controversies that stem from an array of media texts. By considering fan controversies based in literature, films, and video games, I expand the applicability of my argument by engaging with fans who, despite preferring different manifestations of speculative fiction, express similar reactionary tendencies.

My final criterion for the selection of my case studies is visibility. My opening demonstrates how reactionary fans are present on many social media platforms and express their ideologies in both large- and small-scale ways. With this dissertation, however, I focus on the controversies that attracted attention of other social media users and the press. This visibility is important because, while Steven’s response to my review did demonstrate his nostalgia for an imagined past, I am not a social media influencer, let alone a Goodreads one, so it is unlikely more

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<sup>118</sup> Colley and Moore, “The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right.”

<sup>119</sup> Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 53-63.

<sup>120</sup> Cohn, “The Fantastic From Counterpublic to Public Imaginary,” 451.

than a handful of people saw his post. Controversies that attract the attention of the press and trend on social media sites bring together a large population of users—many of whom would not classify themselves as part of the far-right but are emboldened by and drawn to the controversies rooted in reactionary ideologies. With these larger populations of users, I am able to analyze how affect organizes these communities of reactionary fans and better extrapolate the findings to reactionary groups at large.

Based on the criteria for my case studies, I select the fan-driven controversies that centered on the World Science Fiction Society's Hugo Awards, the films *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi*, and the video game series *Mass Effect* and *Last of Us* as the case studies for this dissertation. Each reactionary fan controversy occurred between the years of 2007 and 2020, all centered on speculative fiction from different media (literature, film, and video games, respectively), and all attracted the notice of the press and received substantial social media attention. In addition to the variety in media, the controversies also feature various affective histories, where the World Science Fiction Society's is much longer than the *Star Wars* series', which is in turn significantly longer than that of the video game series that debuted in 2007 and 2013, respectively. Despite these varied histories, all the controversies are reactions against the increasing diversity featured in speculative fiction media—spaces once seemingly reserved for white, heterosexual men.

Before beginning the case study approach, in Chapter One, I trace the lineage of speculative fiction fandoms leading up to my earliest case study. Through examining pre-internet fanzines housed at the Science Fiction Foundation Archive and Oxford's Bodleian Library as well as in online records of historical professional speculative fiction magazines, I perform document analysis on editorials, interviews with fans and authors, and fan-authored letters. In considering

these archival materials, I read speculative fiction and the history of its fandom as political, then demonstrate how the political can be considered fandom. This historical and theoretical context provides the basis for the development of recent fan-driven controversies and addresses why I study speculative fiction fandoms rather than speculative fiction texts or fandoms more generally.

Chapter Two begins the case study approach as I turn to the Hugo Awards' PuppyGate controversy and analyze the affective economy fueled by a revanchist nostalgia. This chapter tracks the development of the controversy from 2013, when speculative fiction author Larry Correia first began his "Sad Puppies" campaign to get his novel nominated for a Hugo Award, one of speculative fiction's most prestigious award, to 2015, when noted white supremacist Vox Day broke from the Sad Puppies to form his own wing of the campaign that he called the "Rabid Puppies." While PuppyGate is ostensibly about giving "popular" literature a chance against the perceived push for diversity within the publishing industry, the rhetoric of the campaign coordinators and the actions of the fans reveal that the goal is more to punish those diverse authors for their foray into speculative fiction—a space many reactionary authors and fans perceive as historically dominated by white men and, importantly, believe should continue to be.

Chapter Three looks to the films *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* and examines the fan reactions to the casting practices of these sequel films that were released nearly forty years after the original *Star Wars* film. While some scholars have dismissed the fan backlash of #BlackStormtrooper as primarily media-driven, this chapter demonstrates this is not the case. When considering the #NotMyJedi fan campaign, which claimed to be about the writing of the character Luke Skywalker but was actually a cover for the misogynistic and racist attacks on Kelly Marie Tran, John Boyega, and Daisy Ridley, this chapter illustrates the key role of sadism in the affective economy of reactionaries. Importantly, it asks

what it means to read white supremacists not as a fandom, but as an anti-fandom, one driven by hatred and disgust of those who are non-white.

Chapter Four examines two controversies surrounding the release of the video game series *Mass Effect* and *the Last of Us*. These games were released thirteen years apart, yet both encountered criticism by anti-fans and anti-LGBTQ activists for their inclusion of queer characters. As video games have historically been implicitly heteronormative, which has led to a gaming community that often reinforces an ideology of compulsory heterosexuality, this chapter analyzes how the two production companies responded to reactionary fan backlash. While BioWare scrapped nearly all queer content from the sequel in an expression of apparent shame, Naughty Dog doubled down, displaying pride as they challenged the status quo of heteronormativity in mainstream video games and illustrated how reactionary fans are often a vocal minority.

My conclusion proposes that the connection between fans' affective attachments to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion that govern reactionary groups is nostalgia, which itself is a form of speculative fiction. This extends to the Constitution Originalists basing their arguments on the imagining of what the US Founding Fathers would do in 2024; to Tucker Carlson claiming that Pennsylvania senator John Fetterman is unfit for office because, following his stroke, he has become a computer program susceptible to hacking; to fans complaining how much better Amazon Prime's *Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power* series (2022-present) would have been if the showrunners had made all the characters white as they contend long-deceased J.R.R. Tolkien would have wanted; to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurists attempting to create their vision of a violent future. The speculating of what-could-be and what-



would-be is at the core of reactionaries' affective attachments to the past, present, and future of their speculative fiction media and of their culture.

Overall, this dissertation engages with affect, speculative fiction, and reactionary fandoms to explore the relationship between the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion. In Kelly's monograph, he writes that "we are at a point in which fascism, demagoguery, and radical populism continue to gain traction—and of which the rhetoric of white male victimhood has become a defining feature."<sup>121</sup> This comes shortly after he discusses Burke's analysis of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Burke (and by extension Kelly) argues that we cannot ignore *Mein Kampf* and hope these ideologies and these people just fade away.<sup>122</sup> Rather, through analyzing these texts, these controversies that are fueled by a supposed love for speculative fiction and an actual hatred for others, we can better understand how these reactionary groups communicate and uncover methods so that, to harken back to Sandifer, the chances of "winning" are still on the table.

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<sup>121</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 88.

<sup>122</sup> Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle" in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 191-220.

## 2.0 Chapter One: Damn It, Jim! I'm a Fan, not a White Supremacist: Reading Speculative Fiction Fandoms as Political and the Political as Fandoms

*"That's all science fiction was ever about. Hating the way things are, wanting to make things different."*<sup>123</sup> – Ray Bradbury, writing as character Roger Bentley

### 2.1 Introduction

As forty-four million people attended the 1939 New York World's Fair with its theme of "The World of Tomorrow," nearby in New York City's Caravan Hall approximately 200 people attended a different future-oriented convention, though not all who tried to enter were admitted. After years of in-fighting and smaller conventions, a group of speculative fiction fans hosted the first annual World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) as a three-day event. The convention was chaired by now-noted fan historian Sam Moskowitz, who organized it with his fellow "New Fandom" members Will Sykora and James V. Taurasi. In the years before the first WorldCon, however, New Fandom had developed a feud with a group of fellow fans known as "the Futurians." After New Fandom gained control over the first WorldCon, the Futurians responded by preparing fliers to hand out at the convention. These fliers cautioned attendees not to let the organizers force a vote on any future fan activities without discussion or to let "the Chairman" appoint any person to an elected office without a vote, as they purported a concern over the democratic conduct of the

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<sup>123</sup> Ray Bradbury, "No News, or What Killed the Dog?" in *Quicker than the Eye* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 166.

convention. Upon learning of the fliers, Moskowitz confronted the Futurians when they attempted to gain admittance to the convention and barred six of them from entering a convention that proved monumental for speculative fiction and its fandom.

This feud began after the Futurians broke off from the Greater New York Science Fiction Club (of which Moskowitz was the head) over ideological differences, but that was not the first time the groups butted heads. The seeds of this schism were planted in 1937, at the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, when Donald A. Wollheim read a prepared speech written by John B. Michel titled “Mutation or Death!” In the speech, Michel by way of Wollheim proclaimed that “science-fiction should, by nature, stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life.”<sup>124</sup> This idea of a more socially conscious and politically active science fiction became known among the fandom as “Michelism,” which Wollheim later defined as “the belief that science-fiction followers should actively work for the realization of the scientific socialist world-state as the only justification for their activities and existence.”<sup>125</sup>

The heavily vocalized, left-leaning sensibilities of Wollheim, Michel, and other Futurians led to animosity between the Futurians and Moskowitz, Taurasi, and Sykora’s New Fandom, and ultimately created a dividing line for speculative fiction fans not as “a little liberal or a little conservative, but as an adherent of the Taurasi-Sykora faction or the Wollheim-Michel faction.”<sup>126</sup> Beyond New Fandom’s belief that the Futurians forced politics on speculative fiction fandom, particularly in the form of “deliberately practiced communistic techniques in the form of leftist attacks,” Moskowitz, Taurasi, and Sykora had personal distaste for Wollheim, Michel, and the

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<sup>124</sup> John B. Michel, “Mutation or Death!” (presentation, Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, Philadelphia, PA, October 30, 1937).

<sup>125</sup> Donald A. Wollheim, “Commentary on the November ‘Novae Terra,’” *Novae Terrae* 2, no. 8 (January 1938): 13.

<sup>126</sup> Harry Warner Jr., *All Our Yesterdays: The Fanzine Columns* (Reading, England: Ansible Editions, 2020), 72.

direction that they hoped to take speculative fiction and its fandom.<sup>127</sup> In 1989, David Kyle, a member of the Futurians during the 1939 WorldCon, wrote that the clash between the Futurians—those fans who had “decided that sf not only dreamed of brave new worlds, but that sf was grounded in reality and that fans should become activists as well as dreamers”—and New Fandom, the fans who preferred more of the escapist elements of speculative fiction, “was going to shape fandom for the future.”<sup>128</sup>

In their accounts of what has been deemed “The Great Exclusion Act” at the first WorldCon, neither Moskowitz nor Frederik Pohl (a founding member of the Futurians) claim that the groups’ differing political ideologies were the cause for the exclusion.<sup>129</sup> Moskowitz maintains that he wanted the convention to appear professional (especially with noted guests like illustrator Frank R. Paul and editor John W. Campbell in attendance) and worried the Futurians would disrupt the proceedings, while Pohl contends it came down to a conflict of personalities between the New Fandom and the Futurians.<sup>130</sup> Despite the people involved in the controversy arguing that the exclusion was not political, it was seen that way by many fans, especially as fanzines at the time made it known that the Futurians’ communist politics stood in opposition to Moskowitz and New Fandom’s conservative leanings. Moskowitz believes the perception of political motivation for the exclusion led to the downfall of the New Fandom and given the number of fan articles written that described the exclusion as political, this may have been the case. Ultimately, in the aftermath of

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<sup>127</sup> Sam Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1974), 249.

<sup>128</sup> Dave Kyle, “The Great Exclusion Act of 1939,” *Mimosa*, no. 6 (April 1989): 5.

<sup>129</sup> It has also been referred to as “The Great Exclusion Act of 1939” since other “Great Exclusion Acts” have occurred in relation to later WorldCons, specifically at the 1956 WorldCon (notably, the second WorldCon to take place in New York City), at the 1964 WorldCon, and at the 2018 WorldCon.

<sup>130</sup> Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm*, 213-224; Frederik Pohl, *The Way the Future Was: A Memoir* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), 94.

the Great Exclusion Act, it was clear to many fans that speculative fiction and its fandom itself could be and often are political.

I learned of the Great Exclusion Act in the summer of 2021, when I was conducting archival research at the University of Liverpool's Science Fiction Foundation Collection and Oxford University's Bodleian Library as well as in online collections of classic speculative fiction magazines. In the very first set of archival documents I read, a collection of fanzines concerned with "radical, hard S.F."<sup>131</sup> entitled *Shark Tactics*, the editor Mike Cobley authored a piece in which he wrote, "Government's a gang of economic thugs, policies're doing for society what Hitler did for the Jews, and what opposition is there? Socialists dedicated to subverting the universe by tedium and centre parties making like the Keystone Cops in high-speed reverse."<sup>132</sup> This quote is not describing the world of any speculative fiction text; rather, it is Cobley discussing his opinion of the then-current state of the United Kingdom's government. I include this quote not to dissect what Cobley argues, but to pose the question: Why this is in a speculative fiction fanzine?

Given that Matt Hills argues that the affective attachment to a particular text or figure is what defines fandom, one may expect fanzines to primarily discuss the object of their fandom.<sup>133</sup> "Fannish" writing has been described as "imaginative writing (usually humorous in nature or intent) about fans, fandom and anything appertaining thereto."<sup>134</sup> This definition comes from a 1975 article by fanzine editor Keith Freeman, and it contends that in addition to writing about the objects of their fandom, fans often write about *being* fans. The idea of fans wanting to discuss their experiences as fans aligns with Tom Shippey's account of talking to fans at conventions: "There

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<sup>131</sup> Editor Mike Cobley defines "radical" as "a. Original, thorough-going, pertain to the root. n. One holding advanced views"; "hard" as "a. Firm, solid, compact. Adv. Forcibly, strenuously"; and "S.F." as "n. Science Fiction, Science Fantasy, Speculative Fiction." "Editorial," *Shark Tactics*, no. 1 (March 1987): 1.

<sup>132</sup> Mike Cobley, "Sharkbait," *Shark Tactics*, no. 6 (1989): 1.

<sup>133</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>134</sup> Keith Freeman, "It Just Isn't Fannish," *Blazon*, no. 2 (July 1975): 9.

were some fans who wanted to talk about science fiction (as I did), but there were others who really wanted to talk about being fans.”<sup>135</sup> So, again, why include a discussion of the government policies with which you are displeased in a speculative fiction fanzine? What does that have to do with speculative fiction or with being a speculative fiction fan?

In the half century since Freeman’s definition, fannish writing has blossomed in style, medium, and content, yet the idea that fans only care about the object of their fandom or “fanning out” with others persists. This assumption ignores two important facts: 1) Despite how they are depicted in popular media, fans are not single-minded automatons that live and breathe only for the continued love for their fandom. They care about the object of their fandom of course, that is what makes them fans, but they have lives outside of their fandom. Importantly, their lives and their fandom often impact each other in mutually reinforcing ways. 2) One can be a fan of more than films, bands, or sports teams. There are fans of individual people, of politicians, even of ideologies.<sup>136</sup> Fans are drawn to media, to textual fields, and to personalities that align with their ideologies, and the content fans produce—be it articles, fiction, art, etc.—often reflects that ideology. As this dissertation illustrates, many fan controversies result from a feeling of unwelcome change in a media object or series, but this feeling extends to culture at large as well. The nostalgic longing for a particular past and a reinstatement of a similar future are largely driven by the felt changes in the present. In this way, fan movements, social movements, and political movements can be read as one another, and that is what I propose to do in this chapter: read fandoms as political and the political as fandoms.

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<sup>135</sup> Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning From Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 67.

<sup>136</sup> Penny Andrews, “Receipts, Radicalisation, Reactionaries, and Repentance: The Digital Dissensus, Fandom, and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 6 (2020): 902-7.

As I do throughout this dissertation, I begin by looking at speculative fiction and its fans before zooming out to illustrate the myriad ways this seemingly marginal genre and its community of fans relate to larger cultural movements. To do so, I first turn to speculative fiction and read it as political, which leads into the discussion of the history of speculative fiction *fandoms* as political. As political bodies are power loci that exercise (or at least attempt to exercise) a degree of control over subjects, understanding the ways non-explicitly political bodies like fandoms act *as* political reframes our understanding of the impact these groups can have. My reading of fandom as political is facilitated by my archival research, where I draw on professional magazines and novels, interviews with authors, fan-authored articles in fanzines, and fanzine editorials provided by fans who created an outlet for others to discuss speculative fiction. The archival fanzines and magazines come from a seventy-year period between 1926 and 1996, with the materials being produced by fans as well as professional and nonprofessional editors and authors from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark. By looking at material published before the other case studies in this dissertation, I establish a history of speculative fiction and its fandoms that many of the controversies discussed in later chapters draw on as they push back against the changes they perceive to be occurring in the genre. After reading the history of speculative fiction fandom as political, I turn to social/political movements to read them as fandom.<sup>137</sup> In doing so, I lay the theoretical groundwork for the following chapters of this dissertation by demonstrating how, through utilizing the lens of fan studies, we can better understand the affective economies of social movements, reactionary and otherwise.

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<sup>137</sup> I use “political movements” and “social movements” interchangeably because 1) I use “political” to refer to action and views focused on the power and structural implications of social relations, not solely legislative action or governance, and 2) As many scholars have demonstrated, “social movements” utilize political action and create change in the political landscape. See Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

## 2.2 Speculative Fiction as Political

### 2.2.1 Imagining the Future, Presenting the Present

Over two centuries after Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote what many consider to be the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and nearly ninety years since J.R.R. Tolkien brought the high-fantasy genre into popular culture with *The Hobbit* (1937) then *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), speculative fiction is still seen by many as an escapist and “pulp” genre. This view is likely influenced by many of the early twentieth century speculative fiction magazines, such as Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*, which were printed on cheap, pulp paper. Stories in these publications were often filled with larger-than-life (male) heroes, damsels who needed saving, fantastical magic and/or other worldly technology, and too-predictable plots. While few of the original stories in these magazines are likely remembered by any but speculative fiction aficionados today, these magazines helped to popularize the genre, and many foundational authors got their start writing in pulp magazines.<sup>138</sup> The popularity, particularly of magazines featuring stories with similar/repetitive tropes and themes, led to a stigma that speculative fiction was a sensationalist and lowbrow genre.

Despite this view, in his editorial for the first issue of *Amazing Stories*, Gernsback wrote, “Not only do these amazing tales make tremendous reading—they are also always instructive. They supply knowledge we might not otherwise obtain—and they supply it in a very palatable form.”<sup>139</sup> Gernsback is often credited as “The Father of Science Fiction” due to how influential

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Ashley, “Introduction: An Amazing Experiment,” in *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine: Vol I, 1926-1935*, ed. Michael Ashley (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1974), 10-47.

<sup>139</sup> Hugo Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” *Amazing Stories* 1, vol. 1 (April 1926): 3.



*Amazing Stories* was on the genre.<sup>140</sup> It is notable, then, that the “Father of Science Fiction” argued in the first issue of the first science fiction-focused magazine that speculative fiction is *always* instructive, that it *supplies knowledge*.<sup>141</sup> Many may dismiss this claim since there are numerous speculative fiction stories that seemingly do not set out to educate audiences, including those published by Gernsback. Yet, speculative fiction can engage with the latest scientific developments (and imagine future possibilities), expose readers to cultures and people different from their own, and use its stories to confront readers with thought experiments that deal with relevant social issues. All these functions and more would be what Gernsback draws from when he claims that speculative fiction is meant to supply knowledge for its audience, and as Thomas Backhaus argues, “scientific facts are not political per se, but knowledge is.”<sup>142</sup>

With this editorial, Gernsback implies that speculative fiction is inherently political, but his editorial was published nearly a century ago, so it is possible that there has been a shift in how authors have utilized the genre in that time. In a 1992 interview with Mike Cobley, author David Wingrove argued that contrary to what many believe, speculative fiction is not about predicting the future; rather, its goal is “exploring and mapping the possible outcomes of certain future choices.”<sup>143</sup> While this idea appears different from that of Gernsback’s idea that speculative fiction supplies knowledge, later in the interview Wingrove added that beyond “telling a riveting tale,” good speculative fiction “can open doors for [its] readers—present them with thoughts they wouldn’t otherwise have thought.”<sup>144</sup> For Wingrove, speculative fiction not only provides readers

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<sup>140</sup> Mark Richard Siegal, *Hugo Gernsback, Father of Modern Science Fiction: With Essays on Frank Herbert and Bram Stoker* (San Bernadino, CA: Borgo Press, 1988).

<sup>141</sup> *Weird Tales*, created by J.C. Henneberger and J.M. Lansinger, is credited as the first *speculative* fiction magazine, as it published fantasy and horror fiction and released its first issue in March 1923.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Backhaus, “Acknowledging that Science is Political is a Prerequisite for Science-Based Policy,” *Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management* 15, no. 3 (May 2019): 310.

<sup>143</sup> Mike Cobley, “David Wingrove: The Art of Living in Interesting Times,” *Territories: The Slipstream Journal* 1, no. 1 (1992): 3.

<sup>144</sup> Cobley, “The Art of Living in Interesting Times,” 3.

with knowledge in the form of “thoughts they wouldn’t have otherwise have thought,” but it also has a future-oriented goal of exploring the potential consequences of the present.

This idea of using speculative elements to comment on the present is a key feature of many speculative fiction texts. A year after Wingrove’s interview, author Kim Stanley Robinson urged speculative fiction authors to “start imagining futures that are better just to give ourselves something to shoot for. And that’s where science fiction writers have a critical role, because we imagine futures, and if all the futures we imagined are just a pale reflection of the present moment, and we don’t do anything radical or subversive or challenging, then we’re not taking on our responsibilities.”<sup>145</sup> Much like Wingrove, Robinson does not say that speculative fiction predicts the future, but rather that the futures they write should be aspirational for those reading them in the present. Given Robinson’s long history of writing utopian fiction, this aspirational goal makes sense, though the futures portrayed in speculative fiction do not *have* to be this way. As Patrick Parrinder demonstrates, “[H. G.] Wells, [Yevgeny] Zamyatin, [George] Orwell and others wrote with subversive intent, using a bad future to underline a bad present.”<sup>146</sup> These authors use speculative fiction to force readers to confront issues in their societies by portraying dystopian futures. While these examples mention speculative *futures*, that is largely because the authors are citing science fiction, which is often more future-focused (more on the distinctions in speculative fiction in the Introduction chapter). In thinking through speculative fiction more capaciously, authors can utilize imagined pasts, futures, and alternative presents to critique our present.

Not all involved in creating speculative fiction, however, believe that the genre should be used for commenting on our present or creating change. Fans, authors, and editors often disagree

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<sup>145</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, “The Man from Utopia: An Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson,” *Territories: The Slipstream Journal*, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 5.

<sup>146</sup> Patrick Parrinder, “The Black Wave: Science and Social Consciousness in Modern SF,” *CritiFan: The Critical Fan’s Journal*, no. 2 (1979): 32.

about the role of speculative fiction, especially when it comes to potential sales. An example of this comes from fan Kevin Smith's article describing a writer's workshop panel at the seventh annual Novacon (an annual English speculative fiction fan convention) in 1977. During the panel Peter Weston, editor of the *Andromeda* speculative fiction anthology series, said, "We're not talking about literature, or art. We're talking about writing SF."<sup>147</sup> Smith's satirical account of the panel details the ways in which Weston is right, telling aspiring fans and writers that "We don't want any real people. ... We don't want morals, except easy ones that the hero can tell us at the end when he's beaten the bad guys to a pulp. We don't want any deep inner meaning, hidden in semi-colons. Hell, we don't want *any* meaning! We want meaningless stories."<sup>148</sup> To emphasize his point, Smith concludes by telling the readers to send their "solid, well-constructed, tightly-plotted, grammatically corrected, neatly typed, hollow, facile, instantly forgettable and artistically derelict stories" to Weston.<sup>149</sup> As Freeman described in his 1975 definition, fan writing is often humorous, and Smith's sarcastic tone underlines how he believes that those who think speculative fiction should be just for entertainment misunderstand the genre's purpose and what fans want.

Yet Weston's opinion is not an isolated one. Separately, fan Joseph Nicholas criticized how in the July 1977 issue of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* Lester Del Rey supposedly wrote that "writers shouldn't take their product too serious. Writers should be entertaining. Writers shouldn't make people *think*."<sup>150</sup> I include "supposedly" because this was Nicholas's description of Del Rey's article rather than a direct quotation. In turning to the actual article, Del Rey begins by arguing against the seriousness in speculative fiction authors by saying that writers do not need to

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<sup>147</sup> Kevin Smith, "The State of the Art," in *By British: A Fanthology of the Seventies*, eds. Ian Maula and Joseph Nicholas (New Malden, Surrey: Paranoid Press, 1979), 11.

<sup>148</sup> Smith, "The State of the Art," 11.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, "The State of the Art," 11.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph Nicholas, "What's Wrong with SF?", *Cyclotron*, nos. 4-5 (November 1977): 9.

“worry about making sure the reader knows every damned minor detail of his [*sic*] background, his [*sic*] characters, or his [*sic*] theme.”<sup>151</sup> The main thrust appears to be more about the economy of storytelling and not adding “60,000 words of ‘history’” to what should be a 7,000-word story, which is more writerly advice than a condemning of socially conscious speculative fiction. Shortly after this advice, however, Del Rey veers in the direction Nicholas alludes to, saying that no speculative fiction novel should be considered “seriously purposeful,” that these stories are meant “to be read, not studied,” and that when he reads speculative fiction, he “want[s] to be entertained.”<sup>152</sup> He backs up his claims by acknowledging that while there may be those who disagree, “from the sales figures [he] see[s], they are in the minority.”<sup>153</sup> While the sale figures likely tell one story of what fans are interested in, as evidenced by articles like those written by Smith and Nicholas, not all fans feel the same. Since Del Rey was leading the speculative fiction division of Ballantine Books at the time, Nicholas’s article expresses disbelief that a prominent editor, one making the decisions about which books would be published, believed speculative fiction should be for pleasure, not message. Of course, a text can be both, but editors and fans have long disagreed on what speculative fiction *should* be.

Even as the debate about the purpose of speculative fiction raged (and still rages), some authors believe that even if change is the goal, it may be too large a task for the genre. Author Ian McDonald, for example, laments that “it would be nice if [SF] writers could influence the society they live in, but not enough people read. The people who read the books are the people who share that same view as the writer anyways.”<sup>154</sup> Given the spike in popularity for speculative fiction media in the early twenty-first century (discussed in the Introduction chapter), the idea that not

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<sup>151</sup> Lester Del Rey, “The Reference Library,” *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* 97, no. 7 (July 1977): 170.

<sup>152</sup> Del Rey, “The Reference Library,” 170-71.

<sup>153</sup> Del Rey, “The Reference Library,” 171.

<sup>154</sup> Ian McDonald, “Ian McDonald in Conversation,” *Territories: The Slipstream Journal*, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 5.

enough people consume it may no longer be as relevant, but the second point requires more unpacking. While many fans do gravitate toward media by authors who share their viewpoints, that is not always the case. For many fans, the author's views are often secondary to the content they write—an example being how the reactionary group known as the Sad Puppies listed Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman: Overture* (2015) as a title for supporters to nominate at the Hugo Awards despite Gaiman's criticism of the group and his well-known progressive sensibilities (more on the Sad Puppies in Chapter Two). This idea can also be seen with author Brandon Sanderson, who is one of the most popular speculative fiction authors of his generation. His Kickstarter to fund four "secret novels" became, as of this writing, the most funded Kickstarter campaign of all time, raising over forty-one *million* dollars. Sanderson is also a practicing Mormon who is open about his faith and identifies as a "liberal democrat."<sup>155</sup> Given his extreme popularity, it is unlikely that *everyone* who reads his books holds the same religious and political beliefs he does.<sup>156</sup>

Sanderson's popularity provides an insight into the polysemy of speculative fiction texts and the ways this polysemy can be resisted. In his novel *Mistborn: The Alloy of Law* (2011), the character Marasi describes that the way to reduce crime in a poor section of the city is to renovate the area, even invoking the "broken windows theory" as support. Outside the novel, the broken windows theory has been criticized as having strong racial and class biases.<sup>157</sup> What is important about this scene, though, is that it has multiple interpretations. One interpretation is that the lack of explicit refutation from others when Marasi advocates for gentrification indicates that her

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<sup>155</sup> mistborn, "This comes up once in a while," Reddit, November 1, 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Fantasy/comments/7a5x50/comment/dp7lacw/>.

<sup>156</sup> Another example is Orson Scott Card, who is also a practicing Mormon. Given the popularity of his *Ender's Game* (1985–present) and *The Tales of Alvin Maker* (1987–2003) series, it is highly unlikely they are only read by members of the Church of Latter-day Saints

<sup>157</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, "Foreword: Race, Vagueness, and the Social Meaning of Order-Maintenance Policing," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 89, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 775-836; Bruce D. Johnson, Andrew Golub, and James McCabe, "The International Implications of Quality-of-Life Policing as Practiced in New York City," *Police Practice and Research* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17-29.

viewpoint should be seen as an accepted good, portraying Marasi and the message of the novel as advocating for policies that have historically harmed communities of color. Another interpretation is that Marasi is young, naïve, and more entrenched in theoretical work from her schooling than applied knowledge and that this inexperience keeps her from realizing the myriad biases in her proposed solution. When Waxillium, the man to whom she is speaking, only responds with a simple “Curious,” Marasi’s reply of “Of course, this isn’t the only answer” could be an emboldened continuation of her previous line of thought or it could be a hurried backtracking.<sup>158</sup> The rest of the novel does not return to this idea, so either interpretation could be true. The polysemy of the sequence fits with what Leah Ceccarelli describes as “strategic ambiguity,” which authors can employ so their audiences can interpret texts in a way that aligns with their ideologies.<sup>159</sup> Sanderson’s ideology is not clear based on this passage or even this single book, because it is written in a way that can appeal to multiple readers. There are fans, however, who will reject interpretations other than the one they have latched onto. One example is how men’s rights activists incorporate *The Matrix*’s (1999) red pill into their discourse and refuse to acknowledge the concept’s relevance beyond their community despite the Wachowski Sisters intending it as an allegory for the transgender experience.<sup>160</sup> As I explain further in Chapter Three, a key aspect of reactionaries is the resistance to alternative interpretations.

These polysemic interpretations are important to consider, as there is no singular way to approach speculative fiction. While some authors write with explicit political intent, others may aim only to tell an entertaining story, and still others may intend their fiction to convey one

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<sup>158</sup> Brandon Sanderson, *Mistborn: The Alloy of Law* (New York: Tor, 2011), 175-7.

<sup>159</sup> Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998): 395-415.

<sup>160</sup> Connie Hanzhang Jin, “‘I, Too, Was Living a Double Life’: Why Trans Fans Connect to ‘The Matrix,’” NPR, December 22, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/22/1066554369/the-matrix-original-trans-fans-resurrections>.

message while actually saying something entirely different, even in antithesis to their original intention. Just because speculative fiction has potential “for exploring the kinds of changes that our society is going through and will continue to go through, sociological, technological, etc.” does not mean all authors will *intentionally* use it for such.<sup>161</sup>

In this section, I have discussed the political and escapist elements of speculative fiction as two sides of a dichotomy, as that is how many of the cited fans and authors describe it, but, in reality, it is much more nuanced. Escapism can be considered political, as it provides an outlet for fans to remove themselves from the stressors of the “real world.” Similarly, what one person may call escapist fiction, another may view as overtly political or socially conscious and vice versa. One of the first results from searching “escapist speculative fiction” on Google is *The Magicians* (2009) by Lev Grossman, but that series deals with themes of depression, sexual assault, and power relationships in society, none of which feel like an escape from “real world” issues. Due to the breakdown in the supposed dichotomy, I proceed with John Grierson’s argument regarding cinema in mind: Media should be considered “a pulpit” that advocates a specific point of view and this media can be utilized to motivate audiences to act.<sup>162</sup> Regardless of whether the authors consider their work explicitly escapist or political, I consider speculative fiction to always have *the potential to be political*. Though, the “specific point of view” varies greatly from author-to-author, especially as the nature of speculative fiction’s politics has never been as clear cut as many assume.

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<sup>161</sup> Jeffrey D. Smith, ed. “Women in Science Fiction: A Symposium,” special issue, *Khatru* nos. 3-4 (1975): 5.

<sup>162</sup> John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 7. For more, see Max Dosser, “According to the Narrator, It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: Styles of Narration-as-Advocation in True-Crime Documentary Series,” *Journal of Film and Video* 75, no. 2 (2023): 45-62.

### 2.2.2 A Little to the Right or is it a Little to the Left?

Depending on who you ask, speculative fiction is either a deeply conservative or an unabashedly progressive genre, with any middle ground between the two rarely being acknowledged. The feud between the Futurians and New Fandom indicates that the fandom's ideology was not homogenous, but what about that of speculative fiction authors or their works? Is there a clear leaning toward or away from any specific ideology? The answer is complicated, but in short: No. Much how I contend that affect can be considered apolitical, so too can speculative fiction. Speculative fiction is "capable of either reinforcing the *status quo* or of helping to undermine it."<sup>163</sup> As such, speculative fiction should be considered politically ambivalent. The genre has no inherent ideological slant. Authors and fans can use the genre to advance their own ideologies without prohibiting someone from using it to advance theirs, even if the two conflict with one another. McDonald argues that speculative fiction "is the only literature of the present" and "ages gracelessly" because it is too tied to the present moment.<sup>164</sup> This view, however, overlooks how many texts remain relevant long after their publication and others that gain new relevance as time progresses. It particularly overlooks texts by minority writers about deep-seated cultural and identity issues. Since the present is experienced differently by different cultures, groups, and individuals, speculative fiction is not "the history of changing attitudes: it merely *reflects* them," and it does so differently in the works of different creators.<sup>165</sup>

Speculative fiction's ideological ambivalence is key to considering how authors have historically utilized the genre. Norwegian fan and author Oyvind Myhre, writing for the Libertarian

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<sup>163</sup> Parrinder, "The Black Wave," 49.

<sup>164</sup> Ian McDonald, "Searching for the Young Soul Rebels," *Territories: The Slipstream Journal*, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 12.

<sup>165</sup> Cay Dollerup, "A Disfavour to the Genre," *CritiFan: The Critical Fan's Journal*, no. 1 (October 1978): 16.



Alliance-sponsored fanzine *Cultural Notes*, agrees that speculative fiction has political potential, particularly in how it “allows the writer to construct his [*sic*] own worlds, his [*sic*] own political systems and his [*sic*] own societies. It also allows him [*sic*] to take present trends to their logical conclusions ... and to show his [*sic*] readers how this will change society in the long run.”<sup>166</sup> Myhre then calls on his readers to use speculative fiction as propaganda for Libertarianism since “it reaches a large number of people who could be readily converted to libertarianism, if only they were presented with the basic ideas in a consistent and entertaining manner.”<sup>167</sup> Here, Myhre not only acknowledges the political potential of speculative fiction but draws on Gernsback’s original idea: speculative fiction can supply knowledge in an entertaining way, though, for Myhre, the politics of that knowledge are overt.

Despite Myhre’s belief that there was a large audience of speculative fiction readers, by the time he was writing, speculative fiction still bore the pulp stigma of Gernsbackian and Campbellian magazines. Niall McA. Robertson, however, argues that the low critical status of speculative fiction should not worry fans “because SF does have a genuine social function,” namely that it is “influential, provoking thought on, and posing human implications of Political Change, War, Feminism.”<sup>168</sup> Unlike the Libertarianism that Myhre was advocating for, Robertson writes that “Just as Jack London’s fiction was a first step for many socialists, SF can spark thought and discussion on ‘Unpopular’ subjects like Anarchism ([Ursula K.] Le Guin) and Radical Feminism ([Joanna] Russ).”<sup>169</sup> The more subversive tendency of speculative fiction that Robertson discusses can be observed in how speculative fiction authors are capable of publishing social criticism, even in times of censorship, because on the surface these stories are about alternative

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<sup>166</sup> Oyvind Myhre, “Science Fiction: A Vision of Liberty,” *Cultural Notes*, no. 9 (1986): 1.

<sup>167</sup> Myhre, “Science Fiction: A Vision of Liberty,” 2-4.

<sup>168</sup> Niall McA. Robertson, “Damn the Torpedoes,” *Hindsight*, no. 1 (April 1982): 4.

<sup>169</sup> Robertson, “Damn the Torpedoes,” 5.

worlds and societies.<sup>170</sup> Authors can use the speculative fiction genre to advance social and political criticism, to portray our present through alternative worlds, and to advocate for their ideologies, but the genre is not restricted to a single lens. This is evidenced by how authors such as Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia E. Butler, and Colson Whitehead were writing Afrofuturism at the same time that Ward Kendall wrote and published a novel where a group of white-skinned humans called the “Nayra” (try spelling it backwards) fled the increasingly diverse Earth to join an all-white utopian colony on Mars.<sup>171</sup>

Despite the various ways speculative fiction has been used by authors and fans, many have attempted to advance their preferred view of speculative fiction history. Parrinder, for example, claims that the “Golden Age” of science fiction (1940-1960) “was characterized by technology-worship and an implicit sexist attitude” and that speculative fiction of the time had “a very clear-cut social identity. ... SF offered escape from the pressures of maturation into an exotic man’s world where emotions and feelings were terse and utilitarian, and sexuality was almost entirely latent.”<sup>172</sup> Parrinder contrasts the so-called Golden Age with speculative fiction of 1960-1979, where “sex and—occasionally—feminism have come to the fore. The audience has certainly become more diverse. ... It also possesses increasing social and political awareness.”<sup>173</sup> Following the Golden Age, there was a “New Wave” of speculative fiction writers—an informal group of British and US American authors whose stories and novels established speculative fiction as a “literature of serious social comment” through their engagement with gender, race, and

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<sup>170</sup> Ellen Pedersen and Niels Dalgaard, “A CritiFan Talk with Frederik Pohl,” *CritiFan: The Critical Fan’s Journal*, no. 2 (1979): 14-15.

<sup>171</sup> For more on Afrofuturism and its connection with speculative fiction, see Elisabeth Abena Osei, “Wakanda Africa Do You See? Reading *Black Panther* as a Decolonial Film through the Lens of the Sankofa Theory,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 4 (2020): 378-90; Isiah Lavender III, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019); Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

<sup>172</sup> Parrinder, “The Black Wave,” 16.

<sup>173</sup> Parrinder, “The Black Wave,” 17.

sexuality.<sup>174</sup> Yet, while speaking at the 1975 Women in Science Fiction symposium Luise White, a member of the New Wave, argued that there were feminist themes in speculative fiction long before 1975.<sup>175</sup> White specifically cites Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1953) as an example of feminism in speculative fiction—a novel authored by two Futurians in the middle of the Golden Age. A counter to such a claim could be that both Pohl and Kornbluth are men, so even if feminist themes were present, non-male authors were not. Eric Leif Davin and Justine Larbalestier, however, have demonstrated that while there is a prevailing narrative that prior to 1965 only a handful of women wrote speculative fiction and those who did either wrote stories as if they were men to conceal their gender or wrote solely about domestic issues, this narrative is verifiably false.<sup>176</sup>

Rather than speculative fiction being “just as conservative and sexist—perhaps even more so—as the rest of society,” Davin argues that the genre has always been “a battleground where representatives of dominant groups and traditional values were jostled by ‘outsider’ groups contending on a basis of relative equality for recognition.”<sup>177</sup> Beyond women, Davin contends that the genre was receptive to Jewish authors and Black authors as well. This view was at least partially shared by New Wave author Suzy McKee Charnas who, at the 1975 Women in Science Fiction symposium, stated that speculative fiction is “suited to the needs of *any* group that feels itself to be oppressed,” implying that imagined realities allow readers and authors to push back against or even to escape the oppressive facets of society.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Marshall B. Tymn, “Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism,” *American Studies International* 23, no. 1 (April 1985): 47.

<sup>175</sup> Smith, “Women in Science Fiction,” 39.

<sup>176</sup> Eric Leif Davin, *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction 1926-1960* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

<sup>177</sup> Davin, *Partners in Wonder*, 2-3.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, “Women in Science Fiction,” 9.

Not all agree about the beating progressive heart of post-Golden Age speculative fiction, especially when it comes to how the genre engages with traditionally marginalized identities, both historically and in the present. Isiah Lavender III argues that speculative fiction “has an unwarranted reputation for being ‘progressive’ in matters of race and racism.”<sup>179</sup> Beyond texts from the Golden Age, Lavender discusses works from throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, highlighting how a series as recent as *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) metaphorically lynches its sole primary Black character in a way that can be read as retaliation for his earlier romantic relationship with the white, female protagonist. Even Charnas, who believes that speculative fiction “lets women write their dreams as well as their nightmares,” argues that apart from “a few notable exceptions” early male speculative fiction writers chose to ignore feelings, sexuality, and power and to instead write “flippant or savage misogynistic paranoia.”<sup>180</sup> I bring up these competing visions not to side with one over the other, but rather to demonstrate that even those who believe speculative fiction has political potential disagree on what the genre has historically been or what its ideological identity is—past or present.

One of the clearest examples of the lack of ideological sameness in speculative fiction is the author-sponsored advertisements for and against the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. In June 1968, a pair of advertisements appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction* and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, one of which included a list of authors and fans who believed the United States must remain in Vietnam, the other of which included a list of authors who opposed the participation in the war (Figure 1). Richard Lupoff observes that “every author or editor who signed the ‘war’ ad was a traditionalist” and that there are more names on the anti-war/peace list than on the pro-war side despite the pro-war being signed by professional *and* fans while the anti-

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<sup>179</sup> Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>180</sup> Smith, “Women in Science Fiction,” 8-9.

war was solely made up of professionals.<sup>181</sup> Despite the fact that speculative fiction reflects the culture in which it is written, when authors Kate Wilhelm and Judith Merril sought signatures for the anti-war ad, they “assumed that ‘95 percent’ of the writers would sign because of the ‘global and anti-racist view’ that supposedly guided SF.”<sup>182</sup> This assumption proved false, as authors such as Robert A. Heinlein “responded with vociferous declarations of ‘America first’ and the ‘US must win.’”<sup>183</sup> As H. Bruce Franklin illustrates, “the pro-war list reads like a roll call of champions of super science and supermen, of manly and military virtue, while the anti-war list includes almost the entire vanguard of ‘New Wave’ SF, profoundly hostile to technocracy, militarism, and imperialism.”<sup>184</sup> By looking at the fiction produced by the two groups, it is evident that author ideology is reflected in their work, which can be seen in how names like Heinlein, John W. Campbell, and the New Fandom founder Sam Moskowitz populate the pro-war ad, while Ursula K. Le Guin, Gene Roddenberry, Samuel R. Delaney, and Futurian Donald A. Wollheim fill the anti-war one.

Despite the clear differentiation between the two groups, Frederik Pohl, the editor of *Galaxy Science Fiction* at the time, argued that “there’s not a pennyworth of difference between them” and, moreover, “if these two groups each constituted a committee for the construction of a world ... and their optimum worlds were compared, they would be essentially the same world.”<sup>185</sup> Based on their differing opinions on the war and the worlds they create in their fiction, this does not appear to be the case. Pohl’s editorial further illustrates how even someone within speculative

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<sup>181</sup> Richard Lupoff, “Science Fiction Hawks and Doves: Whose Future Will You Buy?,” *Ramparts*, no. 10 (February 1972): 26-27.

<sup>182</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, “The Vietnam War as American Science Fiction and Fantasy,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 17, no. 3 (November 1990): 342.

<sup>183</sup> Franklin, “The Vietnam War as American Science Fiction and Fantasy,” 342.

<sup>184</sup> Franklin, “The Vietnam War as American Science Fiction and Fantasy,” 342.

<sup>185</sup> Frederik Pohl, “On Inventing Futures,” *Galaxy Science Fiction* 26, no. 5 (June 1968): 7.

fiction publishing can misunderstand the various ideologies supported by the genre and its potential influence.

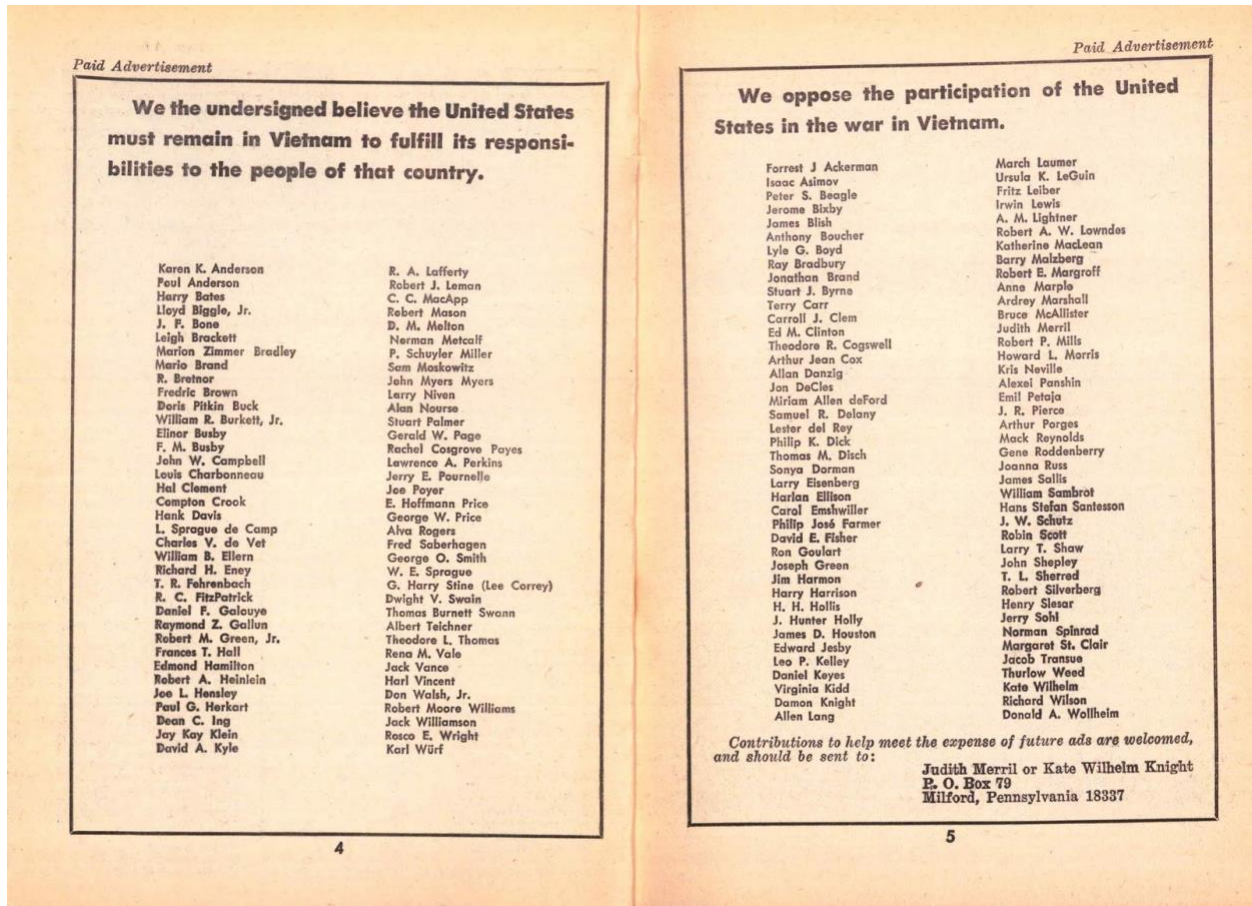


Figure 1. Pro- and Anti-Vietnam War Advertisements from *Galaxy Science Fiction* 26, no. 5 (June 1968): 4-5.

In discussing this chapter with my co-editor at *Flash Point Science Fiction*, Thomas J. Griffin, he said that there should not be a debate over whether speculative fiction is escapist or if it is meant to be political. As he argues, “SF can be activist or escapist. Just write it and let readers decide what they want to read.”<sup>186</sup> This perspective, particularly from an editor who is attempting to acquire stories that appeal to as large a population of readers and fans as possible, makes a certain amount of sense. Rather than saying speculative fiction *must* be escapist or political,

<sup>186</sup> Thomas J. Griffin, text message to the author, February 22, 2023.

reactionary or progressive, Griffin contends that it can be either. And as I establish in the previous section, as paradoxical as it may sound, it can be both. Ultimately, it is up for the reader to decide what it is and what they want to read. The genre’s polysemy suggests Ceccarelli’s concept of “hermeneutic depth,” where texts should not be seen as having a singular “correct” meaning; rather, the audience of the text/textual field should recognize the multitude of possible meanings it could have.<sup>187</sup> What is important to keep in mind, however, is that fandoms are vocal—they discuss what they like, what they dislike, what they want more of, and what they want less of. Many of the fans I discuss in this dissertation quite clearly want less politics in their speculative fiction, or at least less of *certain* politics. Even those who claim to want to keep the political out of speculative fiction mainly work to keep particular viewpoints and voices out of speculative fiction while simultaneously advocating for their own ideologies. It is with this desire for a specific version of speculative fiction in mind that I now turn to speculative fiction fandom more broadly and read it as political.

## **2.3 Speculative Fiction Fandom as Political**

### **2.3.1 A History of Speculative Fiction Fandom’s Politics**

In an early 1980 issue of the fanzine *Cidereal Times*, Jerry Maier authored an open letter to speculative fiction fans criticizing them for reading “escapist fiction ([Maier] won’t grace it with the title ‘literature’) that any totalitarian government ought to be pleased to patronise.”<sup>188</sup> Maier’s

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<sup>187</sup> Ceccarelli, “Polysemy,” 395-415.

<sup>188</sup> Jerry Maier, “An Open Letter to All Science Fiction Readers,” *Cidereal Times*, no. 9 (February 1980): 12.

criticism early in the letter states that science fiction cares little about actual science, that the stories are too similar, and that the genre has little cultural impact when compared to fiction such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), *The Jungle* (1906), or *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-1923). Midway through the more typical criticisms of the genre's shortcomings, however, Maier makes a more incisive argument regarding the ideological issues with speculative fiction: "Wherever and whenever it's set SF celebrates the universal expansion of american WASP culture, and its enshrined myths of expansion, economic growth and squalid materialism."<sup>189</sup> Maier criticizes specific texts—like Isaac Asimov's *Pebble in the Sky* (1950), which concludes with the US Constitution inspiring freedom in the galaxy despite, as Maier points out, the document not recognizing Indigenous people as human beings with rights—as well as more systemic issues with the genre, arguing it is highly exclusionary. His letter ends with two central critiques: 1) speculative fiction is racist ("how many black, chinese, indian or islamic SF writers are there? Look at the alien and all you see is a xenophobic portrayal of the ethnic oriental, the black or the race who was the enemy at the time"), and 2) speculative fiction is sexist ("How many heroes of SF novels are women and how many are window dressing, or curt obeisance to women's lib? How many authors still use women as sex objects and little else, how many titillate their presumably male audience with perversions at the expense of women?").<sup>190</sup>

The letter column in the following issue of *Cidereal Times* was filled with fans denouncing Maier's claims, or at least *some* of the claims. In the pages before the letters, fan and author Rob Carter supplied an article about Maier's critique that set the tone for the other responses. In his piece, Carter writes that while Maier makes many good points, "SF is a business. It's not

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<sup>189</sup> Maier, "An Open Letter to All Science Fiction Readers," 13.

<sup>190</sup> Maier, "An Open Letter to All Science Fiction Readers," 13.



literature.”<sup>191</sup> Rather than engaging with Maier’s critiques of speculative fiction’s racist and sexist traditions, Carter focuses on the claims of the genre’s repetitive nature, arguing that, because speculative fiction is a business, repetition is required as that is what the fans will pay for. This aligns with how Weston and Del Rey describe speculative fiction—it is a business and meant for pleasure. In viewing speculative fiction this way, Carter, Weston, and Del Rey do not attempt to address any genre deficits. These deficits sell, so why address them? Doing so could alienate potential buyers. This line of thinking is reminiscent of a call-and-response in the fanzine *Battleground* in which fan Reubs Willmott criticizes speculative fiction comics for their rampant misogyny and calls on fans and authors to do better.<sup>192</sup> The editor, Andy Brewer, responds in an editorial placed at the bottom of Willmott’s article writing that, “Pornography, and sexism in the media, only exists because there is an audience large enough to sustain it, and there doesn’t seem to be a large enough female audience to create a ‘wank’ industry for them.”<sup>193</sup> Brewer argues that there are not enough female fans to warrant removing women from overly sexualized “wank fantasies” or for placing men in them instead of women. There *are*, he argues, enough male fans who want misogyny in comics, and since they are the supposed majority, the misogyny should and will remain. Brewer’s argument aligns with Carter’s: comic book publishing, like speculative fiction publishing, is a business and until fans stop buying what they offer and pay for something else, they will continue making the same content, no matter if it is stale, sexist, or racist (more on the protection of profits leading to a reinforcing of norms in Chapter Four).

While the fan letters following Carter’s article in the *Cidereal Times* do not argue that speculative fiction is a business, they similarly ignore Maier’s critique of racism and sexism in the

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<sup>191</sup> Rob Carter, “An Open Reply to Jerry Maier,” *Cidereal Times*, no. 10 (Mid. 1980): 12.

<sup>192</sup> Reubs Willmott, “Fallout,” *Battleground*, no. 3 (1992-1993): 41.

<sup>193</sup> Andy Brewer, “Editor Response to Fallout,” *Battleground*, no. 3 (1992-1993): 41.

genre. Dave Clements contends that Maier wants “meticulously accurate deathless prose” and in order to achieve that “the escapist element we secretly seek must be banished from our genre and SF condemned to be more pretentious than it is currently accused of being.”<sup>194</sup> D. West paraphrases author Brian Aldiss by writing, “Science fiction is no more written for scientists than Ghost Stories are written for ghosts” as a dismissal of the idea that science fiction is a poor genre due to its representation of science.<sup>195</sup> Letters by Ian McKeer, B.T. Jeeves, and Mike Paine also focus on Maier’s critique of speculative fiction’s shoddy science and conclude that Maier just hates speculative fiction, as they claim so many non-fans do. The only letter that engages with Maier’s more meaningful critiques of the genre is by Mike Evis, who says that he agrees with many points that Maier makes and thinks they need saying but argues that Maier “seems unaware that there is an entire sub-genre of social comment in SF, all the way from the oft-quoted *Brave New World* thru *Bug Jack Barron* to the excellent *The Dispossessed*.”<sup>196</sup> The inclusion of *Bug Jack Barron* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) is notable, as they are by New Wave authors Norman Spinrad and Ursula K. Le Guin, respectively. Yet, as I illustrate in the previous section, the New Wave was not *the* predominant force in speculative fiction. While it has proven influential on many writers and the genre overall today, it was considered one faction among many. By the next issue of *Cidereal Times*, few letters mention Maier’s critique and those who do largely agree with Carter’s response. Rather than engaging with Maier, these fans mention that there are “glaring holes” in Maier’s argument but do not explain what those holes are. Their focus is primarily on discovering who “Jerry Maier” is a pseudonym for and asking if it was just provocation by editor Alan Boyd-

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<sup>194</sup> Dave Clements, “Cidereal Times Letter Column,” *Cidereal Times*, no. 10 (Mid. 1980): 15.

<sup>195</sup> D. West, “Cidereal Times Letter Column,” *Cidereal Times*, no. 10 (Mid. 1980): 17.

<sup>196</sup> Mike Evis, “Cidereal Times Letter Column,” *Cidereal Times*, no. 10 (Mid. 1980): 19.

Newton to increase engagement with the fanzine. By the following issue Maier's critique is no longer mentioned.

I begin this section with the account of Maier's letter not to say that all speculative fiction fans ignore critiques of the genre or that fans in general are unable to deal with criticism, but to illustrate how fans may turn on those they believe do not understand or appreciate the object of their fandom. While I have already established—through the feud between New Fandom and the Futurians as well as with many of the fanzines already cited—that there are ideological differences within fandom and within speculative fiction at large, this anecdote reveals how quickly fans such as McKeer, Jeeves, and Paine created an us-versus-them division. They dismissed the critique by accusing Maier of being a non-fan. Maier's letter, however, appeared in a fanzine dedicated to speculative fiction, one that required a paid subscription. The mere fact that the letter exists implies that Maier has some affective connection with the material, be it as a fan or an anti-fan (the distinctions between these are elaborated in Chapter Three). Yet, because Maier criticized speculative fiction, they were cast as someone who *hates* speculative fiction, and thus, as someone whose critique should be ignored. This tendency to create factions where an opposing view is dismissed because it clashes with one's own is not restricted to fandoms but plays out in politics and culture at large as well.

The us-versus-them ideal of fandom often leads to a creation of an idealized version of a fan object that does not align with reality. Lawrence Grossberg would explain fandom's tendency to create an us-versus-them mentality as a result of affective attachments, specifically attachments to specific contexts or interpretations that become saturated with affect, which can lead to "affective alliances" within the fanbase.<sup>197</sup> A clear example of this is how certain more

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<sup>197</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 58-9.

“traditional” fans, fans who considered themselves stalwarts of speculative fiction fandom, disparaged those who came into the fandom after the Golden Age. In 1966, as the New Wave in speculative fiction was truly taking off, fan Bill Donaho wrote that, “Fans don’t like modern science fiction, but they have been unable to agree on what kind they do want. Obviously a return to the Good Old Days or to the Golden Age is impossible. But we don’t like what we have now.”<sup>198</sup> Despite Donaho’s claims, more and more fan conventions developed as did many fanzines in the post-Golden Age era, implying that there *was* a base who enjoyed this newer kind of speculative fiction. Similarly, Mike Cobley derided newer fans as “DrWhoStarWarsTrekkies” and blamed their “crass buying decisions and cretinous behavior” for speculative fictions “risible public profile.”<sup>199</sup> While *Doctor Who* (1963-present), *Star Trek* (1966-present), and *Star Wars* (1977-present) are not directly products of New Wave authors, they do represent a shift in speculative fiction. Notably, they were and remain extremely popular not just with speculative fiction fans but with the general public as well. They helped to thrust speculative fiction media into the mainstream, but rather than embracing the influx of new fans and new speculative fiction media, many fans reacted negatively.

Fans like Donaho and Cobley responded to this shift in speculative fiction by casting the new fans as separate (a “them” to the traditional speculative fiction fans’ “us”) and by scorning the new speculative fiction media as separate from “real” speculative fiction. In his fanzine article on how speculative fiction became politicized, Graham Shepard describes two groups of people: those who hate speculative fiction and those who hate what speculative fiction has become. He uses the example of *Star Wars* to demonstrate how the out-group (those who hate speculative

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<sup>198</sup> Bill Donaho, “Two Westercons,” *Habakkuk* 2, vol. 2 (August 1966): 26.

<sup>199</sup> Mike Cobley, “Shark Tactics: The Unacceptable Face of SF,” *Territories: The Slipstream Journal*, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 7.

fiction) “will classify all SF as escapist rubbish, and thereby miss the point” and the in-group (those who hate what speculative fiction has become) “will classify only the film (or whatever) as escapist rubbish, and claim that ‘real’ SF has nothing whatever to do with this nonsense.”<sup>200</sup> While Shepard uses the *Star Wars* example to contend that speculative fiction fans dismiss criticism of the genre by either stating that 1) you do not know about speculative fiction or 2) what you are criticizing is not *actually* speculative fiction, his argument also reveals the nostalgic longings that motivate much of speculative fiction’s traditionalist fandom. Beyond Shepard’s description of two groups, there is at least a third: the people who are fans of *Star Wars* and whose fandom of *Star Wars* led them into speculative fiction more broadly. In the estimation of fans like Donaho and Cobley, however, the more modern or popular speculative fiction is a betrayal of what speculative fiction is supposed to be, so it is not true speculative fiction. This idea is explored further in Chapter Three with the #NotMyLuke campaign, but these fans reject the very legitimacy of something as speculative fiction if it is embraced by the “them” in the us-versus-them schema.

This faction of “us” fans may also be affectively attached to an idea of what speculative fiction “used to be” when that was never truly the case, or perhaps they reject a past version of speculative fiction to only embrace what they prefer to remember. In the 1964 editorial for his fanzine *Logorrhea*, Tom Perry complained that WorldCon was changing in order to make things safer for child-aged fans, which, Perry claimed, was only going to alienate and “make it untenable for adults.”<sup>201</sup> While Perry’s complaint is primarily about how the new policies will make a section of the fandom uncomfortable, it is prefaced by a discussion of a lawsuit where unlawful activity toward a child was perpetrated at the con by “Fan X.” Perry’s account describes how the child’s lawyers contend the convention committee should be held civilly and criminally responsible if,

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<sup>200</sup> Graham Shepard, “Politicising SF: The ‘Boring Old Future’ Syndrome,” *Hindsight*, no. 1 (April 1982): 8.

<sup>201</sup> Tom Perry, “Editorial,” *Logorrhea*, no. 6 (1964): 1.

despite knowing Fan X's history of doing "illegal things with children," they were allowed to attend and thus perpetrate crimes at the con. Beyond the tacit approval of activity that is implied to be pedophilic or other violence, Perry is angry that children are allowed to dilute speculative fandom. He calls them "monster fans" and argues that "It shouldn't be too hard to see that association with [these] fans hurts SF fandoms."<sup>202</sup> Much like Donaho and Cobley, Perry attempts to retain the "purity" of fandom and speculative fiction by dictating what and who should be allowed—preferring the traditional over the modern. Perry even rebels against Donaho after Donaho told him that the committee is making changes because they feel that they "owe the kids some protection particularly since by [the convention's] policies [they] are attracting a large number of young kids that would not otherwise be at the convention."<sup>203</sup> Perry's solution: get rid of the kids, get rid of the monsters, and keep speculative fiction and its fandom adult and pure.

While Cobley, Perry, and other traditionalist fans attempt to maintain the sanctity of their version of speculative fiction, their preferences have little basis in reality. Wanting speculative fiction fandom to be adult-only ignores how the origins of speculative fiction fandom in the 1930s and beyond was largely driven by teenagers. In advancing a vision of speculative fiction fandom that views the influx of young DrWhoStarWarsTrekkies as bad for speculative fiction, it creates an opening for affective alliances between those who prefer speculative fiction to be a particular way—be it adult only, more reminiscent of the Golden Age, or exclusionary in myriad other ways. While the affective alliances over a desired exclusion based on a distorted reading of the past certainly develop in fandom, they also occur in political, social, and cultural movements, where groups may misrepresent the past to best reflect their ideologies.

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<sup>202</sup> Perry, "Editorial," 1.

<sup>203</sup> Perry, "Editorial," 1.

### 2.3.2 Speculative Fiction Fandoms are (and have been) Political

The question could be raised as to why I focus specifically on *speculative fiction* fandoms rather than other genre fandoms or fandoms more generally. Based on my earlier referencing of Grierson, I maintain that media has political potential, so could I not discuss historical fiction and its fandom? The depictions of history in the genre could certainly communicate the author's and their fans' ideologies through the various elements emphasized and diminished. Or why not focus more on fans of particular reactionary political figures, asking how these politicians affectively motivate their fans to act in certain ways? Either approach would produce significant scholarship, and I draw on studies of politician/politics-based fandoms in this chapter just as I explain the connection between speculative fiction and historical fiction in the Introduction chapter, but neither are the central focus of this dissertation. I choose to focus on speculative fiction and its fandoms because, as Gerard Jones argues, much of "geek culture" (comics, computers, video games, collectible figurines, etc.) either grew out of speculative fiction or mimicked its form.<sup>204</sup> Speculative fiction fandom is in many ways the prototypical fandom, so the zines, conventions, fan fiction, fan art, and myriad other activities that we associate with being a "fan" largely originate in or are inspired by the speculative fiction fandom space. This does not make speculative fiction inherently more important or worthy of study than other fandoms, but as it has features common to other fandoms, it provides a solid foundation to consider fandoms more broadly, be they for popular culture or political figures. It is also vital to consider that speculative fiction fandom is "an offspring from the mundane world and therefore has many things in common with other societies

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<sup>204</sup> Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 37.

that occupy more important niches in that world.”<sup>205</sup> It is this connection between the “mundane world” and fandom that enables one to read fandom as more than being interested in politics but rather as political itself.

Given the stigma attached not only to speculative fiction but to fandom at large, reading the latter as political may appear farfetched. Liesbet van Zoonen summarizes why many believe fandom and the political are separate: “Fandom is thought to be based on an affective appreciation of specific objects rather than on a critical cognitive assessment. Political activities, on the other hand, are generally considered to be the quintessence of good citizenship,” and this assumption has resulted in “the *passive* fan and the *active* citizen [being] constructed as absolute opposites.”<sup>206</sup> As Van Zoonen and many other scholars make clear, however, the assumption that fandom is passive is flawed. The clearest example of this is fan activism. Fan activism can be focused on the object of the fandom, such as protesting the casting practices for a film or marshalling support for a television series that is on the verge of cancellation, or it can utilize the community created by their shared fandom to mobilize social change, such as when K-Pop fans raised funds for Black Lives Matter and flooded racist social media hashtags with memes to drown out the offensive content.<sup>207</sup> While Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport describe fan activism as “not about the mix between political concerns and culture but rather action that looks like political activism but is used toward nonpolitical ends,” this ignores the overlap between politics and culture as well as how fandoms can be explicitly political.<sup>208</sup> Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova instead suggest that fan activism should be understood as “fan-driven efforts to address civic or political

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<sup>205</sup> Keith Freeman, “Still Rampant,” *Blazon*, no. 2 (July 1975): 4.

<sup>206</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 61, (my emphasis).

<sup>207</sup> Shreyas Reddy, “K-Pop Fans Emerge as a Powerful Force in US Protests,” BBC, June 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52996705>.

<sup>208</sup> Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, “Movement Societies and Digital Protest: Fan Activism and Other Nonpolitical Protest Online,” *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 3 (2009): 221.



issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content,” and caution against the purist view of the “political” as actions only concerned with legislative impacts.<sup>209</sup> Whether the fans are working to save a series they love or using their fandom to unite a group of people around a larger social movement, fan activism reveals that many fans are anything but passive (more on the concept of fan activism in Chapter Three).

While fan activism is a counterexample to the false dichotomy of passive fans/active citizens, fan activity can also be seen on a smaller scale. Fans create fan fiction and fan art, they attend and volunteer at conventions, they vote for industry awards, they contact creative forces to make their opinions known, and they discuss of the object of their fandoms with each other, debating the merits of narrative decisions and creative forces.<sup>210</sup> This activity can be seen in each of the extended examples I have employed so far: The Futurians and New Fandom (even while attempting to undermine each other) worked to create a convention that would bring together fans and to provide an avenue for communal fan activity, Jerry Maier critiqued speculative fiction with the likely aim of changing it for the better, and Tom Perry pushed back against changes in fandom to maintain his imagined, preferred past of fandom. While these examples feature fans creating change primarily within their community, in each they actively perform their fandom.

The description of fans as passive consumers has been challenged, but there is still the idea that fandoms do not meet the standard of “political” or of a “public,” when one considers a public to be made of political subjects who precipitate common action through mass-mediated communication.<sup>211</sup> According to Daniel Dayan, there are four features that characterize publics: 1)

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<sup>209</sup> Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, “Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation,” *Transformative Works and Culture*, no. 10 (2012): 2.3.

<sup>210</sup> John Fiske argues that fan productivity is not only creating new texts (i.e., fan fiction, fan art, etc.) but it also “participates in the construction of the original text.” “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 40.

<sup>211</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 83-100.

the feeling of sharing a community with (real or imagined) others, 2) the ability to make demands and levy criticisms, 3) continued sociability and debate, and 4) the capacity for performance.<sup>212</sup> Beyond my description in the previous paragraphs demonstrating that fandoms can fit each of the criteria, Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst argue that “fans are *skilled* or *competent* in different modes of production and consumption; *active* in their interaction with texts and in their production of new texts; and *communal* in that they construct different communities based on their links to the programmes they like.”<sup>213</sup> Despite the connection, Dayan contends that fandoms are *not* a public, as “the activities of the fan reflect a world of play and mimicry, a social reality that could be described as closed off, marginal, a game. ... Here is a public without a commissive dimension, without a sense of seriousness.”<sup>214</sup> The dismissal of fandom as not “serious” or lacking a commitment to future action has been and will continue to be shown to be an erroneous assumption. Van Zoonen argues that Dayan’s distancing of fan activities from civic performance stems from the desire to separate politics and entertainment.<sup>215</sup> The separation breaks down under scholars such as Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, who argues that the practices of fandom have strong connections in both form and function to that of political action.<sup>216</sup> Even when considering what is it means to be a “proper” citizen, “the behavior of fans in relation to soaps, popular music, and other entertainment genres is not fundamentally different from what is required of citizens.”<sup>217</sup> Despite arguing that entertainment and politics, that fandom and publics, are separate, Dayan’s features enables one to illustrate their many commonalities.

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<sup>212</sup> Daniel Dayan, “The Peculiar Public of Television,” *Media, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6 (2001): 743-65.

<sup>213</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: SAGE, 1998), 127.

<sup>214</sup> Dayan, “The Peculiar Public of Television,” 752.

<sup>215</sup> Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 56.

<sup>216</sup> Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 130.

<sup>217</sup> Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 16.

The last assumption that often leads to the separation of fans and politics is the assumption that fandom is emotional while politics are rational. Given the scope of scholarship produced about the uses of anger, pride, shame, fear, etc. in political and social movements, it is clear that politics are not rooted solely in rationality. Josue David Cisneros argues that we “understand the ways that publics are formed through moving and circulating ‘affective ecologies’ of texts, tropes, bodies, and structures of feeling.”<sup>218</sup> Emotions bonds these groups together—be they fandoms, social movements, or political groups—and as Adam Roberts succinctly puts it: “fans love SF, and love is not an emotion to be treated lightly.”<sup>219</sup> But can fandoms also be rational? Is fandom solely rooted in emotion? I argue that just as politics can be emotional *and* rational, so too can fandom. While emotions may draw fans in, the effectiveness of their campaigns and activism would be vastly different if they operated solely through pathos. And just as I have described that authors are capable of polysemy in their ideological messaging to appeal to a variety of audiences, there may also be audiences who support media objects through fan art and discussion for reasons apart from the narrative—a form of *strategic fandom*, where the fandom is more due to ideological reasons than it is for textual ones. Even in this situation, rationality and emotion can be mixed. The rationality causing one to support a fan object to bring its ideology more attention, and emotion through the expression of fandom and sense of community generated through the fandom.

While fandoms do form over shared affective attachments, they are also extremely personal and fulfilling to the individual fans. Cornel Sandvoss has described fandom as the “most dedicated form of media consumption and production—articulating a sense of who we are and strive to be through our fan engagement with the object of fandom from television shows and musicians to

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<sup>218</sup> Josue David Cisneros, “Borders, Bodies, Buses, and Butterflies: Migration and Rhetoric of Social Movement” in *The Conceit of Context: Resituating Domains in Rhetorical Studies*, eds. Charles E. Morris III and Kendall R. Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 170.

<sup>219</sup> Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2.

sports teams.”<sup>220</sup> This personal connection to the fan object then can motivate political and social action, especially as the media objects (particularly the “content worlds” in speculative fiction media) can act “as potent civic sources of imagination, affect, and ethics.”<sup>221</sup> In fact, fans’ investments in their fan objects, the communities they build to discuss the fan object, and their tendency to propose alternatives for what *could have happened* in the text are, in the abstract, equivalent to the essentials of democratic politics: information, discussion, and activism.<sup>222</sup> Fandoms, then, can be political in the activism they engage in and through the textual fields they support and the information they disseminate about their preferred objects. Fans—even fans in the minority of their specific fandom—can utilize their attachments to the object of their fandom to create change, often in more immediate and tangible ways than one would expect from a citizen engaging in traditional political activity.

As this section demonstrates, not only are the distinctions separating fandom and politics arbitrary, but fandom’s ability to create active communities that are bonded together through shared affective attachments enables one to read fandom as political. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington believe that research into fan communities and audiences can further “our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world.”<sup>223</sup> This bonding with ourselves and others is important in fandom just as it is in politics. Through truly engaging with the potential of fandom, one can see the impact fandom can

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<sup>220</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, “Toward an Understanding of Political Enthusiasm as Media Fandom: Blogging, Fan Productivity and Affect in American Politics,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 260.

<sup>221</sup> Stephanie Betz, “‘Elf Lives Matter?’ The racial dynamics of participatory politics in a predominantly White fandom,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (2022): 15.

<sup>222</sup> Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 63.

<sup>223</sup> Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, “Introduction: Why Study Fans?” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 10

have socially and politically. With fandom's political potentialities established, I turn to political and social movements and read them as fandoms.

## **2.4 Politics and Social Movements as Fandoms**

The crowd impatiently waits as the empty stage looms before them. They are never completely silent—there are too many people for there to be silence, not with their taut anticipation for what is to come. The charged atmosphere erupts into applause as the clock on the screen ticks to midnight and then fades. A series of images showing different eras of music icon Taylor Swift's career fade in and out on the screen. Then a physical section of the screen lifts to reveal a series of figures wearing billowing, pink tie-dyed, peacock-esque tails that stand roughly ten feet above their heads. One-by-one they saunter down the catwalk. Upon reaching the center of the stage, they kneel, creating a shroud, almost a cocoon. Suddenly, the figures pull back and from where their plumes rested moments ago stands Swift. The crowd applauds rapturously as Swift begins her hit song "Miss Americana & the Heartbreak Prince."

This is a description of the Taylor Swift concert in Pittsburgh, PA on June 16, 2023, and while the presentation and content are significantly different, there are many elements not dissimilar from what one might have seen during Donald Trump's presidential campaign rally in Pittsburgh on September 22, 2020. Trump was less theatrical: rather than being lifted through the bottom of the stage into a tie-dyed cocoon, Trump stepped off Trump Force One and onto the stage, waving and smirking as Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" scored his entrance. Yet both events brought out ardent supporters who chanted along or filled in gaps in the song/speech ("So casually cruel in the name of being honest" and "One, two, three, let's go bitch")

for Swift; “Four more years,” “USA,” and “Lock them up” for Trump), who created or bought signs and apparel to showcase their support, who waited for hours to gain admittance to the performance, and who ecstatically applauded throughout. Trump dubbed his 2023-24 campaign the “Retribution Tour,” much how Swift called her 2023-24 tour the “Eras Tour.” Additionally, in an odd moment of synchronicity, both Swift and Trump fans have an LGB acronym: Swift’s fans mean “Let’s go bitch,” while Trump’s mean “Let’s go Brandon”—though the meanings differ wildly. I use this comparison not to say that Swifties (the name Taylor Swift fans have given themselves) and Trump’s fanbase are the same, nor even to establish that politicians have fans, as that has already been demonstrated. Instead, I open with this comparison to illustrate the similarities between something that is seen as a popular fanbase and those who are largely seen as part of political movement, in this example Trumpism. The similarities expand beyond fans of celebrities like Swift and Trump to sports teams, speculative fiction, and political movements at large.

In the previous section, I consider the factors that many consider to separate fandom from the political and demonstrated how they apply to fandom. Now, I look to the features of fandom and illustrate how they map onto social/political movements. Expanding on Cornel Sandvoss’s definition that fandom is the regular and emotionally involved consumption of popular texts, Jonathan Dean suggests four key features of fandom: consumption, affect, community, and contestation.<sup>224</sup> The first, consumption, is likely the clearest regarding fandom, as many would argue that in order for one to be a fan, one needs to consume content related to the fan object. Importantly, Dean collapses consumption and productivity into a single feature. His reasoning comes from Mark Duffett, who contends that fandom and fan studies have largely erased the

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<sup>224</sup> Jonathan Dean, “Politicising Fandom,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2017): 412. See also, Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (New York: Polity Press, 2005), 8.

distinction between active producers and passive consumers.<sup>225</sup> Even with this shift of consumption to consumption *and* production, the previous section demonstrates the activity and consumption patterns associated with fandoms, be it creating fan fiction, engaging in fan activism, influencing the original text and its adaptations through campaigns, or conversing with others about the fan object.

This kind of consumption and production also occurs in social movements. In terms of consumption, just as fans interact with their fan objects and the media that surround their fan objects, so do those in political movements. They watch speeches, attend rallies, read articles and listen to podcasts dissecting the speeches at these rallies, follow figures on social media, and use all that consumption to fuel their productivity. John Fiske contends that there are three types of productivity in fan communities: enunciative, textual, and semiotic.<sup>226</sup> Enunciative productivity is considered the act of discussing the fan object with others. The discussions can be positive, negative, somewhere in between, but they enable fans to circulate various meanings and conclusions they have come to about the object. While discussion is key in fandoms and politics, enunciative productivity also extends to nonverbal displays, such as styling one's physical appearance (hair, makeup, clothing, accessories, tattoos, etc.) or performing actions in a way that aligns with the fan object. This may mean dressing up as characters from your favorite series at fan conventions or joining a crowd-turned-mob if the leader of your movement urges you to march on the seat of the US Congress. The latter is an allusion to the 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol that was spurred on by outgoing president Donald Trump, but it also aligns with Fiske's description of how British soccer fans—whom he describes as frequently disempowered socially and

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<sup>225</sup> Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 251.

<sup>226</sup> Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," 37-9.

economically (much how many Trump supporters portray themselves as economic victims of progressive policies)—exhibit “empowered behavior that may, at times, become violent and lethal” when they wear their team colors and are around other fans.<sup>227</sup> The enunciation enables fans and supporters to feel a connection to the object of their fandom and inspires them to not only discuss the object but to act in ways they may not otherwise.

Textual productivity describes how fans produce and often circulate texts based on their fan object. Fiske argues that these fan-produced works (fan fiction, fanzines, fan art, etc.), while frequently having similar production values as the “official” culture, are typically not produced for profit and thus have a more limited circulation. Fiske, however, wrote this in 1992, before the advent of social media, blogs, and personal websites. Now, these fan-made works can be shared widely, with the website “Archive of Our Own” (an open source repository for fan-made works) hosting over twelve million works and boasting a userbase of over six million as of January 2024. While many think of fan fiction primarily in relation to works of fiction, there is also “real person fiction,” where fans create stories about “real” people. Rachel Winter demonstrates how fans wrote “political real person fiction” about US Senator Bernie Sanders based on both canon and fanon (fan-made fiction) to help them better understand the 2016 election cycle.<sup>228</sup> This fan writing not only helped the fans gain an understanding of the election, it also worked alongside the campaign’s branding efforts to create an image of Sanders. Notably, the separation of “canon” and “fanon” in the writing about a political figure raises important questions about how one determines what the “canon” actually is. Certain aspects like Sanders’s physical appearance and his voting record are canon, but other elements such as his personal history blur the lines between reality and fiction.

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<sup>227</sup> Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 28.

<sup>228</sup> Rachel Winter, “Fanon Bernie Sanders: Political Real Person Fan Fiction and the Construction of a Candidate,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32 (2020).



This extends not only to fans writing real person fiction but to political movements where supporters draw on real world events to fuel their movements. The history or political decisions they claim are canonical are frequently exaggerated or reside in a place of an agreed-upon past, rather than an actual one. Similar to the ways fans writing about Sanders used their fiction to imagine different futures, so too do many social movements—creating a future based on their agreed-upon past.

The last kind of productivity Fiske proposes is the one he spends the least space discussing, but semiotic productivity is the one that creates the strongest link between fandom and politics. Both Fiske and Dean contend that semiotic productivity is characteristic of popular culture at large rather than strictly fandom, but they discuss it differently. Dean claims it is “the way individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to cultural texts,” which is much more limited than how Fiske originally described it as “the making of meanings of social identity and social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity.”<sup>229</sup> With Fiske’s theorization, semiotic productivity is when fans’ identities are influenced by the fan object, when fans make meaning of the wider world through how they relate to the fan object. This conception aligns with Grossberg’s description that fan identities are shaped through their affective investments in cultural contexts, objects, and/or practices—they make sense of their identities through the objects of their fandoms.<sup>230</sup> While this description may seem very “fannish,” it equally can be said about politics. Gamze Baray, Tom Postmes, and Jolanda Jetten demonstrate how being involved with an extreme right-wing party influenced participants’ social and personal identities.<sup>231</sup> In supporting Trumpism,

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<sup>229</sup> Dean, “Politicising Fandom,” 412; Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 37.

<sup>230</sup> Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House,” 58.

<sup>231</sup> Gamze Baray, Tom Postmes, and Jolanda Jetten, “When I Equals We: Exploring the Relation between Social and Personal Identity of Extreme Right-Wing Political Party Members,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (2009): 625-47.

in buying MAGA merchandise, in attending Trump’s rallies, people’s identities become tied up in this support—it is not an opinion they express once every two-to-four years at the ballot box, but a key feature of who they are and how they perform their citizenry. This is similarly seen in Mel Stanfill’s argument that white supremacists engage in cosplay and purchase merchandise (enunciative productivity), create fanon (textual productivity), and interact in a participatory culture (semiotic productivity) just as fans do.<sup>232</sup> While these forms of productivity and consumption are “fannish,” they are also common activities for supporters of political movements.

As established earlier in this chapter and in the Introduction, affect—Dean’s second feature of fandom—is key to being a fan, but affect is also increasingly recognized as integral to social movements. Much literature on social movements has focused on the key role of anger and fear in motivating supporters. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, David Stanley, and Linda Howell connect the affective bonds of fandoms to social movements by reading the conspiracy theory political movement QAnon as a fandom, arguing that “if fandom is driven by love and anti-fandom is driven by hate, then perhaps QAnon’s political fandom is driven by fear or anger” (more about the prevailing idea that fandom is rooted in love and anti-fandom in hatred in Chapter Three).<sup>233</sup> The various affects influence fan activity and the types of productivity supporters engage in: anger may cause one to work toward change, while hatred can lead to an effort to destroy. Wahl-Jorgensen contends that populist rhetoric draws on many “negative” emotions, particularly anger, so it is imperative that we consider the way affects circulate in political movements.<sup>234</sup> While fans being

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<sup>232</sup> Mel Stanfill, “White Supremacy as a Fandom” (paper presentation, Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Online, March 19, 2021).

<sup>233</sup> CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, David Stanley, and Linda Howell, “Fans of Q: The Stakes of QAnon’s Function as Political Fandom,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 8 (2022): 1167.

<sup>234</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media, and Politics*, 3-5.

affectively attached to their object of fandom is clear, it should be equally apparent that, regardless of the affective clusters involved, politics is influenced by affective attachments as well.

Dean's third feature of fandom is community, and the sense of community is vital for both traditional fandoms and for political movements. Dean argues that fandoms could be considered "imagined communities," as, while they will likely never meet all the other members of the community, it can provide them with a sense of belonging and companionship.<sup>235</sup> As illustrated throughout this dissertation, however, fan communities are seldom without conflict. Their conflicting views and ideologies may extend to the point where they divide the fandom, and wider culture, into an "us" and a "them." This division is not unique to fandom; rather, as established, it is prevalent in politics as well. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson argue, "Politics is about who we are—often in contradiction to 'them,' to the types of people that are not fully part of our imagined community."<sup>236</sup> The "who we are" is important both for fandom and political movements, as they can both provide clarity for individuals regarding their identities, not only through the communities that form but through the very fandoms and movements people gravitate toward. Since fans "usually cohere together in a fan community because they share beliefs, feelings, intentions, and/or actions," a person's pre-existing attitudes, opinions, and beliefs incline them toward and away from various objects and fandoms.<sup>237</sup> This equally applies to politics, where the shared opinions and beliefs will often draw a person toward a particular movement or candidate who claims to support what they support.

In joining fandoms or movements because those involved share your beliefs, opinions, etc., fandoms and movements set up an us-versus-them division, much like I discuss in the previous

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<sup>235</sup> Dean, "Politicising Fandom," 413.

<sup>236</sup> Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 47.

<sup>237</sup> Reinhard, Stanley, and Howell, "Fans of Q," 1163.

section. Being in-group can strengthen the bond of a group, but they also can lead to conflicts with those deemed out-group.<sup>238</sup> In the realm of speculative fiction media, this is evident in *Star Trek* fans versus *Star Wars* fans as well as between the “Snyder Bros” who support Zack Snyder’s vision for DC superhero films and those who are fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These groups often lash out at one another, criticizing the other side’s media intensely while ignoring their own fan object’s flaws. This increasingly applies to political parties as well, where aligning yourself with the Democratic or Republican party largely leads to one criticizing politicians from the other as well as their supporters. Returning to the example of Trumpism, John Street notes similarities between Trump supporters and sport fans, particularly in the way of their seemingly unwavering loyalty, noting that that these fans cannot (or refuse to) see their own teams’ mistakes and fouls and thus assume that the referees must be biased against them.<sup>239</sup> Fans of the University of Alabama’s football team, for example, actively root against the teams from Clemson University, Auburn University, and Louisiana State University, even when they are not playing against Alabama. They do so because those schools are Alabama’s rivals—the “them” to Alabama’s “us.”<sup>240</sup> Similar to speculative fiction fans and the supporters of various political parties/politicians, these sports fans may ignore their own teams’ missteps while hyper focusing on the other teams’, particularly when it appears they are “getting away” with something unfairly, such as when critics, news media, or referees do not chastise their rival objects for something when they had previously criticized *their* fan objects for doing the same.

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<sup>238</sup> Reinhard, Stanley, and Howell, “Fans of Q,” 1166.

<sup>239</sup> John Street, “What is Donald Trump? Forms of ‘Celebrity’ in Celebrity Politics,” *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2019): 3-13.

<sup>240</sup> Another example, courtesy of my advisor Calum Matheson, is how in Scotland, for every World Cup, football fans create shirts that read either “ABE” (anyone but England) or “\_\_\_\_\_ Supporter,” with the blank being whoever is in England’s group and plays against them. I am also indebted to Kevin Pabst for telling me about Alabama’s rivalries, extensively and often without my asking.

These connections between fan and political communities raise two important points: 1) support can be fueled as much by disdain for the other as it can love for the object, and 2) having the knowledge of when the other side escapes the same scrutiny as your fan object implies that one should know about the happenings of the out-group. Both points can be seen in how actively rooting against someone else applies in sports fandoms as well as in speculative fiction fandom and in politics. People may support politicians not for their policies but because they are not the other person. In a way, they may support one candidate or movement due to their anti-fandom for the other. In the 2020 US presidential election, many who voted for Joe Biden claimed to be voting *against* Trump rather than voting *for* Biden when they cast their vote, a form of the strategic fandom I discuss in the last section.<sup>241</sup>

Importantly, despite being against the out-group, the in-group still follows what the other media/movement/team does. Fans of Alabama football know who the starting quarterback for Clemson is, what LSU's win-loss record is, and even if there have been any "suspicious" calls made that worked in Auburn's favor. Snyder Bros know when a Marvel film is premiering and they know the box office performance—otherwise, they could not declare it a flop to demonstrate how much better DC films are. Similarly, progressive organizations such as Media Matters for America do reports on what occurs on Fox News and what Trump posts on his Truth Social social media platform. In many cases, knowing what the out-group is doing is vital—a social movement needs to understand the opposition to formulate the steps to fight back against oppression. Regardless of if one is actually oppressed, however, if one understands their opposition, they can convey the various ways the out-group is their oppressor. Social movement scholarship has

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<sup>241</sup> Tom Matthews, "44% of Biden Voters Cast Vote 'Against' Trump, Rather than in Support of the Democratic Nominee, Exit Polls Suggest," MassLive, November 4, 2020, <https://www.masslive.com/politics/2020/11/44-of-biden-voters-casted-vote-against-trump-rather-than-in-support-of-the-democratic-nominee-exit-polls-suggest.html>.

illustrated that when one sees themselves as part of the oppressed, they are more likely to identify with others who they also see as oppressed.<sup>242</sup> As this dissertation demonstrates, through strategic affective appeals, fans can create a community based on oppression and victimhood, even when that in-group community is largely functioning as the oppressor of the out-group. Fandoms and political movements both create audiences/communities whose shared fears and hopes affectively bond them together.<sup>243</sup> These communities are sustained through the sense of belonging that is created through their shared membership as the in-group and their knowledge that they are not the out-group.

Contestation is Dean's final feature of fandom, but, unlike the with previous three, Dean only references contestation in relation to a "politicised fandom," which means it may have a more tenuous application to fandoms more generally. That said, the previous section elucidates how we can and should read fandoms as political, so the feature is certainly still applicable. Dean describes contestation as when the fan community is sustained by "the circulation of representative claims oriented towards *contesting* perceived injustices and *transforming* wider social relations."<sup>244</sup> This feature overlaps in many ways with consumption/productivity, as Dean's examples are of the Harry Potter Alliance (*Harry Potter* fans engaging in fan activism on a global scale), *Doctor Who* fans arguing for greater representation of non-white, non-male characters in British film and television, and fans of far-right figurehead Milo Yiannopoulos becoming increasingly committed to him as his political influence grew—each of which involves consumption and production. The inclusion of Yiannopoulos is important, as Dean's theorization of contestation is that these fans

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<sup>242</sup> Lory Britt and David Heise, "From Shame to Pride in Identity Politics" in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, eds. by Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens, and Robert W. White (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 262.

<sup>243</sup> See John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 45-60.

<sup>244</sup> Dean, "Politicising Fandom," 415.

contest perceived injustices and transform wider social relations. While this could be discussed in a more progressive sense, it can equally apply to reactionary movements. Since these are *perceived* injustices, one movement can act in a manner they believe aligns with contestation but, to others, appears to be enacting further injustice, even as it benefits the in-group and aligns with their values. In Chapter Two, I analyze the way that a group of speculative fiction authors and fans react to their perceived injustices—heterosexual, white men no longer winning as many industry awards as they used to—by working to prevent authors of other identities from even being nominated. Contestation involves fans becoming more actively political and, in short, doing exactly what social movements aim to do.

While the four features of fandom have been separated in this discussion, they frequently overlap. For example, Dean argues that in a typical fandom, affect runs primarily between fans, the fan object, and other fans, but when fandoms turn political, their “affective charge” turns outward, meaning that their “affective investments are thus oriented towards society as it is currently constituted and a vision of a (changed) future society.”<sup>245</sup> Here, we can see the affective attachments at play as well as the contestation of working to transform the present into the future. Beyond this, the affective charges connect the idea of community and productivity, as the affective charge motivates the community of fans to create change through a form of fan activism. Between the interplay of the four features of fandoms—politicized and otherwise—and their applicability not just to fandoms but to the political/social movements as well, just as one can read fandoms as political, one can also read the political as fandom.

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<sup>245</sup> Dean, “Politicising Fandom,” 413.

## 2.5 Conclusion

From speculative fiction fandom's Great Exclusion Act of 1939 to Jerry Maier's 1980 open letter to speculative fiction fans to Donald Trump's Retribution Tour in 2023-24, I have illustrated how one can read speculative fiction as political, fandom as political, and the political as fandom. Through doing so, this chapter further erodes the presumption that fandom is based on emotion while politics are rooted in rational thought. As Reinhard, Stanley, and Howell argue, scholars "can use fan studies concepts to understand the importance of emotions and affect to ideological communities like politics and religion"<sup>246</sup> The activities we associate with fandom are frequently part of political movements, and being aware of how fan studies scholars approach and analyze these activities can influence future studies. With the increasing polarization of the US political parties and their supporters, a version of "us" and "them" is present not only in our fandoms but also in our politics. The politics of individual fans, just like the ideologies in any single text, are less important than how "fan-like attachments to politicians and political parties shape citizens' participation in political debate and democratic process."<sup>247</sup> As supporters of various causes and ideologies are increasingly (and often derogatorily) described as fanatics, fandom "matters to politics."<sup>248</sup>

Fandoms—regardless of if they are for speculative fiction media, college sports teams, politicians, musicians, or a specific ideology—are communities where the affective attachments are especially prevalent and intense, sites where one can be open about one's affective attachments to an object, regardless of if they are rooted in love, joy, disdain, or hatred. The relationships fans

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<sup>246</sup> Reinhard, Stanley, and Howell, "Fans of Q," 1166.

<sup>247</sup> Sandvoss, "Toward and Understanding of Political Enthusiasm as Media Fandom," 254.

<sup>248</sup> Dean, "Politicising Fandom," 409.



have to their fan object may be influenced by any number of factors, including their ideologies. As Grossberg contends, fan objects “can and often will be located in a number of different contexts; in each, it will function as a different text and it will likely have different relations to and effects on its audience.”<sup>249</sup> This is true in speculative fiction media, where the polysemy of the text means it can appeal to a wide population, even those who disagree with the author’s ideology. This is not always the case—John Scalzi, for example, is typically blunter with his progressive ideology, as is Orson Scott Card with his opinions on same sex marriage. Yet even Card’s works can be interpreted with a degree of strategic ambiguity. *Star Trek*, on the other hand, is a television and film series created by Gene Roddenberry (a signer of the Vietnam anti-war/peace ad) that features a storyworld set in a post-scarcity age that has been described as a Marxist utopia.<sup>250</sup> Despite this, the series has found popularity across the political spectrum. Its political themes, while key to the series’ storyworld and narratives, are not enough to alienate those of differing ideologies. In terms of social movements, the key aspect of the ability for different readings for this dissertation is when this polysemy is denied, when a group insists there is only one possible reading. While this can be as small as a fan disagreement over whether Han Solo shot first, it can extend to the polysemic interpretations of the US Constitution, a polysemy that has consequences for the entire nation. Fan studies enables one to more fully consider the affective economies that motivate these communities, especially when they so desperately cling to their reading while disavowing any that contradict theirs.

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<sup>249</sup> Grossberg, “Is There a Fan in the House,” 54.

<sup>250</sup> Jeff Ewing, “Federation Treconomics: Marx, the Federation, and the Shift from Necessity to Freedom” in *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy: The Search for Socrates*, eds. Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016), 115-26; George A. Gonzales, *The Politics of Star Trek: Justice, War, and the Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2015); Mike O’Connor, “Liberals in Space: The 1960s Politics of *Star Trek*,” *Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2012): 183-203.

Beyond fan studies and fandom more generally, the genre of speculative fiction and its fandom in particular matter to politics. This goes further than speculative fiction being able to provide criticism in times of great censorship; the way it can comment on the present through utopian and dystopian depictions of the past, present, and future; or even that its fandom is often considered the prototypical fandom. Carl Freedman writes that “both critical theory and science fiction have the potential to play a role in the liberation of humanity from oppression.”<sup>251</sup> While perhaps a touch too optimistic, I agree. Yet, in most of this dissertation I demonstrate the ways that reactionary forces use speculative fiction and its fandom in an attempt to oppress others.

In Chapter Two, I discuss a group of authors and fans who attempt to assert a version of speculative fiction that is dominated by white, heterosexual male authors through appeals to the past. But as this chapter has shown, this is a history that ignores how many non-heterosexual, non-white, non-male authors and fans have been existed in speculative fiction since its beginning. Even so, these fans distort that history, resist the alternative reading of speculative fiction’s past to advocate for their preferred reality. I now turn to PuppyGate, where these reactionary authors and fans used fannish activities to establish an out-group against which their in-group could rebel as they appealed to an imagined past rooted in revanchist nostalgia.

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<sup>251</sup> Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), xx.

### 3.0 Chapter Two: When Puppies Start to Hate: The Modalities of Reactionary Nostalgia in the Hugo Awards' PuppyGate Controversy<sup>252</sup>

*"It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."*<sup>253</sup>

– Lewis Carroll, writing as character Alice

#### 3.1 Introduction

On August 22, 2015, when the World Science Fiction Society presented the Hugo Awards—awards honoring the best speculative fiction authors, editors, and illustrators of the previous year—at their 73<sup>rd</sup> WorldCon convention, “No Award” won five of the sixteen categories. While the lack of winners in these categories may seem indicative of a weak year for speculative fiction, that is not the case.<sup>254</sup> Every year since 1955, the World Science Fiction Society has awarded the Hugo Awards at their annual convention, WorldCon.<sup>255</sup> Despite the Hugo Award website stating the awards are “science fiction’s most prestigious award,” other speculative fiction subgenres are eligible as well, as evidenced by Neil Gaiman’s fantasy novel *American Gods*

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<sup>252</sup> This chapter is an expansion of Max Dossier, “When Puppies Start to Hate: The Revanchist Nostalgia of the Hugo Awards' PuppyGate Controversy,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 20, no. 4 (2023): 453-70.

<sup>253</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Bantam Classics, 2006), 86.

<sup>254</sup> While the genre of speculative fiction encompasses many speculative genres, such as science fiction and fantasy, the authors involved in PuppyGate tend to focus more on science fiction. One potential explanation might be that many of the works the PuppyGate authors reference were from the 1950s and 1960s, before fantasy was revived as a genre but a classical period for conservative science fiction.

<sup>255</sup> WorldCon was first held in 1939, but the awards were not a part of the convention until 1953. The 1954 WorldCon chose not to present the awards, but they became tradition from the 1955 WorldCon onward. The only years since its inception that the WorldCon was not held was 1942-1945, due to World War II. For more, see “WorldCon,” Fanac Fan History Project, March 9, 2022, <https://fanac.org/worldcon/>.

winning Best Novel in 2002 and China Miéville's novel *The City and the City* winning the same award in 2010, despite being classified as a combination of "weird fiction" and police procedural.<sup>256</sup> The categories are primarily literature-based, including best novel, best novella, best short story, best professional editor, best semiprozine (semi-professional magazines), but they also present awards to film and television (best dramatic presentation) and even to fans (best fan artist, best fan writer, best fanzine). The Hugo Awards are voted on by anyone attending that year's WorldCon, including authors, editors, and, primarily, fans. The open voting system where anyone who purchases a membership has a say on who is nominated and who wins opens the ability for fans to greatly influence the types of stories, authors, and editors who represent what is supposed to be the best in speculative fiction.

In 2013, two years before "No Award" won five Hugo Awards in a single evening, Larry Correia, a conservative author frustrated over what he perceived to be a left-leaning trend of the awards, found a flaw in the voting system he could exploit: Using voting blocs, he could fill entire categories with his desired nominees. In the first year of his campaign, however, he only lobbied his followers to vote for his own novel, *Monster Hunter Legion* (2012), which ultimately came up seventeen votes short of being a finalist. The next year, in 2014, Correia expanded his slate of potential nominees, highlighting not just himself but many conservative authors who wrote what he referred to as "popular" literature.<sup>257</sup> One author included on the slate was Vox Day, a noted white supremacist who has been removed from other speculative fiction organizations for racist language. While significantly more successful in year two, earning several nominations, the campaign still did not net any wins. The following year, 2015, sensing an opportunity to truly

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<sup>256</sup> "About," The Hugo Awards, <http://www.thehugoawards.org/about/>.

<sup>257</sup> Abigail Nussbaum, "The 2015 Hugo Awards: Why I Am Voting No Award in the Best Fan Writer Category," Asking the Wrong Questions, April 10, 2015, <http://wrongquestions.blogspot.com/2015/04/the-2015-hugo-awards-why-i-am-voting-no.html>.

impact the World Science Fiction Society, Day broke away from Correia's group, shifted the rhetoric of the campaign, and brought in unprecedented support. These voters flooded the finalist lists with "popular" speculative fiction, which, perhaps not so coincidentally, was largely written by white, heterosexual men. When it came time to vote on the winners, however, the WorldCon attendees voted en masse for "No Award" in each category filled by Day's nominees.

The two campaigns were comprised of reactionary authors and fans upset over the lack of recognition received by more "traditional" works and blamed the perceived snubs on a push for diversity within the speculative fiction community. The coordinator of Correia's 2015 campaign, Brad Torgersen, echoed Correia's original complaint in his explanation of the campaign, saying that the Hugo Awards had "skewed more and more toward literary (as opposed to entertainment) work."<sup>258</sup> Shortly afterwards, however, he revealed their true reasoning by adding, "[They are] an affirmative action award: giving Hugos because a writer or artist is (insert underrepresented minority or victim group here) or because a given work features (insert underrepresented minority or victim group here) characters."<sup>259</sup> The efforts by Correia, Torgersen, Day, and their supporters have come to be known as "PuppyGate," as the groups called themselves the Sad Puppies and the Rabid Puppies.<sup>260</sup> The groups' names call to mind melancholy, anger, and hatred—all of which are affects the Puppies mobilized against the increasing diversification of speculative fiction.

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<sup>258</sup> "Hugo Award Nominations Spark Criticism over Diversity in Sci-Fi," *The Telegraph*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/11517920/Hugo-Award-nominations-spark-criticism-over-diversity-in-sci-fi.html>.

<sup>259</sup> Hugo Award Nominations Spark Criticism over Diversity in Sci-Fi."

<sup>260</sup> While I use "PuppyGate" to refer to the Hugo Awards controversy, other controversies have also been referred to as "PuppyGate." Most are political scandals, such as the negative media and political attention senator Mitt Romney received when the public discovered he tied a dog to his roof and drove for 12 hours during a 1983 family vacation as well as the attention senate candidate Mehmet Oz received upon the public learning that his heart research lab euthanized over 300 dogs. The term is also used to refer to events involving cast members of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010-present) and a rescue puppy, Lucy Lucy Apple Juice, which became the focus of the series' ninth season.

In this chapter, I analyze the affective economy of PuppyGate to demonstrate the key role of nostalgia in the affective economies of reactionary movements at large. PuppyGate began with a nostalgia for a time of speculative fiction where the most awarded and beloved literature featured conservative values—a time that never truly existed for more than fleeting moments. This nostalgia led to a movement fueled by melancholy. When new leadership took over the campaign in 2015, there was a rhetorical shift for both the Sad Puppies and the newly formed Rabid Puppies that was rooted in anger and hatred, respectively. The fracturing of these groups illustrates the modalities of nostalgia present in PuppyGate and wider reactionary movements. The two groups' aims expose a tension between *restorative* nostalgia, with its aim to return to an imagined past, and *revanchist* nostalgia, which strives to destroy the present and punish those who made the destruction necessary. PuppyGate provides an example of how reactionary alliance formation and mobilization can occur through a shared nostalgia. Even as the Sad and Rabid Puppies diverge in goals, their progression over the course of PuppyGate reveals how reactionary affective economies must balance the affects of love and hate, hope and outrage, and restoration and destruction.

Before analyzing the affective economy of PuppyGate, I first detail how the various affects mobilized in the controversy can interact with nostalgia and with the imagined history of speculative fiction many Sad and Rabid Puppies appeal to. Through doing so, I lay the foundation for examining the affective clusters that are mobilized by the Sad and Rabid Puppies. Second, following this discussion, I illustrate how the Sad Puppies campaign was grounded in nostalgia. I demonstrate how, as the movement evolved, the affective economy mobilized melancholy over a lost past and anger at the present to gather support and form alliances. Third, I turn to the Rabid Puppies, who broke from the Sad Puppies when the more reactionary faction of fans and authors decided the World Science Fiction Society was not changing to suit their whims and they needed

to destroy the institution. With this section, I illuminate how the splintering of the Sad and Rabid Puppies largely resulted from their differing imagined futures as well as the tension between the restorative and revanchist nostalgia motivating their movements. Fourth, to elucidate how mourning and reflective nostalgia can drive change, I analyze the responses of the two authors who, after being promoted by the Sad and Rabid Puppies' slates, withdrew from the 2015 Hugo Award finalists' list. I conclude by connecting the affective economy seen in this seemingly marginal controversy to other reactionary controversies and almost-controversies also motivated by nostalgia.

### 3.2 The Affects of PuppyGate

Two of the central affects in the affective economy of PuppyGate are anger and hatred. In her 1981 keynote address to the National Women's Studies Association, Audre Lorde defines anger as "a grief of distortions between peers and *its object is change*."<sup>261</sup> This conception is a counterpart to her definition of hatred: "the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction."<sup>262</sup> Lester C. Olson's analysis of Lorde's address illustrates how anger can aid in the creation of change while hatred is seen as a more negative force.<sup>263</sup> The idea of anger creating change raises important questions of who is allowed to perform anger as a "proper" emotion. Much scholarship has been written about how when women express anger it is "ugly,

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<sup>261</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 129 (my italics).

<sup>262</sup> Lorde, "Uses of Anger," 129.

<sup>263</sup> Lester C. Olson, "Anger Among Allies: Audre Lorde's 1981 Keynote Admonishing the National Women's Studies Association," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 283-308.

unappealing, dangerous, something to be shut down or jeered.”<sup>264</sup> This is particularly true of Black women, who are often dismissed with the offensive “angry Black woman” stereotype.<sup>265</sup> Those involved in PuppyGate and many other reactionary controversies, however, are largely white men, and, as such, they are permitted and often even encouraged to express their anger.<sup>266</sup>

The other prominent affect in PuppyGate is melancholy, which is “an occasion for mourning an object, the loss of which is unrecognized ... and a failing self-image whereby the ego identifies itself with the lost object.”<sup>267</sup> Much how Lorde defines anger and hatred as similar but with distinct differences, so do psychoanalysts with melancholy and mourning. To Sigmund Freud, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one.”<sup>268</sup> Change is occasioned after mourning has passed, as “mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead.”<sup>269</sup> Melancholy, on the other hand, in refusing to consciously acknowledge the loss of the object, will lead to attempts to reclaim what is lost. David L. Eng and Shinee Han, on the other hand, see less of a dichotomous division between melancholy and mourning. They describe melancholy as “a normative psychic state involving everyday conflicts and negotiations between mourning *and* melancholia.”<sup>270</sup> Similarly pushing back against Freud, Sara Ahmed writes, “melancholia should

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<sup>264</sup> Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 19.

<sup>265</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 41-52; Rachel Alicia Griffin, “I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 138-57.

<sup>266</sup> R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>267</sup> Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Rhetoric on the Bleachers, or, The Rhetorician as Melancholiac,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 4 (2008): 358. For more on melancholy in rhetoric, see Barbara Biesecker, “No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007): 147-69.

<sup>268</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243.

<sup>269</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 257.

<sup>270</sup> David L. Eng and Shinee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 25.



not be seen as pathological; the desire to maintain attachments with the lost other is enabling, rather than blocking new forms of attachment.”<sup>271</sup>

This chapter builds on the work of Ahmed, Eng and Shinee, and Olson. While Ahmed writes about affect and queerness, Eng and Shinee discuss melancholy and Asian Americans, and Olson considers Audre Lorde’s—a Black, lesbian woman’s—conception of anger and hatred, my argument is centered on white, heterosexual men who claim victimhood despite their privilege. This aligns with how Casey Ryan Kelly connects melancholy and white masculinity, where there is “fixation with remaking the present in the image of a time before men were supposedly wounded.”<sup>272</sup> Aggrieved white men such as the Sad and Rabid Puppies think of themselves as oppressed and attempt to “take back” an imagined past.

Before further detailing PuppyGate, it is worth discussing another media-based controversy driven by white men attempting to reclaim an imagined past—GamerGate—as GamerGate and PuppyGate share many affective strategies. GamerGate was a reactionary controversy in the video game community in which men targeted, harassed, and threatened female game developers and media critics. This harassment followed false accusations that video game developer Zoë Quinn had slept with journalist Nathan Grayson in order to get a positive review for her video game *Depression Quest* (2013). The accusation was made in a blog post by Quinn’s ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni, where he claimed Quinn engaged in *quid pro quo* with a journalist who, in reality, never actually reviewed *Depression Quest*. Yet, despite how easily disproved Gjoni’s claims were, they found purchase with an audience of reactionary fans and trolls who believed women receive broader preferential treatment by the press for their video games due to a push for

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<sup>271</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 159.

<sup>272</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, “The Wounded Man: *Foxcatcher* and the Incoherence of White Masculine Victimhood,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 165.

progressivism within the industry.<sup>273</sup> The campaign expanded from Quinn to encompass other female game creators (such as Brianna Wu) and female journalists who covered video games (such as Anita Sarkeesian). Many of the arguments put forward by supporters of GamerGate justified their actions by claiming they were concerned with objective journalism, but these arguments were largely meant to obfuscate the fact that the campaign was more about ensuring female content creators did not “steal” recognition from men.<sup>274</sup> A similar strategy is present in PuppyGate, where some authors and fans claimed to care about the writing itself, even as their primary concern was their presumed victimage caused by the growing diversity in speculative fiction.

In focusing specifically on PuppyGate, this chapter illustrates how the perceived loss of privilege and entitlement of these largely white men is rooted in not only melancholy but hatred and anger as well. As I analyze the affective economy of this reactionary controversy, I ask: Is affect politically agnostic? Does the anger and hatred described by Lorde align with the reactionary anger of PuppyGate? Many affect studies scholars have focused on how affects drive liberating movements, but with PuppyGate, I ask how affects can be mobilized in an effort to return to an imagined past before increasing diversity threatened the power and esteem of those in privileged positions.<sup>275</sup>

Affect studies scholars have long illustrated a connection between affect and social movements. Deborah Gould argues that social movements can provide affective pedagogies that

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<sup>273</sup> Kristin M.S. Bezio, “Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right,” *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (2018): 556-66.

<sup>274</sup> Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208-20.

<sup>275</sup> Other scholars using affect theory in similar ways include Alexandra Deem, “The Digital Traces of #whitegenocide and Alt-Right Affective Economies of Transgression,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 3183-202; Marina Levina and Kumarini Silva, “Cruel Intentions: Affect Theory in the Age of Trump,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 70-72.

authorize the ways participants and supporters feel and emote.<sup>276</sup> While scholarship has often centered anger as a key affect in social change, more recent scholarship has illustrated how anger works with other emotional formations such as pride and grief in both sparking and maintaining social movements.<sup>277</sup> This is particularly important to consider for PuppyGate, as the affective economy involves clusters of affects rather than solely anger, hatred, and/or melancholy. Even so, Kenneth Zagacki and Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald argue that angry rhetoric “is designed in one fashion or another to make an audience angry (or angrier) and to have them direct this anger toward a particular agent, policy, or idea.”<sup>278</sup> Indeed, Mervi Pantti and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argue that to matter politically, anger typically requires a target.<sup>279</sup> Celeste Condit builds on these theorizations of anger by demonstrating how angry rhetoric can be directed at out-group members in order to rally in-group members to attack them.<sup>280</sup> This anger is directed at the out-group and is performed in a way that casts the out-group as the reason for the in-group’s supposed harm. These conceptions of the pragmatic use of anger ring particularly true with PuppyGate, as the Sad and Rabid Puppies not only mobilize anger to engage their supporters, they also provide a concrete method for how to act on it: Their supporters vote for select authors to get them nominations *and* to deprive authors of various minority groups from receiving them. I argue that this anger is fueled by nostalgia for a past speculative fiction that never really existed.

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<sup>276</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 213.

<sup>277</sup> Robert Ariss, “Performing Anger: Emotion in Strategic Responses to AIDS,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 4 (1993): 18-30; Isaac West, “Reviving Rage,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 97-102; Gould, *Moving Politics*; Erin J. Rand, “Gay Pride and Its Queer Discontents: ACT UP and the Political Deployment of Affect,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 75-80.

<sup>278</sup> Kenneth S. Zagacki and Patrick A. Boleyn-Fitzgerald, “Rhetoric and Anger,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 39, no. 4 (2006): 295.

<sup>279</sup> Mervi Pantti and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “‘Not an Act of God’: Anger and Citizenship in Press Coverage of British Man-Made Disaster,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2011): 105-22.

<sup>280</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit, *Angry Public Rhetorics: Global Relations and Emotion in the Wake of 9/11* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

### 3.3 Reflective, Restorative, and Revanchist Nostalgia

Nostalgia is vital to consider in terms of the founding and sustaining of the Sad and Rabid Puppies as it is the shared affective foundation between the two groups. As discussed in my Introduction chapter, Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>281</sup> One of the most interesting and relevant aspects of Boym’s nostalgia is her theorization of the two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia involves those who “do not think of themselves as nostalgic” and propose “to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.”<sup>282</sup> Restorative nostalgia can be seen in the rhetoric of conspiracy theorists, who find a group, an other, to scapegoat for all their misfortunes. These conspiracy theorists must conspire against the scapegoat in order to “restore” their imagined community and their imagined past. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, dwells “in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance.”<sup>283</sup> Rather than aiming to restore what they imagine used to exist, reflective nostalgics focus more on acknowledging change and reflecting on its meaning for the present. While restorative nostalgia is often related to *groups* reasserting their imagined past, reflective nostalgia is more often about individuals.

Boym argues that reflective nostalgia has elements of both mourning and melancholia, but I propose an amendment. To me, reflective nostalgia is much more in line with mourning, while restorative nostalgia fits better with melancholy. Melancholy and restorative nostalgia refuse to let go; they are what lead to national revivals, to the desire to *restore* what was once there. As Slavoj Žižek describes, the melancholic “remains faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce [their]

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<sup>281</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

<sup>282</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

<sup>283</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

attachment to it.”<sup>284</sup> Mourning and reflective nostalgia, however, acknowledge what one desires is dead and/or gone. Neither seeks to restore. Rather, mourning and reflective nostalgia build a new future after grieving. They move on, while melancholy and restorative nostalgia dwell in the past. While I acknowledge that this approach may draw too stark of a division between restorative/reflective nostalgia and mourning/melancholy and, thus, might not hold up to a deconstructive approach, this schematic is useful in conceptualizing various nostalgic expressions, as I illustrate through my discussion of the fracturing of the Sad and Rabid Puppies.

PuppyGate extends restorative nostalgia to the modality of *revanchist nostalgia*. Neil Smith uses revanchism to describe a component of anti-urbanism, where it is “a reaction against the ‘theft’ of the city by variously defined ‘others,’ and in large part a defence of a traditionally white, middle-class world view.”<sup>285</sup> In PuppyGate, rather than the “theft” being the city, it is the praise and accolades of the World Science Fiction Society and, ultimately, the values and the Western narrative traditions they imagined defined the speculative fiction genre. While restorative nostalgia implies violence is involved in restoring the past, revanchist nostalgia moves beyond restoration. It explicitly aligns with ideas of revenge and not only retaking an imagined past but punishing the ones who made this “reclamation” necessary—typically meaning those who are not white, heterosexual men. Revanchist nostalgia traffics in the seemingly opposed fantasies of restoring an imagined past and destroying the societal changes perceived to disallow that past—particularly, the (relative) gains made in terms of diversity and inclusion.

Revanchist nostalgia builds on and interacts with white thymos. Thymos is “the part of our souls that desires recognition of injustices done to us,” and Bharath Ganesh describes *white* thymos

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<sup>284</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 658.

<sup>285</sup> Neil Smith, “After Tompkins Square Park: Degentrification and the Revanchist City” in *Re-presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Metropolis*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1996), 94.

as “a complex of pride, rage, resentment, and anger that is created through informational and affective circuits that create the perception of a *loss* of white entitlement.”<sup>286</sup> White thymos, then, balances the tension of love and hate, anger and hope, which the affective economy of revanchist nostalgia expands with its tension between restoration and destruction. Reactionaries are angry over the perceived loss of their culture to the progressives, but they are also hopeful they can restore it, often through the punishment and destruction that is inherent to revanchism. Manuel Castells argues that outrage and hope are key to social movements—one feels outrage over the past and hopes for a different future, motivating action.<sup>287</sup> White thymos, then, functions through discourse by cultivating affective investments in white male victimhood while simultaneously increasing the affective charge of hostility in the trolling of others. Through such trolling, the participants seek to own the affective states of others and reassert their presumed dominance. Trolling that mobilizes revanchist nostalgia takes this even further, attempting to destroy instead of asserting dominance.

Similar to how Ganesh argues white thymos can be “weaponized” by reactionaries against diversity, Eric King Watts asserts affective economies of anti-Blackness mobilize whites against the “blackened biothreat” who threaten white sovereignty.<sup>288</sup> The zombie acts as a metaphor for Black people and foreigners who threaten and will ultimately devour white society if left unchecked.<sup>289</sup> The fantasies of preparing for a zombie apocalypse illuminate an anti-Black affect and nostalgia for a time when Black people “knew their place” and they illustrate the inherent fear

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<sup>286</sup> Bharath Ganesh, “Weaponizing White Thymos: Flows of Rage in the Online Audiences of the Alt-Right,” *Cultural Studies* (2020): 893-4.

<sup>287</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015).

<sup>288</sup> Eric King Watts, “‘Zombies are Real’: Fantasies, Conspiracies, and the Post-Truth Wars,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 51, no. 4 (2018): 441-70.

<sup>289</sup> Eric King Watts, “Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2017): 317-33; Eric King Watts, “The Primal Scene of COVID-19: ‘We’re All in this Together,’” *Rhetoric, Politics & Culture* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 1-26.

of racialized bodies posing as a biothreat. Postracial affective economies mobilize a hatred of blackness and a love of white society and supremacy. Revanchist nostalgia captures sentiments of both the love and hate that are engendered by signifiers of identity, grounding the conflicting fantasies and affects that mobilize reactionaries against others.

### 3.4 Nostalgia for an Imagined Speculative Fiction

As revanchist nostalgia is key to reactionary movements, the question is: What are the Sad and Rabid Puppies nostalgic for? The answer may be the time of *Starship Troopers* (1959) by Robert A. Heinlein. The novel glorifies traditional masculinity, treats women as objects, and disguises racism and xenophobia behind antagonistic arachnid aliens.<sup>290</sup> Despite the many problematic themes, Heinlein's novel won the 1960 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Then in 1987, Orson Scott Card, who is open about his far-right leaning ideas regarding homosexuality and his support for the War on Terror, became the first author to win two consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel for *Ender's Game* (1985) and *Speaker for the Dead* (1986).<sup>291</sup>

Despite wins by Heinlein and Card, Hugo winners are typically more progressive stories, with the awards in recent years increasingly going to women and people of color.<sup>292</sup> This may be a conscious choice in the speculative fiction community, or it may simply reflect the growing

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<sup>290</sup> Alexei Panshin, *Heinlein in Dimension: A Critical Analysis* (Chicago: Advent Publishing, 1968); Leighton Brett Cooke, "The Human Alien: In-Groups and Outbreeding in Enemy Mine," in *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*, eds. Eric S. Rabkin and George E. Slusser (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1987), 132-7.

<sup>291</sup> It should be noted that while there are echoes of traditional right-wing ideologies in *Ender's Game*, *Speaker for the Dead* features themes of tolerance, civic understanding, and cultural acceptance. It was not until Card released the third book in the series, *Xenocide* (1991), that his opinions on same sex marriage more explicitly crept into the narrative. *Xenocide* was nominated but lost the Hugo Award for Best Novel. The finale of the tetralogy, *Children of the Mind* (1996), was not nominated.

<sup>292</sup> James Davis Nicoll, "Gender and the Hugo Awards, by the Numbers," Tor, September 10, 2019, <https://www.tor.com/2019/09/10/gender-and-the-hugo-awards-by-the-numbers/>.

diversity of authors in the industry. Speculative fiction lends itself to exploration of our cultures and self-conceptions, which is greatly aided by a multitude of author identities. As Isiah Lavender III explains, “There is nowhere better than sf to examine the fear and excitement generated through alien encounters with race and racism.”<sup>293</sup> Speculative fiction is often an expression of culture, which engages and critiques “the gendered, racialized and ableist systems of power in which we live.”<sup>294</sup> This can be seen in novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* (2009). Tom Shippey argues that speculative fiction is a cultural technology through which authors and audiences can engage with topics that often border on the taboo (more on this ability in Chapter One).<sup>295</sup> Speculative fiction is capable of interrogating our conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, power, capitalism, warfare, and language.<sup>296</sup> PuppyGate, however, shows the potential of reactionaries to poison the unique cultural technology of speculative fiction, which is about imagining how things could be otherwise.<sup>297</sup>

The ability of speculative fiction to critique the world in which we live may be obscured by the fact that the majority of professional authors throughout the history of speculative fiction have been white men. Even without getting into the liberal-conservative spectrum of the genre, the more complex novels and less “popular” stories often prevail at the Hugo Awards. This is not to say that conservative novels cannot be complex, as many are, but the original complaint of Correia

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<sup>293</sup> Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>294</sup> Chaya Porter, “‘Engaging’ in Gender, Race, Sexuality and (Dis)Ability in Science Fiction Television through *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Voyager*” (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2013), x.

<sup>295</sup> Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning From Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 260.

<sup>296</sup> Ria Cheyne, *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

<sup>297</sup> Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Jutta Weldes, ed., *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics* (New York: Springer, 2003).



was that “popular” fiction was overlooked in favor of “literary” speculative fiction.<sup>298</sup> What this implies is that the Sad and Rabid Puppies are not nostalgic for a true past of speculative fiction, but rather a *fantasy* of the past. Zygmunt Bauman describes this nostalgia for a false past as a *retrotopia*, where one aims to return to the past, not as it genuinely was, but to their nostalgic dreams of it.<sup>299</sup> Retrotopias are “visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future.”<sup>300</sup> Nostalgia, while looking backwards, “invariably invites inspection into the present and future condition,” and, in the case of the Puppies, they see the increasingly diverse Hugo Award winners and look back to an imagined past of unquestioned white supremacy in speculative fiction.<sup>301</sup> In order to make this nostalgic, revisionist fantasy a reality, the Sad and Rabid Puppies rely on melancholy, anger, and hatred to gather support and mobilize supporters. The remainder of this chapter analyzes the rhetoric of the Sad and Rabid Puppies to illustrate how their coordinators and supporters mobilize these affects in an effort to create change, beginning with how nostalgia was central to the origins of the Sad Puppies.

### 3.5 The Melancholic, Sad Puppies

From the start of the Sad Puppies’ campaign in 2013, Larry Correia aimed to create an out-group for his supporters to fight against. After alerting his followers that his novel, *Monster Hunter*

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<sup>298</sup> The proposed dichotomy of “popular” and “literary” speculative fiction gets to a core distinction in speculative fiction narratives. Shippey argues that while many readers and editors prefer “the easier reading,” the speculative fiction genre as a whole “often goes for the hard one instead. There are of course dumb sf stories, but on the whole it is not a dumb genre, and it is often a very challenging one.” *Hard Reading*, 49.

<sup>299</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 7.

<sup>300</sup> Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 3.

<sup>301</sup> Ron Von Burg and Paul E. Johnson, “Yearning for a Past that Never Was: Baseball, Steroids, and the Anxiety of the American Dream,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 4 (2009): 355.

*Legion*, was eligible, Correia posted on his personal blog, “The fact that I write unabashed pulp action that isn’t heavy handed message-fic annoys the literati to no end. When I got nominated for the Campbell [Award for Best New Author], the literati message-fic crowd had a conniption fit.”<sup>302</sup> With his first post, Correia sets himself apart from others in speculative fiction publishing by saying that his books are not “message-fic” and then creates an enemy in the literati.<sup>303</sup> In urging his followers to nominate his book, Correia sets up a false dilemma fallacy:

Should I vote for the heavy-handed message-fic about the dangers of fracking and global warming and dying polar bears and robot rape as a bad feminist analogy with a villain who is a thinly veiled Dick Cheney? Or should I vote for the LAS VEGAS EXPLOSION SHOOTING EVERYTHING DRAGON HELICOPTER CHASE ORC SACRIFICING CHICKENS BOOK!?!<sup>304</sup>

As members can list up to five nominees in each category, a person could nominate both message-fic and novels featuring dragon helicopter chases and orcs who sacrifice chickens. What Correia’s post leaves unsaid, however, is that much of the message-fic to which he refers is written by non-heterosexual, non-male, and/or non-white authors—the same people who in recent years began winning awards once seemingly reserved for white men. This and subsequent posts encouraged rebellion against message-fic, casting those who enjoy message-fic as an out-group, as members of the literati. This raises the question of if Correia believes having a message means more than communicating something to the audience. Does Correia not think *his* writing communicates to his readers? This suggests an assumed neutrality of his subject position as a white, heterosexual,

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<sup>302</sup> Larry Correia, “How to Get Correia Nominated for a Hugo :),” *Monster Hunter Nation*, January 8, 2013, <http://monsterhunternation.com/2013/01/08/how-to-get-correia-nominated-for-a-hugo/>.

<sup>303</sup> Correia offers no real definition of what he considers to constitute “message fiction” or the “literati.” Based on his many posts and the posts of his supporters throughout the controversy, “message-fic” varies between fiction that has a message (which would be essentially all fiction) and fiction that one cannot enjoy unless they *agree* with its message, while the “literati” (in line with its denotative definition of the educated class) are generally portrayed as a snobbish, left-leaning group of authors and fans who prefer message-fic over “traditional,” “fun” fiction.

<sup>304</sup> Correia, “How to Get Correia Nominated for a Hugo :).”

cisgendered man, making it impossible for literature written by authors of other identities not to be “message-fic.”<sup>305</sup>

Even at the start of the movement, the impact of nostalgia for a different era of speculative fiction is clear. Boym links restorative nostalgia to conspiracy theorists, and Correia’s rhetoric closely aligns with Boym’s description. Boym, writing from the position of a conspiracy theorist, states, “‘We’ (the conspiracy theorists) for whatever reason feel insecure in the modern world and find a scapegoat for our misfortunes, somebody different from us whom we don’t like. ... ‘They’ conspire against ‘our’ homecoming, hence ‘we’ have to conspire against ‘them’ in order to restore ‘our’ imagined community.”<sup>306</sup> The scapegoats for Correia are the literati and the authors the literati support—authors who were not awarded in previous years because institutional racism and sexism kept them from opportunities afforded to people like Heinlein and Card.<sup>307</sup> Restorative nostalgia leads one to set up an us-versus-them mentality, and Correia creates that foundation. As I demonstrate in the next section, when PuppyGate evolves and the Rabid Puppies form, the “them” of diverse authors are demonized and the World Science Fiction Society is portrayed as a microcosm of all that is wrong with current speculative fiction and must be destroyed.

Correia’s first post also demonstrates the most significant difference between GamerGate and PuppyGate. While GamerGate was an online harassment campaign against *specific* women, PuppyGate is portrayed to be more broadly against the literati and diverse authors. Correia casts anyone who dislikes “popular” literature as an enemy, which is intentionally vague enough that it could mean anyone. This follows Ahmed’s initial description of affective economies where the

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<sup>305</sup> Even outside of speculative fiction, reactionaries have an aversion to messages. The online message board 4chan—which along with 8chan, Parler, and Gabi.ai are hot spots for far-right extremism—will ban users if they attempt to promote a message or a cause. Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, “The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: ‘Come on in the Water’s Fine,’” *New Media and Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 5-30.

<sup>306</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 43.

<sup>307</sup> Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 10-11.

lack of a specific figure at whom to direct the hate allows emotions to circulate and accumulate affective value.<sup>308</sup> By making the “them” broad enough to not just be women or authors of color, but anyone who enjoys their work, the affect that saturates Correia’s communication accumulates value, bonds together his supporters, and begins to justify the repetition of the exclusion of others.

Humor is a key tool in reactionary affective economies, as humor further creates in- and out-groups, particularly when it comes to online trolling.<sup>309</sup> In two subsequent posts, Correia describes the plight of pulp novelists by asking his readers to imagine the Sarah McLachlan song from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals commercials featuring abused and “sad” puppies. This is the first connection between his campaign and the name “Sad Puppies,” and Correia writes that “the leading cause of puppy-related sadness was boring message-fic winning awards.”<sup>310</sup> As Alexandra Deem argues, “alt-right affective economies are driven not just by fear but also by irony and amusement,” and Correia often uses humor alongside the melancholy at the core of the Sad Puppies’ cause.<sup>311</sup> In reactionary digital culture, white male humor often promotes racism and anti-Blackness in order to further entrench dominance and can act as “a cloak disguising a network of racist sentiment.”<sup>312</sup> Freud states, “feelings of shame in front of other people ... are lacking in the melancholic ... One might emphasize the presence in him of an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure.”<sup>313</sup> Correia

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<sup>308</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 123.

<sup>309</sup> Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 112-6.

<sup>310</sup> Amy Wallace, “Who Won Science Fiction's Hugo Awards, and Why It Matters,” *Wired*, August 23, 2015, <https://www.wired.com/2015/08/won-science-fictions-hugo-awards-matters/>.

<sup>311</sup> Deem, “The Digital Traces of #whitegenocide,” 3190.

<sup>312</sup> Robert J. Topinka, “Politically Incorrect Participatory Media: Racist Nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis,” *New Media & Society* 20 (2018): 2055. See also, Calvin L. Warren, “Catachrestic Fantasies” in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018): 143-68; Simon Weaver, “Jokes, Rhetoric, and Embodied Racism: A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of the Logics of Racist Jokes on the Internet,” *Ethnicities* 11, no. 4 (2011): 413-35.

<sup>313</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 247.

exhibited no shame as he repeatedly posted to his blog, urging the public to vote for himself and, in later iterations of the campaign, other authors he felt were a move away from “boring messagefic.” While the use of humor could be seen as a way of denying melancholy, restorative nostalgia suggests humor and melancholy can be used hand-in-hand to reject the present reality and seek a restoration of a false past—just what Correia was attempting to do (further discussion regarding how humor is weaponized by reactionary fans in Chapter Three). Despite the plethora of posts and stoking of melancholy in his supporters, however, his novel, *Monster Hunter Legion*, ended up seventeen votes short of being a finalist, as noted above.

While melancholy is useful for bringing people together around a cause, mobilizing anger can move the group to action. In 2014, Correia’s first post for the new campaign stated that he would “tug at [his followers’] heartstrings with the piteous mewling of sad eyed pulp novelists who have been abused by the literati elite.”<sup>314</sup> Immediately, Correia informs his followers that he plans on playing with their emotions and creating sympathy for himself and other pulp novelists. A major difference in the 2014 campaign was that Correia expanded his slate, asking his followers to inform him of other works that aligned with their values and for “deserving things ... out there that the literati twaddle peddlers hate.”<sup>315</sup> By the end of voting, Correia published a slate of twelve nominees, seven of which were nominated. This led to the Sad Puppies gaining some notoriety in the World Science Fiction Society, and Correia claimed he was harassed online due to his personal beliefs, referring to himself as “an outspoken right-winger.”<sup>316</sup> Instead of frequent jokes, Correia’s post lists the grievances he had against the literati who maligned authors “not for the quality of

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<sup>314</sup> Larry Correia, “Back from Texas, and Now It Is Sad Puppies Season 2!,” *Monster Hunter Nation*, January 7, 2014, <https://larrycorreia.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/back-from-texas-and-now-it-is-sad-puppies-season-2/>.

<sup>315</sup> Larry Correia, “Sad Puppies 2: The Debatening!,” *Monster Hunter Nation*, February 20, 2014, <https://monsterhunternation.com/2014/02/20/sad-puppies-2-the-debatening/>.

<sup>316</sup> Larry Correia, “An Explanation About the Hugo Awards Controversy,” *Monster Hunter Nation*, April 24, 2014, <http://monsterhunternation.com/2014/04/24/an-explanation-about-the-hugo-awards-controversy/>.

their art but rather for their unacceptable beliefs” and argues that “message or identity politics [have] become far more important than entertainment or quality.”<sup>317</sup> Correia is still melancholic for a different time, a time when he perceived that political beliefs did not influence a work’s reception, but anger is increasingly present in his communication. Even as his rhetoric mobilizes anger and the idea of changing the World Science Fiction Society, he still longs to be a part of it. He desires recognition from people he considers peers, even if many of those peers (people he pejoratively refers to as “social justice warriors”) believe him to be a “terrible, awful, horrible, bad person.”<sup>318</sup> In the end, of the seven finalists he promoted, only one placed above last, with another (a novelette by Vox Day) placing six out of five, behind “No Award.”

By 2015, Correia was no longer the sole leading figure in the Sad Puppies campaign. While he was still heavily involved—and later had to make posts differentiating his movement from the Rabid Puppies—fellow author Brad Torgersen (who appeared twice on the 2014 slate) took over the campaign as coordinator. Torgersen initiated his tenure as head puppy with a post that included the first official Sad Puppies logo and this narrative:

And when the three puppy astronauts—Ray, Isaac, and Frank—observed the lay of the alien land on Hugo World, they let out a forlorn howl. For they saw nothing but tedious ‘message’ fiction, depressing talk-talk stories about amoral people with severe ennui, and literary MFA novels. Not a rocketship nor a ray gun in sight. ‘Can someone please give us some explosions?’ the puppies cried in unison. ‘I mean, we were promised explosions! And kick-ass laser battles! And all we got were some lousy t-shirts that said, *This is what a feminist looks like!* We don’t want that stupid crap! We came to have fun!’<sup>319</sup>

This narrative is an interesting melancholic move, as the three puppies are presumably Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Frank Herbert—locating the speculative fiction Torgersen is

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<sup>317</sup> Correia, “An Explanation About the Hugo Awards Controversy.”

<sup>318</sup> Correia, “An Explanation About the Hugo Awards Controversy.”

<sup>319</sup> Brad Torgersen, “How You Can Aid the Valiant Sad Puppies 3 Campaign!,” Blue Collar Speculative Fiction, January 21, 2015, <https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/how-you-can-aid-the-valiant-sad-puppies-3-campaign/>.

appealing to in the 1950s and 1960s. Stephanie Coontz argues that there is a unique melancholy in the US for the 1950s with its supposedly tranquil lifestyles, family dynamics, and conservative cultural ideals, but that, in reality, this golden age never existed and has been distorted to fit various political ideologies.<sup>320</sup> This nostalgia for a false past rings particularly true with a past speculative fiction that never existed. Rather than name the three puppies Jules (Verne), Herbert (G. Wells), or Mary (Wollstonecraft Shelley)—three authors frequently cited as the originators of science fiction as a literary genre—Torgersen chose authors from a period that is a nostalgic fantasy for the right and, notably, the time directly before the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>321</sup> Yet, the vision of speculative fiction during this period is not what Torgersen and Correia claim either.

Paula Ioanide posits that people receive affective rewards for believing in fantasies, even when faced with evidence that points to the contrary.<sup>322</sup> The emotional attachments to these fantasies can motivate actions, and through latching onto imagined pasts, there is the opportunity to form attachments to reactionary movements. This can be seen in how the Sad Puppies ignore the more progressive authors of the 1960s onward—including Damon Knight, Harlan Ellison, Samuel R. Delany—and how they even ignore works by the very authors they appear to idolize. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* explores sexual freedom and prejudice, Asimov’s *The Gods Themselves* features an alien species with three genders, and Herbert’s *Dune* provides a progressive ecological and anti-capitalist message while critiquing masculine rage and gender norms—all three of which won the Hugo Award for Best Novel. As Elizabeth Sandifer argues, the idea that speculative fiction is “an apolitical genre of thrilling adventure fiction is simply not

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<sup>320</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>321</sup> Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 287-332.

<sup>322</sup> Paula Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Color Blindness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

supported by any sort of historical reality.”<sup>323</sup> Yet, with his narrative and the overall Sad Puppies campaign, Torgersen melancholically appeals to moments from this period, ignoring and distorting the nuanced reality of speculative fiction’s history.



**Figure 2. The 2015 Sad Puppies Campaign Mission Patch.**<sup>324</sup>

In addition to the nostalgic narrative, Torgersen invokes visuals by including a logo he refers to as a “mission patch” (Figure 2). A mission patch is a cloth reproduction of a spaceflight mission emblem worn by astronauts and other personnel affiliated with that mission, so Torgersen calling this digital logo a “mission patch” is a clear evocation of the speculative fiction genre.

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<sup>323</sup> Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Scotts Valley, CA: Eruditorum Press, 2017), 356.

<sup>324</sup> Martin Moore and Angela Nagle both argue that reactionary groups, particularly in online communities such as 4Chan, have a fundamentalist belief in free expression and free speech. When I reached out to the artist of the mission patch (artraccoon, aka Lee Madison) to receive permission to include them in an article, Madison said, “Understand that I am a strong advocate of free speech, and free thought, and support healthy debate. I hope that this is your position as well.” A similar devotion to free speech is apparent in many of Correia’s blog posts as well, both those related to PuppyGate and more generally. Lee Madison, DeviantArt message to the author, February 3, 2021; Martin Moore, *Democracy Hacked: Political Turmoil and Information Warfare in the Digital Age* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2018); Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2017).



Shannon P. Callahan and Alison Ledgerwood argue that “simply having a symbol leads collections of individuals to seem more like real, unified groups” and that these increased claims to “realness” lead groups to seem more effective.<sup>325</sup> By providing a visual for the group to rally around, Torgersen gives form to the public identity of the Sad Puppies while offering fellow authors and puppy supporters a symbol to include on their blog posts, tweets, and communication with others.<sup>326</sup> Many authors and fans did just that to mark themselves as part of the Sad Puppy movement, to recruit further supporters, and to foster unity among those who shared the same or similar images.<sup>327</sup>

The content of the patch is particularly noteworthy as the logo depicts the puppies Torgersen describes in his narrative. One throws back its head in the described forlorn howl, while the other two look down with drooping eyebrows. Behind the astronaut puppies is a rocket that has seemingly failed to make it into outer space—it arcs back toward the ground from the cannon that propelled it. Its supposedly impenetrable, shiny hull is flaccid—a metaphor for the feeling of impotence experienced by the white, male pulp novelists when it comes to the Hugo Awards. Rather than strictly looking back at an imagined past, however, with this narrative and mission patch, Torgersen paints an imagined future.

With Torgersen as the head of the Sad Puppies campaign, there is a distinct shift in rhetoric, as he not only utilizes anger to convince his readers to vote for particular stories and authors as a way to change the Hugo Awards and to get revenge on the message-fic-loving literati, he also

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<sup>325</sup> Shannon P. Callahan and Alison Ledgerwood, “On the Psychological Function of Flags and Logos: Group Identity Symbols Increase Perceived Entitativity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110, no. 4 (2016): 528.

<sup>326</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of ‘Accidental Napalm,’” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 1 (2003): 35-66.

<sup>327</sup> For more on how affectively charged images, when placed “onto digital spaces through tweets or Facebook posts ... [can] activate the affective potential in the image,” see Josue David Cisneros, “Borders, Bodies, Buses, and Butterflies: Migration and Rhetoric of Social Movement” in *The Conceit of Context: Resituating Domains in Rhetorical Studies*, eds. Charles E. Morris III and Kendall R. Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 176.

mobilizes fear.<sup>328</sup> Fear, according to Ahmed, “responds to that which is approaching rather than already here.”<sup>329</sup> After detailing the ways speculative fiction publishing has come under the influence of the “general societal fear factor” incited by “activist mob[s],” Torgersen says that new authors are told “*don’t write the wrong stories.*”<sup>330</sup> Torgersen implies that if the liberal literati have their way, the “wrong stories”—stories that the public actually likes—will not exist in the future. This creates an imagined future where, if the present situation of diversity-over-all continues, future writers will be too afraid to write anything other than message-fic. The only way to ensure a future for stories like those from Correia and Torgersen is to vote for the stories and authors that were once beloved and awarded in speculative fiction. Torgersen writes that despite the dangers entailed with writing “the wrong stories,” he and the Sad Puppies have “decided that some things are worth the personal risk. We’re done with playing the game. We’re calling out the fearmongers and we’re saying, ‘Go to hell, you can’t stop us, because you were never as powerful as you thought you were.’”<sup>331</sup>

The fear mobilized in this affective economy, like melancholy and anger, has nostalgia as its affective foundation. Torgersen writes that the Sad Puppies plan to “get this ship [speculative fiction] out of the doldrums of correctness. Put it back onto the high seas where it belongs.”<sup>332</sup> By putting the ship *back* where it belongs, there is an implication that the seas where it used to sail

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<sup>328</sup> Another interpretation could be, rather than fear, this is anxiety. Calum Lister Matheson writes, “Anxiety results when the object of the Other’s desire draws too close, eliminating the distance that permits subjects to enjoy their fantasies.” Speculative fiction is about imagining new worlds that might be. Matheson would say what makes it pleasurable is that dynamic between “here” and “gone,” where we can play with the ideas but not live in them. When a new world is introduced—one ushered in by increasing diversity in speculative fiction—it is jarring to the more “traditional,” white, male authors. They do not know what the Other wants of them, so they feel excluded or rejected by that order. “Filthy Lucre: Gold, Language, and Exchange Anxiety,” *Review of Communication* 18, no. 4 (2018): 250. For more on this conception of anxiety, see Calum Matheson, “‘What Does Obama Want of Me?’ Anxiety and Jade Helm 15,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 133-149.

<sup>329</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 125.

<sup>330</sup> Brad Torgersen, “The Fear Factor in SF/F Publishing and Fandom,” *Blue Collar Speculative Fiction*, April 1, 2015, <https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/the-fear-factor-in-sff-publishing-and-fandom/>.

<sup>331</sup> Torgersen, “The Fear Factor in SF/F Publishing and Fandom.”

<sup>332</sup> Torgersen, “The Fear Factor in SF/F Publishing and Fandom.”

were different. They were the seas of Heinlein; seas where popular, pulp literature and award-winning literature could be one and the same; seas that only existed for fleeting moments. Reclaiming this past can only be accomplished, Torgersen believes, if he and Correia use fear and anger to spur supporters into action. As Lory Britt and David Heise argue, fear alone can leave people feeling vulnerable.<sup>333</sup> But fear transformed into anger—an anger invoked with the intent to change the system—motivates supporters to act and join the cause. Torgersen does not say the Sad Puppies want to sink the ship or to dry out the sea. Instead, they are changing course, preventing an imagined future that threatens what he, his fellow authors, and their fans want. Change is the Sad Puppies’ goal, a change that benefits privileged white male authors.

Even with the addition of anger and fear, melancholy and nostalgia were still central to the affective economy of the Sad Puppies. When Torgersen released the 2015 voting slate, the recommendations ballooned to sixty proposed nominees across the sixteen categories. The fact that most of the proposed nominees were white, heterosexual men is indicative of melancholic longing. Tammy Clewell points out that melancholy “attempts to reclaim a part of the self that has been projected onto the other, a part of the self necessary to the construction of the subject’s self-image as a complete and autonomous being.”<sup>334</sup> As the Sad Puppies believed they had lost the ability to be awarded by their peers, they attempted to reclaim the part of themselves that had previously been validated by the Hugo Awards.<sup>335</sup> While by 2015, Torgersen shifted the rhetoric

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<sup>333</sup> Lory Britt and David Heise, “From Shame to Pride in Identity Politics” in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, eds. by Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens, and Robert W. White (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 256.

<sup>334</sup> Tammy Clewell, “Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52, no.1 (2004): 47.

<sup>335</sup> This has a clear connection with anxiety in the form of the Other, “the Symbolic order that makes communication possible.” The Sad Puppies want the validation from the World Science Fiction Society, to be the object of the Other’s affection, and they panic when they apparently are not. Matheson, “Filthy lucre,” 135.

of the Sad Puppies from that of Correia’s melancholy to anger, the formation of the Sad Puppies was rooted firmly in restorative nostalgia and melancholy accompanied by fear and humor.

### 3.6 The Hateful, Rabid Puppies

While the affective cluster of melancholy, anger, and fear propelled the Sad Puppies, with the Rabid Puppies that anger became hate as their goal was not restoration, but destruction. The Rabid Puppies were formed in 2015 by Theodore Robert Beale, commonly known as Vox Day. Day describes himself as a Christian Nationalist, and he has posted on his personal blog that American culture is white culture, that legalizing rape would be less damaging to society than having women in the workforce, and that the United States Constitution should not guarantee posterity for “immigrants [or] descendants of immigrants.”<sup>336</sup> In 2013, Day ran to become the president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America association, and while he failed to win, he did receive ten percent of the vote. Following his loss, he called author N.K. Jemisin—a Black woman who (correctly) characterized him as a “misogynist, racist, [and] anti-Semite”—an “ignorant half-savage” and was expelled from the organization.<sup>337</sup>

Between Torgersen’s angry rhetoric calling for a return to the past and the inclusion of Day on the Sad Puppies’ 2014 slate (despite or perhaps *because* of his extremist views), there is a clear revanchist connection to the Sad Puppies’ movement. While Day directed many of his followers

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<sup>336</sup> Vox Day, “Posterity: TK vs VD,” Castalia House, June 25, 2017, <http://voxday.blogspot.com/2017/06/posterity-tk-vs-vd.html>; David Futrelle, “Vox Day: Working Women is Worse than Rape,” *We Hunted the Mammoth*, February 24, 2013, <https://www.wehuntedthemammoth.com/2013/02/24/vox-day-women-working-is-worse-than-rape/>.

<sup>337</sup> Rajan Khanna, “Controversies Inside the World of Science Fiction and Fantasy,” *LitReactor*, November 26, 2013, <https://litreactor.com/columns/controversies-inside-the-worl-of-science-fiction-and-fantasy>; Vox Day, “A Black Female Fantasist Calls for Reconciliation,” Castalia House, June 13, 2013, <http://voxday.blogspot.com/2013/06/a-black-female-fantasist.html>.

to vote for the Sad Puppies slate in 2014, he wanted more input in the 2015 selection. The day after Torgersen announced the 2015 slate for the Sad Puppies, Day unveiled a slate of sixty-seven nominees for a new faction of the campaign he called the Rabid Puppies. Notably, Day included himself twice on the Rabid Puppies' slate and eleven total works from his publishing house, Castalia House. Day did not appear on the 2015 Sad Puppies slate, but there were many stories, authors, and editors that appeared on both. In explaining the significant overlap between the two groups' slates, Day writes, "[We] are similar because we value excellence in actual science fiction and fantasy, rather than excellence in intersectional equalitarianism, racial and gender inclusion, literary pyrotechnics, or professional rabbitology."<sup>338</sup> The voting block actions of both the Sad and Rabid Puppies as well as Day's acknowledgement of their alliance make the two groups' goals appear similar, though the rhetoric of Day and his supporters recontextualize these actions and reveal their goals to be destructive rather than restorative.



**Figure 3. The 2015 Rabid Puppies Campaign Mission Patch.**

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<sup>338</sup> Vox Day, "Rabid Puppies 2015," Castalia House, February 2, 2015, <http://voxday.blogspot.com/2015/02/rabid-puppies-2015.html>.

Along with the slate announcement, Day also unveiled the 2015 Rabid Puppies mission patch (Figure 3). The Rabid Puppies’ 2015 mission patch/logo bears many similarities to the Sad Puppies’ patch as it features presumably the same three puppies and a rocket angled downwards in the background. The main differences are that now each puppy bares its teeth in a snarl, they wear red uniforms with spikes on their shoulder pads, the suits are embossed with skulls and crossbones, and the central puppy brandishes a ray gun. Additionally, the rocket behind them has blown up—signifying the Rabid Puppies’ desire for destruction rather than change. Similar to the Sad Puppies, Day and other Rabid Puppies included the mission patch in blog posts and other social media posts to convey their support for the Rabid Puppies’ goal. The more significant discussion, however, comes from turning to the mission patch for their 2016 campaign (Figure 4), as it is illustrative of the major differences between the two campaigns.



**Figure 4. The 2016 Rabid Puppies Campaign Mission Patch.**

The 2016 Rabid Puppies’ mission patch retains the idea of three puppies from the Sad Puppies’ logo—though they are different breeds than Ray, Isaac, and Frank from Torgersen’s post

as well as the three in the 2015 Rabid Puppies patch. Everything else, however, is a clear indication of the diverging motivations and aims of the two groups. Rather than depicting the puppies with drooping eyebrows and pitiful eyes with one forlornly howling, these illustrated puppies are angry. One wields a battle axe, another wears a skull-and-crossbones embossed eyepatch as they chomp down on a bone with sharp teeth, and the third (one that more closely resembles a fox than a puppy) slurps from a goblet made from a skull. All three are adorned in battle armor, and the scattered bones of what one can assume are their conquered enemies lay at their feet. Notably, the 2016 patch replaces the 2015's science fiction theme with a medieval fantasy one. This indicates a move from imagining a different future to imagining a past that never actually existed. To do this, the Rabid Puppies replace the limp/exploded spaceship in the background with fireballs raining down on a tower. One flaming missile smashes through the stone structure. On top of the destroyed edifice waves a tattered flag—a flag that is reminiscent of reactionaries' flag for SJWs: a black snowflake (one of the many pejoratives reactionaries use when referring to liberals) in a white circle on a red flag. The bottom features a banner bearing the phrase “Making the Hugos Great Again,” a clear homage to Donald Trump, who, at the time, was the Republican nominee for President of the United States with his campaign slogan “Make America Great Again.” The gesture to Trump and his brand of nostalgic rhetoric is important to note, as it appeals (however winkingly) to white supremacists.<sup>339</sup> While neither Torgersen nor Correia admit to the white supremacist underpinnings of the Sad Puppies campaign, it is clear that while they may have a different degree of revanchist nostalgia to that of Day and the Rabid Puppies, it is not a different kind. Even Day's rhetoric mirrors that of Correia and Torgersen—victimize yourself, demonize the other side, and

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<sup>339</sup> James Chase Sanchez, “Trump, the KKK, and the Versatility of White Supremacist Rhetoric,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 44-56.

use anger to unite a group to act on behalf of your interest. Day's open ties to white supremacy brings to mind Sara Ahmed's scholarship.<sup>340</sup>

Ahmed argues that white supremacist groups use hatred to craft narratives that they are organizations of love, aiming to uplift their supporters. These narratives are "a rewriting of history" where "the white subjects claim the place of hosts ... at the same time as they claim the position of victim."<sup>341</sup> This is virtually identical to the rhetoric of the Sad and Rabid Puppies, where privileged, white authors portray themselves as victims because their stories do not win as many awards as they believe they would if the industry was monopolized by white men. Ahmed describes hate as the primary affect white supremacists use in these narratives. In explaining his intentions with the Rabid Puppies, Day wrote, "I wanted to leave a big smoking hole where the Hugo Awards were. All this has ever been is a giant Fuck You—one massive gesture of contempt."<sup>342</sup> This is clearly evocative of Lorde's definition of hatred, with its "fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction."<sup>343</sup>

One may pause at Day's claim to want destruction, as he includes himself on the nomination slate. His inclusion may indicate that by placing himself as a potential nominee, Day wants to change the World Science Fiction Society to something where he, with his reactionary views, could not only survive, but thrive. Perhaps Day experienced a grief of distortions with his peers, particularly after being kicked out of a speculative fiction organization where ten percent of

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<sup>340</sup> Day has written that it is offensive to call him a white supremacist, as he identifies as Native American. This reasoning, however, can largely be seen as further trolling by Day. In his definition of the alt-right, Day proposes a number of tenets, the fourteenth being "the Alt Right believes we must secure the existence of white people and a future for white children." This is a clear evocation of the "Fourteen Words" slogan of white nationalists (also referred to as "14/88"). Its placement as the fourteenth tenet only makes the connection clearer. For more, see David Auerbach, "The Sci-Fi Roots of the Far Right—From 'Lucifer's Hammer' to Newt's Moon Base to Donald's Wall," *The Daily Beast*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/from-lucifers-hammer-to-newts-moon-base-to-donalds-wallthe-sci-fi-roots-of-the-far-right>.

<sup>341</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 43.

<sup>342</sup> Wallace, "Who Won Science Fiction's Hugo Awards, and Why It Matters."

<sup>343</sup> Lorde, "Uses of Anger," 129.



members voted for him to become president. I argue no, Day does not consider the other members of the World Science Fiction Society to be his peers. His rhetoric reveals that he views the many diverse authors in the World Science Fiction Society as far beneath him. Instead of wanting to be a part of the proceedings, he hoped to “tank” them.<sup>344</sup> This impulse to destroy beloved institutions rather than let other non-white, non-male groups partake in their enjoyment is a characteristic of white masculine victimhood.<sup>345</sup> Even if the Rabid Puppies fell short of actually winning any Hugo Awards, by nominating himself, works from the Patriarchy Press, and science fiction erotica, Day prevented other diverse authors from even having the chance to be nominated.<sup>346</sup>

Notably, Day continually uses the phrase “blowing up the Hugo Awards” in his posts, and this repetition reveals the influence of white thymos in PuppyGate. Through the repetition, Day and the other coordinators express that they have experienced injustices at the hands of the literati and have lost out on something they believe they deserve due to a perceived push for diversity and inclusion. Jodi Dean describes how repeated messages can produce enjoyment and turn followers into an “acephalic force,” a collective group acting on ingrained instinct.<sup>347</sup> Day produces that enjoyment through his continued messaging of destruction, which he justifies by claiming that, through destruction, they will both enable more literature like his to thrive and take down a once-great institution that has been ruined by the left. In doing so, Day weaponizes white thymos by

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<sup>344</sup> Day, “Rabid Puppies 2015.”

<sup>345</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 83-104. Additionally, Heather McGhee provides an example of this impulse to destroy an institution rather than allow non-whites to use/enjoy it through the history of desegregated public schools and the creation of private schools in *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: Random House, 2021), 103-138.

<sup>346</sup> For more on despite losing in every category, the Sad and Rabid Puppies “won,” see Tasha Robinson, “How the Sad Puppies Won – By Losing,” NPR, August 26, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/26/434644645/how-the-sad-puppies-won-by-losing>.

<sup>347</sup> Jodi Dean, “Affective Networks,” *MediaTropes* 2, no. 2 (2010): 21.

“aiming the energies of this swarm at a target or aspiration,” destroying the World Science Fiction Society through voting for his proposed nominees.<sup>348</sup>

White thymos is central to the affective economy of revanchist nostalgia. In white thymos, the white man imagines they are no longer privileged and looks back to a time when they were. In a way, this is the counterpart to the nostalgia driving the melancholy of the Sad Puppies: Correia looks back on a time of speculative fiction that never existed, while Day looks back on a time when white men were privileged as if it no longer exists in the present. Despite this difference, both are firmly rooted in revanchist nostalgia. Melancholy and anger drive Correia and Torgersen to attempt to restore a false past of speculative fiction, while white thymos and hatred drive Day to further inscribe a present of white, male dominance. In both cases, however, the desire is to return to a state where their privileged groups have unquestioned supremacy—to not only remove the others who have threatened their positions but to punish them by preventing them from receiving accolades that can increase sales and ensure the longevity of their careers. Bharath Ganesh writes that white thymos invents a crisis of white culture, which Day creates through his repeated calls for destruction and claims that diversity is ruining speculative fiction. Day weaponizes white thymos by playing on “personal and collective structures of rage, anger, and indignation to reinscribe audiences as participants in a righteous cultural war to return ... to [their] mythical dominance.”<sup>349</sup> The dominance, however, may be more than merely mythical, as fifty-eight of the sixty-seven nominees on the Rabid Puppies’ slate advanced to the finalist round. The anger, hatred, and revanchist nostalgia Day stoked in the Rabid Puppies resulted in many deserving, diverse authors being excluded.

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<sup>348</sup> Ganesh, “Weaponizing White Thymos,” 901.

<sup>349</sup> Ganesh, “Weaponizing White Thymos,” 916.

The shared affective foundation of nostalgia led to shared allegiances between the two Puppy groups, but while the shared affect can bring people deeper into reactionary philosophy, this is not guaranteed. A splinter can also occur. Upon the unveiling of the finalists, there was a push by those in the speculative fiction industry to vote for “No Award” rather than vote for any of the Puppy nominees. Torgersen protested, writing, “*We are not Rabid*. None of us wants to burn the Hugos down. We want the Hugos to live up their reputation as the preeminent award in the combined field of Science Fiction & Fantasy.”<sup>350</sup> Here, Torgersen refers to Day’s rhetoric of hatred and clarifies that the Sad Puppies do not *want* to destroy the Hugo Awards. Rather, they want to change them. The aims of reformation versus destruction led the nostalgia to take on different motivating affects: fear and anger for the Sad Puppies and hatred for the Rabid Puppies. As the groups’ aims drift apart, there is resistance to being a part of the other group. Megan Condis demonstrates how this fracturing occurs in wider reactionary movements through her discussion of how the so-called “self-appointed standard bearers for the alt-right movement” (such as Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos) distanced themselves from white supremacist groups such as the 1488ers because they went about accomplishing their goals in different ways, despite ultimately desiring the same thing.<sup>351</sup> The Sad Puppies do the same with the Rabid Puppies, even as they both ostensibly aim to bring the Hugo Awards back to a previous state.

The portrayal of their imagined pasts, presents, and futures differs between the two Puppy groups. While both mobilize nostalgia and melancholy over a lost past, the Sad Puppies want to restore that past in order to seek inclusion in the present and future. The Rabid Puppies, on the other hand, intensify the anger of the Sad Puppies—their desire for change—into hatred, aiming

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<sup>350</sup> Brad Torgersen, “Sad Puppies: We Are Not Rabid Puppies,” Blue Collar Speculative Fiction, April 16, 2015, <https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/04/16/we-are-not-rabid/>.

<sup>351</sup> Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 102.

instead to destroy the present and create a future they deem acceptable. Despite these differences, in 2015 Correia explained his goal with the Sad Puppies was “to demonstrate that the [Hugo] awards were biased, represented the likes of only one small part of fandom, that authors with the wrong politics who got on the ballot would be attacked ... and to get deserving, worthy authors who would normally be ignored onto the ballot.”<sup>352</sup> Correia reveals his plan was never *only* about reclaiming a lost past, but also exposing the corruption within the World Science Fiction Society. The goal of demonstrating how conservative authors would be attacked fits more with Torgersen’s use of fear and anger than the melancholy that saturated Correia’s early posts. Correia and Torgersen stoke anger in their followers, hoping to provoke change through conservative victories. While their actions are rooted in melancholy and nostalgia, in 2015 they focus more on the coming change, as they believed, after winning all five finalist slots in multiple categories, there would be conservative winners again.

### **3.7 The Mournful, Reflective Nominees**

When an author, artist, or editor is nominated for a Hugo Award, a representative of the World Science Fiction Society contacts them and asks if they want to accept the nomination. Authors turn down nominations for many reasons, such as Neil Gaiman declining his nomination of Best Novel for *Anansi Boys* (2005) and Martha Wells turning down her nomination for Best Novella for *Fugitive Telemetry* (2021) because they believed they had been amply rewarded in the past and wanted new names to appear on the ballot. When one declines the nomination, the

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<sup>352</sup> Torgersen, “Sad Puppies: We Are Not Rabid Puppies.”

organizers select the story or person with the next highest number of points and elevates them to the finalist position. Only after five nominees in each category have accepted their nominations are finalists revealed to the public. In 2015, at least six finalists promoted by either the Sad and/or Rabid Puppies withdrew themselves prior to the nominations being announced—clear evidence of the fracturing between the two Puppy groups and the authors they claimed exemplified their values. Among the fifty-one announced finalists from the Sad Puppies’ slate and fifty-eight from the Rabid Puppies’ slate, two authors stand out: Marko Kloos and Annie Bellet. Kloos was a finalist in the Best Novel category for his novel *Lines of Departure* (2014), and Bellet was a finalist in Best Short Story for her story “Goodnight Stars” (2014). These authors are notable because, while they initially accepted their nominations, both Kloos and Bellet made the nearly unprecedented decision to withdraw themselves from the final ballot *after* the finalist lists were released.

Kloos and Bellet’s statements about their eventual withdrawals expose how PuppyGate ultimately led to a fracturing between the Sad Puppies, Rabid Puppies, and their selected authors as their various goals drifted apart. Kloos’s withdrawal announcement post is short and explains that he cannot accept a nomination or an award that he feels he might have earned for reasons apart from quality. He wishes “to disassociate [him]self from the originator of the ‘Rabid Puppies’ campaign,” Vox Day, who he refers to as “a shitbag of the first order,” a clear distancing from the Rabid Puppies, despite his initial acceptance of their endorsement.<sup>353</sup> Bellet, on the other hand, wrote a lengthy blog post explaining her reasons for withdrawing. She states, “I am withdrawing because this [nomination] has become about something very different than great science fiction ...

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<sup>353</sup> Marko Kloos, “A Statement on My Hugo Nomination,” Marko Kloos, April 15, 2015, <https://www.markokloos.com/?p=1387>.

All joy that might have come from this nomination has been co-opted, ruined, or sapped away.”<sup>354</sup> Bellet’s blog post is filled with disappointment, frustration, and sadness directed at the Sad and Rabid Puppies but also at the World Science Fiction Society, as she expresses that she is “both a conscripted player and also a ball”—she is being used by groups on all sides and none care about her art, only her conservative politics.<sup>355</sup> While her frustration could be read as anger, Bellet is not focused on creating change. Instead, she is frustrated by the fact that PuppyGate has tainted a moment she should have cherished—her first major nomination for her writing—but also, and equally important, that the Puppies felt they had to be involved at all. The latter aspect indicates that Bellet *does* share beliefs with the Puppies; she wishes they had not had to get involved and that fiction like hers (and by extension theirs) could be evaluated on its own merits, like it once was. By not protesting her inclusion on either Puppy groups’ slate, she tacitly agrees with their nostalgic vision for the Hugo Awards. This tacit agreement is further evidenced by her initial acceptance of the nomination. But the splintering between Bellet and the two Puppy groups occurs not only due to Bellet being confronted with the reality of this new alliance, but by the shifting of the motivating affects.

Within Bellet’s frustrated tenor, there is a lamenting the loss of joy. This loss is not recognized as melancholy, but as mourning. Bellet writes one reason she hates that she has to withdraw her story from the finalist list is that she believes her story could have won. The loss of the possibility of giving an acceptance speech is gone, taken from her, and she mourns its passing. She does not, however, write about reclaiming this moment. She does not look back on this possibility with restorative or revanchist nostalgia, but, instead, with reflective nostalgia.

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<sup>354</sup> Annie Bellet, “Hugo Story Withdrawn,” Annie Bellet, April 15, 2015, <https://anniebellet.com/hugo-story-withdrawn/>.

<sup>355</sup> Bellet, “Hugo Story Withdrawn.”

Melancholic rhetoric aims to “persuade us to act *as if* a certain loss had occurred even though it has in fact *not yet* been lost,” but unlike Correia, Torgersen, and Day, who are nostalgic for a time when white men in speculative fiction were privileged as if it no longer exists, Bellet acknowledges that her nomination, her chance of winning *has already* been lost.<sup>356</sup>

As Žižek describes, mourning is a “second killing of the (lost) object,” and here the loss is not an imagined past of speculative fiction’s past or present, but her own chance to be a Hugo Award winner.<sup>357</sup> The only way for Bellet to reclaim the elation that being nominated brought, to reclaim the ability to give her acceptance speech, to “put on a princess gown sewn with d20s,” and to sit at the awards banquet with her mother is to move forward.<sup>358</sup> Her blog post is her grieving the death of this possibility in 2015, but she imagines a future where it is possible. Correia and Torgersen want to create a past that never existed, but Bellet wants to work toward a future that is unlike the present. In some ways, this aligns more with Day’s desire for destruction, but rather than destroying the institution, Bellet destroys her chances of winning by withdrawing herself. Hatred is not present as much as the individual self-reflection that is key to reflective nostalgia. Her rhetoric is not intended to inspire others to vote for particular nominees, nor is it even encouraging specific actions (apart from signaling to those who are pro- and anti-Puppies to stop harassing her). Rather, Bellet uses the moment as one that will reinvigorate her writing, to reflect on the past and chart her future on a different path, one where she can reclaim her writing, as her “fiction is [her] message, not someone else’s.”<sup>359</sup> The phrasing in Bellet’s declaration of reclamation is almost assuredly a poke at Correia, Torgersen, Day, and the rest of the Sad and Rabid Puppies. From Correia’s first post, he encouraged rebellion against “message-fic,” casting

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<sup>356</sup> Barbara Biesecker, “No Time for Mourning,” 153

<sup>357</sup> Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act,” 658.

<sup>358</sup> Bellet, “Hugo Story Withdrawn.”

<sup>359</sup> Bellet, “Hugo Story Withdrawn.”

those who enjoy message-fic as members of the literati, yet Bellet explicitly refers to her fiction (the fiction that Correia, Torgersen, and Day all promoted) as a message.

Even with Bellet and Kloos off the ballot, nominees from the Sad and Rabid Puppies' slates monopolized five categories, presumably meaning voters would *have* to vote for a Puppy-sponsored work. In each of these categories (Best Novella, Best Short Story, Best Related Work, Best Editor Short Form, and Best Editor Long Form), however, "No Award" was named the victor. Kloos's replacement in the Best Novel category, *The Three-Body Problem* (2008/2014) by Chinese author Liu Cixin and translated by Ken Liu, ultimately won the Best Novel Hugo Award, the first Asian novel to do so. Seeing as no Puppy-affiliated author came close to victory, it is unlikely that Bellet would have triumphed had she retained her slot as a finalist, but Bellet demonstrates how mourning can drive future change. While she is frustrated and possibly even angry about the situation, she also displays a refusal to dwell. She does grieve, as one does in mourning, but by acknowledging the grieving, acknowledging that the past is lost, she is able to move forward. That is something Correia, Torgersen, and Day do not do, as restorative and revanchist nostalgia require a romance with their imagined past. Bellet recognizes that while she would like to replicate aspects of this imagined reality in which she won the award, it cannot come about in the same way. That is not what she wants. Through mourning, Bellet decides to make a conscious change, so that "perhaps someday [she] can win this award for the right reasons and without all the pain."<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Bellet, "Hugo Story Withdrawn."



### 3.8 Conclusion

At the 2015 WorldCon, fans proposed a change in the Hugo Awards' voting procedures that would reduce the power of bloc voting. Due to the World Science Fiction Society bylaws, "*E Pluribus Hugo*" took two years to ratify, so in 2016, the Sad and Rabid Puppies again put out slates. Sixty-one of the eighty-one Rabid Puppy nominations advanced to the finalist round. "No Award" again won multiple categories. Within two years, "No Award" claimed more wins than it had throughout the seventy-two years of Hugo Awards prior to PuppyGate. In 2017, following the ratification of *E Pluribus Hugo*, the Sad Puppies ceased releasing slates and the Rabid Puppies only managed twelve nominations; in 2018, the Rabid Puppies refrained from publishing a slate as well.

While, as of this writing, neither the Sad nor Rabid Puppies have put out slates since 2017, Day has continued his attempts to undermine the Hugo Awards by giving more pointed recommendations, including Stix Hiscock's (a fairly obvious *nom de plume*) novelette *Alien Stripper Boned From Behind By The T-Rex* (2016). The nomination was not as much to promote a white male author as it was "to *really* tank the proceedings" and undercut the credibility and respectability of the World Science Fiction Society by nominating an erotic novel following a three-breasted alien from the planet of "Fylashio."<sup>361</sup> Day's push for Hiscock and other authors aligns with how scholars have discussed the alt-right's propensity to troll online "for the lulz." Yet, as Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner elucidate, ironic hatred is still hatred.<sup>362</sup> While it is easy to say Day merely wants to "own the libs," he and many other reactionary posters

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<sup>361</sup> Jason Kehe, "The Hidden, Wildly NSFW Scandal of the Hugo Nominations," *Wired*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/04/hugo-nominations-who-is-stix-hiscock/>.

<sup>362</sup> Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 103-36

in PuppyGate promote ideologies of hate as they do so. Ultimately, Hiscock lost, and, in what could be seen as an almost direct response to PuppyGate, in 2018, N. K. Jemisin, the author Day called a “half-savage,” became the first person to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel in three consecutive years for her *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015, 2016, 2017).<sup>363</sup>

PuppyGate may appear to be an incident that got out of hand, but, as this dissertation illustrates, there have been many similar controversies following a group reacting to a perceived “theft” or “defacing” of their imagined past. Beyond the larger instances that have attracted significant attention I discuss in this dissertation, there have been smaller instances in which no movement took off from the initial complaints. In 2018, Kendrick Lamar’s album *DAMN.* (2017) won the Pulitzer Prize for Music, becoming the first non-classical or non-jazz work to win the award. Two composers—Laura Elise Schwendinger and Andrew Rudin—took to the Facebook group known as “Pretentious Classical Music Elitists” to express their frustrations. Schwendinger wrote that pop and rock music is good “but not for the Pulitzer” and that the Pulitzer has “been sort of irrelevant for a while now.”<sup>364</sup> Rudin concurred and added a melancholic twist in a similar vein as Correia and Torgersen: “I’d say the Pulitzer is now no longer to be taken seriously at all.

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<sup>363</sup> Of course, while the Hugo Awards have awarded more diverse authors in recent years, the organization still features many reactionary tendencies, particularly when it comes to the “old guard” of speculative fiction. In 2020, only two years after Jemisin’s historic win, the Hugo Awards gave a “Retro-Hugo” (a Hugo Award presented to works from years in which no Hugo Awards were originally awarded) to H.P. Lovecraft, sparking outrage over the organization’s tendency to award racists. This came only a year after the Best New Writer award was renamed “*Astounding* Award for Best New Writer” after being “John W. Campbell Award” from 1973-2019, because 2019 winner Jeannette Ng, in her acceptance speech, described Campbell as a racist and fascist—traits that were common knowledge for years but largely ignored due to respect for Campbell’s industry impact. For more, see Meghan Ball, “Stop Giving Awards to Dead Racists: On Lovecraft and the Retro Hugos,” *Tor Night Fire*, August 5, 2020, <https://tornightfire.com/stop-giving-awards-to-dead-racists-on-lovecraft-and-the-retro-hugos/>; John Scalzi, “Jeannette Ng, John W. Campbell, and What Should Be Said By Whom and When,” *Whatever*, August 20, 2019, <https://whatever.scalzi.com/2019/08/20/jeannette-ng-john-w-campbell-and-what-should-be-said-by-whom-and-when/>.

<sup>364</sup> Laura Elise Schwendinger, “Yes, but not for the Pulitzer,” Facebook, April 16, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/pretentiousclassicalmusicelitists/>.

Unless... of course... you or I get it! LOL.”<sup>365</sup> While unsaid in these posts, they highlight their resistance to both Lamar’s win and the growing acceptance and acclaim of rap and hip hop, historically Black genres. Schwendinger says pop and rock are good, but she does not mention rap, and Rudin says the award should only be taken seriously if he or Schwendinger win it. He adds the “LOL,” which, much like Correia’s use of humor, is used alongside the melancholic plea for things to return to when white composers were the ones rewarded. There was disagreement in the posted responses from a variety of members—some agreeing with Schwendinger and Rudin, others disagreeing and singing the praises of Lamar as an artist and *DAMN.* as a Pulitzer Prize winner—but the conversation died out shortly afterwards and the group moved on to other topics and complaints.

Similarly, there has been pushback to the changes in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ (AMPAS) Academy Awards. Much like the Hugo Awards, the Academy Awards are considered the pinnacle of its artistic field of film in the United States. In 2017, after two years of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite trending on social media following the nominations of nearly all white actors, AMPAS decided to make a conscious push for diversity.<sup>366</sup> Since then AMPAS has extended invitations to over 1,000 non-white, non-male actors, editors, cinematographers, and other film creatives. There have been grumblings from many reactionaries who, similar to Torgersen, claim that, with the introduction of these voters, the Oscar is becoming an affirmative action award.<sup>367</sup> These changes come after nearly a decade of complaints that the Academy Awards had become less relevant due to their awarding of acclaimed, niche films over the likes of popular

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<sup>365</sup> Andrew Rudin, “I’d say the Pulitzer is now no longer to be taken seriously at all,” Facebook, April 16, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/pretentiousclassicalmusicelitists/>.

<sup>366</sup> Reggie Ugwu, “The Hashtag that Changed the Oscars: An Oral History,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowhite-history.html>.

<sup>367</sup> For more, see Nico Lang, “How We Talked About *Moonlight*’s Oscar Win Proves We Still Don’t Know How to Recognize Black Excellence,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/news/a21105/moonlight-oscar-response-black-art/>.

fare.<sup>368</sup> The reactionaries' unstated desire is to return to a time of white dominance in Hollywood, which is evidenced by the fact that in the ninety-five year history of AMPAS, only one Black woman has won the award for Best Actress (Halle Berry in *Monster's Ball* [2001]) and how it took until 2014 for a film directed and produced by a Black filmmaker to win Best Motion Picture of the Year (*12 Years a Slave* [2013]) and until 2018 for a Black screenwriter to win Best Original Screenplay (Jordan Peele for *Get Out* [2017]). Despite the calls for the Academy Awards to be about excellence in film, not diversity, from many people within the film industry, in 2020, the AMPAS announced it would institute a diversity requirement in order for films to be eligible for Best Picture, further moving the awards away from an all-too-real past of awards being handed almost exclusively to white people.<sup>369</sup>

PuppyGate and these smaller controversies share important similarities—namely they are driven by a nostalgia for a supposedly better, more conservative time. In fact, all these examples began as the grumblings of an aggrieved person or persons who wanted to reverse a decision with which they were displeased, a decision that impacted their privileged identity. The centering of these controversies or almost-controversies on awards shows is not coincidental. Awards are not only about gaining fans, money, and prestige, but they are also about canonization and power.<sup>370</sup> The stakes for the Sad and Rabid Puppies go beyond being considered more popular, but rather they are about becoming part of canonical speculative fiction literature, just as Heinlein and Card have. As such, it is vital that scholars not only analyze how movements like PuppyGate engage emotions to unite groups and attempt to impede progress, but also to be aware of how these

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<sup>368</sup> Caryn James, "Why the Oscars Ignore the Best Films of the Year," BBC, February 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190220-why-the-oscars-ignore-the-best-films-of-the-year>.

<sup>369</sup> Nicole Sperling, "The Oscars Will Add a Diversity Requirement for Eligibility," New York Times, June 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/movies/oscars-diversity-rule.html>.

<sup>370</sup> James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

movements begin. While the World Science Fiction Society enacted a change that hindered and, at least for now, stopped the Sad and Rabid Puppies, due to the actions of Correia, Torgersen, and Day, many deserving, diverse authors were not given the prestige of a nomination. As nominations and awards can lead to more readers and continued deals with publishers, PuppyGate likely hindered or possibly even ended the careers of many diverse authors.

PuppyGate demonstrates how nostalgia and melancholy for an imagined past are key to reactionary movements. Through mobilizing nostalgia, reactionaries can cast themselves as victims, attract allies, and bring people into their philosophy, but they then need to transform that melancholic longing for a past into anger or hatred about the present and fear for the future. Without anger being used to unite the groups, the individual reaction is just one in a series of outbursts in our divisive environment. Without hatred, there is no united swarm to set about the task of destroying an institution. With them, however, movements like PuppyGate garner support and disrupt progress.

The Sad and Rabid Puppies and the distinctions between them suggest that reactionary affective economies are tasked with balancing the affects of love and hate, restoration and destruction, as they gather and mobilize their followers. Navigating these various affects can result in opportunity for alliances as well as fracturing, as evidenced by the changing relations between the Sad and Rabid Puppies throughout PuppyGate. PuppyGate, ultimately, illustrates how the nostalgia of reactionary movements can motivate its followers to seek to restore what they believed they once had, to destroy/punish those who took that past from them, or perhaps to embrace a more reflective acceptance that the past is gone. Importantly, as opposed to the examples of racist and misogynist *Star Wars* fans and the homophobic fan reactions to *Mass Effect* and *The Last of Us I* discuss in Chapter Three and Four, respectively, PuppyGate had clear leaders. Correia, Torgersen,

and Day were able to use their posts to not only direct fan activity but to stoke particular affects. As reactionary movements feature leaders as often as they do not, this exploration of revanchist nostalgia complements the analysis of the largely leaderless controversies in my remaining chapters, particularly that of the *Star Wars* (anti-)fandom, to which I now turn.

## 4.0 Chapter Three: Not the Fandom You're Looking For: The Love, Hate, and Sadism of *The Last Jedi* Anti-Fans

*"Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate.  
Hate leads to suffering."*<sup>371</sup> – George Lucas, writing as character Yoda

### 4.1 Introduction

In 2021, Netflix released a mockumentary featuring well-known actors portraying scientists, academics, and “regular” people discussing the year’s political, social, and cultural developments entitled *Death to 2021*. One of the more notable characters is Tennyson Foss OBE, a historian with reactionary leanings portrayed by Hugh Grant. A running joke in *Death to 2021* and its predecessor, *Death to 2020* (2020), is that Foss speaks about speculative fiction media, such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, as if they are historical fact. One example features Foss comparing the celebration following Joe Biden’s US presidential victory to the 1983 celebration following the fall of the Empire—an event that occurred on the Forest Moon of Endor in *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (1983)—a celebration Foss insists was real (because he was there). When the conversation turns to *Bridgerton* (2020-present)—a Netflix series set in an imagined version of England’s Regency era where Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz’s mixed-race heritage results in a more racially diverse aristocracy—Foss says, “The multiculturalism is historically inaccurate. In fact, to borrow a trendy phrase, it is cultural

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<sup>371</sup> *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas (Lucasfilm, 1999), 1:30:40 to 1:30:50.

appropriation, is it not? At a stroke, the whites are erased from their own history.” The interviewer, from off screen, replies, “It’s fantasy. It’s not history.” Foss shoots back, “Well then the whites are erased from their own fantasy.”

This sentiment of white erasure from their fantasies—where fantasy could be thought of both as the speculative fiction genre and in a more psychoanalytical sense, where fantasy is “a mental activity that allows us to alter an unpleasant reality by making it into something more pleasurable”—is prevalent in many fan controversies and reactionary movements at large.<sup>372</sup> In recent years, controversies over the casting of actors of color have accompanied nearly every major speculative fiction production featuring a prominent non-white character, particularly when those characters have been portrayed as white or assumed to be white in the past. From Idris Elba playing Heimdall in Marvel’s *Thor* films (2011, 2013, 2017, 2022) to Michael B. Jordan playing Johnny Storm in *Fantastic Four* (2015) to Noma Dumezweni playing Hermione in the Broadway production *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2018) to Ismael Cruz Córdova and Sophia Nomvete playing a Black elf and dwarf, respectively, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022-present), many so-called fans rebel against the appearance of people of color in fictional worlds they believe should be solely white. While some of these reactions are cast as concerns about “canonical fidelity,” in many cases, this is an excuse to spout racism. As Jamaican novelist Marlon James so eloquently put it after a friend insisted the cast of *The Hobbit* film series (2012-2014) needed to be white because *Lord of the Rings* is based on British and Norse mythology, “*Lord of the Rings* isn’t real. You can do whatever you want with [Tolkien’s] story.”<sup>373</sup> Even more directly, James states that authors who consider themselves “social realists” tend to create “worlds

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<sup>372</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>373</sup> Marlon James, “Our Myths, Our Selves” (lecture, Seventh Annual J.R.R. Tolkien Lecture on Fantasy Literature, Pembroke College, Oxford, February 26, 2019).



where people of color don't exist or don't matter," then asks, "So who's really living in a fantasy world?"<sup>374</sup>

It must be said, however, that not all fan controversies aimed at "racebending" casting practices are reactionary.<sup>375</sup> There were also outcries over the nearly entire white cast in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Last Airbender* adaptation (2010), Tilda Swinton portraying the previously Tibetan character the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* (2016), and Ed Skrein playing Major Ben Daimio in the *Hellboy* reboot (2019).<sup>376</sup> These controversies often turn fan activity and communication toward the directors and producers. This can be seen as a form of "fan activism," or the "intentional actions by fans, or the use of fanlike strategies, to provoke change" (more in Chapter One).<sup>377</sup> The primary intention here—and the success in the case of Skrein, who stepped away from the Daimio role after learning of the character's heritage from fans and was replaced by South Korean-American actor Daniel Dae Kim—is not to hurt the *actors* playing these roles.<sup>378</sup> Instead, these fans aim to get the producers, studios, and film industry at large to realize the impact whitewashing characters of color and thus diminishing the already minimal racial representation in Hollywood can have on audiences.

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<sup>374</sup> James, "Our Myths, Our Selves."

<sup>375</sup> While "racebending" is typically associated with changing the race of a character from one production to another, Lori Kido Lopez, notes that racebending "can be seen as more than simply changing the race of a character: it is the changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability." "Fan Activists and the Politics of Racebending in *The Last Airbender*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012): 433.

<sup>376</sup> For more on the racebending of these characters in particular, see Henry Jenkins, "Negotiating Fandom: The Politics of Racebending" in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2017): 379-391; Isabelle Khoo, "Hellboy Producers's Comments Prove Why Whitewashing is Such an Issue," *Huffington Post*, August 25, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/08/25/hellboy-producer-whitewashing\\_a\\_23185522/](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/08/25/hellboy-producer-whitewashing_a_23185522/); LeiLani Nishime, "Whitewashing Yellow Futures in *Ex Machina*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Advantageous*: Gender, Labor, and Technology in Sci-Fi Film," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2017): 29-49; Xu Hai-hua, "Orientalism Within the Creation and Presentation of Doctor Strange," *Sino-US English Teaching* 18, no. 5 (May 2021): 131-135.

<sup>377</sup> Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, "Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012): 2.4.

<sup>378</sup> For more on Ed Skrein's thoughts on his casting and departure, see Ed Skrein, Twitter post, August 28, 2017, 3:02 p.m., <https://twitter.com/edskrein/status/902244967296491520>.

That said, reactionary fan controversies often turn to Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, 4chan, and a variety of other social media platforms to rally fans against the media objects and to attack those involved in their production. Despite the harmful effects, this activity, too, can be seen as fan activism, as many of these controversies mobilize fans to take particular actions in the hopes that it will create change.<sup>379</sup> The most notable strategies are boycotting the films and review bombing them on review aggregate sites such as Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic.<sup>380</sup> The governing idea behind the boycotts and review bombing is to impact the film's box office success, which, many fans believe, if diminished significantly enough, would prevent studios from producing future films featuring the objectionable trait. In most cases, this means without women and/or people of color in lead roles.

Through flooding social media with hateful comments, boycotting films, and engaging in review bombing on various sites, these fans are not only attempting to create a different present or reclaim a particular past version of the media, they aim to take revenge for their perceived erasure. They plan to punish studios for casting these actors and producing these films and, more still, to punish the *actors* playing these roles. In the example of Leslie Jones and *Ghostbusters* (2016), fans not only tried to hurt Sony Pictures Entertainment through their boycott and campaign to make the trailer the most downvoted trailer in YouTube's history, they also released private, nude images of the actress in an effort to damage Jones's career and prevent her from receiving future roles.<sup>381</sup> This activity, while claimed to be motivated by a dedication to a past, preferred version of the *Ghostbusters* franchise, is a clear example of revanchist nostalgia.

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<sup>379</sup> Bethan Jones refers to this as "antifan activism" instead of "fan activism" as these fans are acting *against* the media instead. I draw out the distinction between fans and anti-fans in a later section of this chapter. "Antifan Activism as a Response to MTV's *The Valleys*," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 19 (2015).

<sup>380</sup> William Proctor and Bridget Kies, "Editors' Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 15, no. 1 (May 2018): 127-142.

<sup>381</sup> Caitlin E. Lawson, "Platform Vulnerabilities: Harassment and Misogynoir in the Digital Attack on Leslie Jones," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 6 (2017): 818-833.

While these reactionary and “toxic” fan practices can be observed in an unreasonable number of fandoms, the *Star Wars* fandom is considered by many to be the “most toxic.”<sup>382</sup> As discussed in the Introduction chapter, there is a difference between “toxic” and “reactionary” fans, with “toxic” seldom being defined and more used to describe homophobic, misogynistic, racist, and/or violent practices or individuals.<sup>383</sup> This is evident in the description of *Star Wars* fans being “toxic” as John Boyega, Kelly Marie Tran, and Moses Ingram all received racist threats after appearing in *Star Wars* productions. Daisy Ridley, the white actress who portrayed Rey in the sequel trilogy, and Rian Johnson, the white, male director of *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017), also received death threats, indicating that the fan hatred was not exclusively focused on race but also extended to gender and the inclusion of more general progressive themes in the series.

Again, it is important to note that not all the so-called toxicity in fandoms is reactionary. Ahmed Best who played Jar Jar Binks in the prequel trilogy received such a slew of death threats and more general hatred for his character—much of which vociferously criticized Jar Jar as a racist caricature—he contemplated suicide.<sup>384</sup> As William Proctor argues, “Sending death threats tagged with antiracist sentiment to Best means that toxicity does not always come from reactionary

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<sup>382</sup> Thomas Bacon, “Why Star Wars Fans Can Be So Toxic,” ScreenRant, June 3, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-toxic-fans-problem/>; Carlos de Loera, “Simon Pegg says ‘Star Wars’ Fans are the ‘Most Toxic at the Moment,’” Los Angeles Times, July 20, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-07-20/simon-pegg-star-wars-fans-are-the-most-toxic>; Matt Miller, “I was a Star Wars Super Fan, Until the Dark Side of Online Fandom Made Me Quit,” Men’s Health, January 12, 2022, <https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a38735381/quitting-toxic-fandom/>.

<sup>383</sup> I do not use the term “toxic” as a characteristic of people due to its implication that the blame for their so-called “toxic” behaviors can be attributed to an external entity, one that can be removed through a therapeutic corrective, but “toxic fans,” “toxic fandoms,” and “toxic fan practices” are common terms in fan studies and popular parlance, so if I utilize it, it will be to refer to toxic *practices*, not individuals or groups. For more on my critique of toxicity as a metaphor, see Max Dossier, “I’m Gonna Wreck It, Again: The False Dichotomy of ‘Healthy’ and ‘Toxic’ Masculinity in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, no. 4 (2022): 333-46.

<sup>384</sup> Ryan Parker, “Jar Jar Binks Actor Says He Considered Suicide After ‘Star Wars’ Backlash,” Hollywood Reporter, July 3, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/jar-jar-binks-actor-ahmed-best-considered-suicide-star-wars-backlash-1124848/>.

quarters but potentially from more politically progressive avenues, complicating the notion that toxic fan practices are invariably right-wing in nature.”<sup>385</sup> Even with that caveat, as evidenced by the sheer quantity of racist and misogynistic messages sent by fans whenever a non-white, non-male, or non-heteronormative actor is cast in a lead or prominent supporting role, it is clear that the *Star Wars* fandom has a vocal contingent of reactionary fans (many of whom could be classified as *anti-fans*, a distinction I detail in a later section), who not only want to return to the imagined *Star Wars* of their past, but to punish those involved in the seemingly more progressive series it has become.

In this chapter, I analyze these revanchist tendencies of reactionary fans and anti-fans to better understand how revanchist nostalgia interacts with the affects of love, hate, disgust, cruelty, and joy for reactionary groups. To do so, I first discuss the *Star Wars* franchise overall, focusing specifically on its narrative content and its fandom. While my central focus in this chapter is on *The Last Jedi*, I discuss multiple films and television series in the franchise and the controversies that surrounded them. Second, I turn to a race-based controversy that preceded the release of *The Last Jedi*, #BlackStormtrooper, to provide context for the #NotMyJedi controversy that occurred three years later. While some scholars have argued that #BlackStormtrooper was an example of a more progressive toxicity, I demonstrate how the controversy expanded beyond public social media forums and displayed a so-called “love” for the franchise to mask the hatred these fans/anti-fans felt for the racialized other. This discussion leads to how the affects of love, hate, and disgust motivate affective attachments and action for anti-fandoms and anti-fans. In detailing the concept of anti-fans, I read white supremacy not just as a fandom but as an *anti-fandom*. I, then, analyze

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<sup>385</sup> William Proctor, “A New Hate?: The War for Disney’s *Star Wars*” in *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, eds. William Proctor and Richard McCullough (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 304.

the #NotMyJedi controversy—a controversy that surrounded the release of *The Last Jedi*. While the controversy is ostensibly a reaction to how the film portrayed Luke Skywalker, my analysis reveals reactionary hatred for the racialized other was the primary focus. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how joy and cruelty are linked not only to each other in the affect of sadism but also to the radicalization of fans/anti-fans to reactionaries. I conclude by considering Walt Disney Company and Lucasfilm’s reactions to the #NotMyJedi controversy and how those reactions shaped the final film in the *Star Wars* sequel series.

#### 4.2 *Star Wars*: The Franchise

The *Star Wars* series began in 1977 with the release of *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (though then it was only titled *Star Wars*), and, from the beginning, *Star Wars* was a phenomenon. The first film currently stands as the second highest grossing film of all time in the United States when adjusted for inflation—behind only *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Without adjusting for inflation, the *Star Wars* series is the second highest grossing franchise of all time worldwide, behind only the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which, as of this writing, encompasses more than twice the number of films as *Star Wars*, soon to be triple. Following the release of the first film, the *Star Wars* franchise proliferated across media, producing eight sequel and prequel films, multiple anthology films, live-action and animated television series, novels, comic books, video games, and more.

While the *Star Wars* universe is massive, the central narrative of the main film series centers on a specific family of characters: the Skywalkers. The original trilogy (episodes 4-6) focuses on Luke Skywalker’s ascension to Jedi Master, the prequel trilogy (episodes 1-3) explains

Luke's father Anakin Skywalker's fall to the Dark Side, and the sequel trilogy (episodes 7-9) follows Rey (who ends the series by calling herself "Rey Skywalker") and Luke's nephew Ben Solo as they struggle in a push-and-pull battle between the Light and the Dark, the Resistance and the Sith. Following the Walt Disney Company's acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2012, the series' focus gradually began to expand. Media that shifted the attention away from the Skywalker family include *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), an anthology film focusing on a group of rebels who steal the plans for the Death Star; *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), a prequel exploring the origins of fan-favorite character Han Solo; and *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021), a limited series that follows the bounty hunter Boba Fett as he attempts to take over the crime syndicate on the planet Tatooine. Each of these, while not *starring* a Skywalker, does feature a character from the original trilogy in a prominent (if not lead) role. The television series *The Mandalorian* (2019-present) appeared to be an anomaly, as its narrative was driven by completely new characters, but Luke Skywalker returns at the end of season two, keeping, as of this writing, all the spin-offs and anthology films/series neatly tied to the Skywalker saga. So, why, when the *Star Wars* series has an entire galaxy far, far away to use as its sandbox, does the series focus on the same characters? A more appropriate question, given the scope of this dissertation, is why focus on these characters when fans continually express anger, disappointment, and even disgust over how each new entry handles their beloved characters and the Skywalker narrative?

To answer this question, it is necessary to discuss the *Star Wars* fandom in general. *Star Wars* has been described as a "cult blockbuster" because the first film (as well as each successive one) was a box office phenomenon that was accompanied by a marketing blitz and a multibillion-dollar merchandising empire while also attracting the kind of ardent fan following that is often

associated with cult media.<sup>386</sup> While *Star Wars* is a property with a massive following—one that most people have at least heard of—its entry into media fandom circles was turbulent.<sup>387</sup> Scholars have cited *Star Trek* (1966-1969) as spawning the first media fandom because, following its premiere, fans developed fanzines, mailing lists, and conventions dedicated to the series.<sup>388</sup> While its fans faced scorn from other “more traditional” science fiction fans, following the release of *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* fans “felt threatened by this sudden upstart and began to treat *Star Wars* fans as badly as they had been treated.”<sup>389</sup> Even now, fans and scholars feel the need to separate and delineate *Star Wars* from *Star Trek* and other science fiction texts.<sup>390</sup> Despite this unwelcoming entrance into the world of media fandom, *Star Wars* fans wrote fan fiction based on both the films and the novelized continuations (now known as “The Expanded Universe”), discussed and held panels focusing on *Star Wars* at fan conventions, collected memorabilia and autographs of those involved in the production, and even wrote letters to George Lucas, creator of *Star Wars*, about their thoughts on the films and their hopes for how the storylines would continue—though fans have reportedly had a thorny relationship with Lucas.<sup>391</sup>

While Lucas tended to ignore and disregard *Star Wars* fans in the early years of the franchise, William Proctor and Richard McCulloch note that, as internet access and home

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<sup>386</sup> Matt Hills, “*Star Wars* in Fandom, Film Theory, and the Museum: The Cultural Status of the Cult Blockbuster” in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 178-89; Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8-36.

<sup>387</sup> For an example of how even non-fans or non-viewers have been impacted by *Star Wars*’s influence on popular culture, see Lucy Bennett, “‘Someone is Someone’s Father!’ An Autoethnography of a Non-*Star Wars* Viewer,” in *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, eds. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 278-88.

<sup>388</sup> Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2006), 41-59.

<sup>389</sup> Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” 50.

<sup>390</sup> Jonathan Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee? Let Me Count the Ways,” in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 27-28.

<sup>391</sup> Elana Shefrin, “*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and Participatory Fandom: Mapping New Congruencies Between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 3 (2004): 261-81.

computers became more common, fans' relationship with Lucas frequently "mushroom[ed] into hostility and abuse" as they continually provided (unwanted) feedback on Lucas's missteps.<sup>392</sup> One example is how fans complained about Lucas altering canon when he rereleased the original trilogy as a box set under the title *Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition* (1997). The rerelease featured new digital special effects, altered narrative content, and an additional scene. Most significantly for many fans, the rerelease contained Lucas's controversial edit of the scene in which Han Solo shoots Greedo in *A New Hope*—changing it so Greedo shoots and misses Han before Han shoots, whereas in the original release, Han shot first. Fans rebelled against this alteration and its implications for Han's character, even going so far as to make merchandise bearing the phrase "Han Shot First," challenging Lucas's edits while "disavow[ing] Lucas's status as author and creator" of *Star Wars*.<sup>393</sup>

This challenging of Lucas-as-author can also be seen in how, after being disappointed with *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (1999), the first *Star Wars* film in 16 years, some fans reedited the film to show what they believed it *should* have been. There was even a 2002 petition signed by over 7,000 fans that began: "We, the undersigned, in the spirit of our raped childhoods, ask that George Lucas give over his reign as director and writer of *Episode III* to one Peter Jackson," who had just written, directed, and produced the critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003).<sup>394</sup> Fans accused Lucas of making content only for kids, of being racially insensitive, and of not holding true to the original trilogy—all of which, it should be said, are potentially valid critiques, particularly the idea of

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<sup>392</sup> William Proctor and Richard McCulloch, "From the House that George Built to the House of Mouse" in *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, eds. William Proctor and Richard McCullough (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>393</sup> Proctor and McCulloch, "From the House that George Built to the House of Mouse," 4.

<sup>394</sup> Quoted in Shefrin, "*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and Participatory Fandom," 271.



Lucas's non-human characters drawing heavily on various racial stereotypes.<sup>395</sup> Still, the massive amount of criticism and personal attacks Lucas received following the release of the prequel trilogy led him to respond to a 2012 interview question regarding if he had any plans for future *Star Wars* films with, "Why would I make any more when everybody yells at you all the time and says what a terrible person you are?"<sup>396</sup>

The toxicity of the *Star Wars* fandom's practices—from fans across the ideological spectrum—reflects Rukmini Pande's playful paraphrasing of Jane Austen: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that the move of media fandom communities to the internet changed everything."<sup>397</sup> As internet access grew, fans increasingly had the ability to correspond with each other and with media creators. While Lucas, Best, and many others involved in the production of the prequel trilogy received significant hate from fans, these toxic fan activities proliferated as social media platforms became more commonplace in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Significantly, these platforms provided fans outlets to share their complaints more widely than they could on the forums of fan-dedicated websites.<sup>398</sup> Yet, despite the vitriol over Lucas's prequel series and the petition that he turn over the reins of *Star Wars* to Jackson in 2002, many fans expressed disbelief and outrage when Lucas sold Lucasfilm to Disney in 2012 and the trailer for *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (2015) premiered two years later. While the controversy following the trailer's release (known as #BlackStormtrooper, which I detail in the next section) exposed the

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<sup>395</sup> Will Brooker, "Readings of Racism: Interpretation, Stereotyping and *The Phantom Menace*," *Continuum* 15, no. 1 (2001): 15-32; Matt Hills, "Putting Away Childish Things: Jar Jar Binks and the 'Virtual Star' as an Object of Fan Loathing" in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Arnold, 2003), 74-89.

<sup>396</sup> Bryan Curtis, "George Lucas is Ready to Roll the Credits," *New York Times*, January 22, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/george-lucas-red-tails.html>.

<sup>397</sup> Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 62.

<sup>398</sup> Zizi Papacharissi illustrates how online platforms can generate feelings of connectedness that ultimately "propagate affectively charged expressions." "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 308.

racism of many of fans, the revanchist nostalgia that is so key to reactionary movements truly erupted in the months before the 2017 premiere of *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi*.

As such, in this chapter I primarily focus on *The Last Jedi*, the eighth film in the series and one that sees the return of Luke Skywalker after a self-imposed exile—a characterization that many fans pointed to as “out of character” and used to justify their outward hatred for the increasing diversity featured in the film. *The Last Jedi* became a major talking point amongst reactionary fans even before its release due to the inclusion of more diverse characters, despite many of these characters being introduced in *The Force Awakens*. When *The Last Jedi* premiered, fans engaged in review bombing, including the creation of “bots” that created fake accounts with which to downvote the film on various websites.<sup>399</sup> One of the persons responsible for review bombing the film with bots was a “self-identified member of the ‘alt-right,’” and he explained his reasoning by saying that the character “Poe Dameron [the Han Solo-esque character played by Oscar Isaac] is a ‘victim of the anti-mansplaining movement,’ that Poe and Luke Skywalker are in danger of being ‘turn[ed]’ gay, and that men should be reinstated as rulers of ‘society.’”<sup>400</sup>

While this troll primarily focused on the characters’ gender roles and apparent sexuality in his critique of *The Last Jedi*, much of the #NotMyJedi controversy centered on race—particularly targeting the Vietnamese American actress Kelly Marie Tran, who played Rose Tico. Tran received death threats, rape threats, and such an outpouring of vitriol that she deleted her social

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<sup>399</sup> Morten Bay, “Weaponizing the Haters: *The Last Jedi* and the Strategic Politicization of Pop Culture Through Social Media Manipulation,” *First Monday* 23, no. 11 (2018).

<sup>400</sup> Bill Bradley and Matthew Jacobs, “Surprise, Surprise: The ‘Alt-Right’ Claims Credit for ‘Last Jedi’ Backlash,” *Huffington Post*, December 20, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rotten-tomatoes-last-jedi-ratings-bots\\_n\\_5a38cb78e4b0860bf4aab5b1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rotten-tomatoes-last-jedi-ratings-bots_n_5a38cb78e4b0860bf4aab5b1). See also, Julia Alexander, “Star Wars: The Last Jedi is being Review-Bombed on Rotten Tomatoes,” *Polygon*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.polygon.com/2017/12/18/16792184/star-wars-the-last-jedi-rotten-tomatoes-review-bomb>.

media accounts and began therapy.<sup>401</sup> Unfortunately, this was not the first race-based fan controversies for the *Star Wars* franchise, nor the last. These controversies have become so common that Lucasfilm has started warning actors of color to expect and prepare for racist attacks online following their casting—a topic I detail more in the conclusion.<sup>402</sup> Before discussing the reactionary controversy over Luke Skywalker and Rose Tico, however, I first turn to #BlackStormtrooper, which occurred three years earlier and centered on the casting of Black actor John Boyega as the stormtrooper FN-2187 (also known as Finn) in *The Force Awakens*.

### 4.3 How is a #BlackStormtrooper Canon?!

Following the release of the trailer for *The Force Awakens* in November 2014, #BlackStormtrooper and “Black Stormtrooper” more broadly became trending topics on multiple social media platforms. Given that progress or advancement for people of color is often met with backlash in the form of “white rage,” the hashtag was largely interpreted as a racist reaction to the casting of John Boyega as a stormtrooper.<sup>403</sup> For many posters, reactionary and not, Boyega’s casting raised questions of canonical fidelity. The prequel trilogy established that stormtroopers were largely an extension of the clone troopers, which were an army composed of clones made from single individual—Jango Fett, played by Māori actor Temuera Morrison. As none of the stormtroopers were unmasked in the original trilogy and thus were never shown to *not* look like

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<sup>401</sup> Jason Guerrasio, “‘Star Wars’ Actress Kelly Marie Tran Left Social Media After Racist and Sexist Trolls Drove Her to Therapy,” *Insider*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/kelly-marie-tran-racist-sexist-trolls-social-media-2021-3>.

<sup>402</sup> See Louis Chilton, “*Obi-Wan Kenobi*’s Moses Ingram: ‘If You’ve Got Talking Droids and Aliens but No People of Colour, It Doesn’t Make Sense,’” *Independent*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/obi-wan-kenobi-moses-ingram-interview-b2088811.html>.

<sup>403</sup> Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Morrison, many assumed that stormtroopers in the sequel series should still be Jango Fett clones and so questioned how there could be a Black stormtrooper.<sup>404</sup> Even accounting for the canonical uncertainty, the hashtag was primarily considered to be a backlash over having Black actor in a lead role in *Star Wars*, which apart from secondary characters like Lando Calrissian and Mace Windu, have been predominantly white.<sup>405</sup> Notably, as of this writing, Black actor James Earl Jones has voiced Darth Vader in all his live-action film appearances, but when Darth Vader was unmasked in *Return of the Jedi*, he was revealed to be a white man. Even a character audiences may have assumed was non-white for multiple films ultimately was revealed to be white.

Proctor, however, argues that rather than the #BlackStormtrooper hashtag being “clear evidence of fan racism” as “various news outlets reported,” it was primarily featured in tweets from users condemning racist fans.<sup>406</sup> Proctor describes these tweets as “replete with attacks on an imagined and imaginary population of toxic, racist fanboys, with many progressive messages performing a brand of what can be viewed as toxicity of a more progressive nature.”<sup>407</sup> He even claims, in the title of one of his papers on the topic, “I’ve seen a lot of talk about the #blackstormtrooper outrage, but not a single example of anyone complaining.”<sup>408</sup> While making this argument, however, Proctor focuses primarily on Twitter rather than the discussion of “Black Stormtrooper” on social media at large. The first result when searching “4chan Black

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<sup>404</sup> There was, of course, a fifty-six-year in-universe time difference between the introduction of the fully grown clones in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2002) and when John Boyega’s Finn appears in *The Force Awakens*, meaning many of the clones (at least the clones that survived multiple wars and the explosion of two Death Stars) may have aged out of service and needed to be replaced by younger recruits.

<sup>405</sup> Rebecca Harrison, “Gender, Race and Representation in the *Star Wars* Franchise,” *Media Education Journal* 65, no. 2 (2019), 16-19.

<sup>406</sup> William Proctor, “Fear of a #BlackStormtrooper: Hashtag Publics, Canonical Fidelity, and the *Star Wars* Platonic” in *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion, and Reception*, eds. William Proctor and Richard McCullough (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 240.

<sup>407</sup> Proctor, “A New Hate?,” 309.

<sup>408</sup> William Proctor, “I’ve seen a lot of talk about the #blackstormtrooper outrage, but not a single example of anyone complaining: The Force Awakens, canon fidelity and non-toxic fan practices,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018).

Stormtrooper” is a post from April 2015 filled with racial epithets about John Boyega and his character Finn along with largely unrelated invectives directed at the queer, disabled, and Jewish communities. One of the suggested follow-up threads is just titled “N[\*\*\*\*\*]!!!” where the asterisks are (in all caps) one I, five Gs, four Es, and seven Rs. Searches that replace “4chan” with other social media platforms more closely associated with reactionaries provide similar results.

When searching Reddit—a platform more akin to Twitter in having users from a wider spectrum of ideologies than social media platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, and Gab.ai—I found many, many threads in which posters discussed the controversy. Some users argued in a similar vein of Proctor, noting that the uproar was media generated and they had seen no evidence of anyone actually being upset by the casting. Others countered these claims by pointing to overtly racist posts, comments, and reviews on IMDb and Instagram. Drawing from the Reddit threads I found on r/movies, r/StarWars, r/funny, r/explainlikeimfive, and r/sci, I found that posts and their comments (ranging from 24 to 273 in each thread) fit into five broad categories: 1) debating the controversy’s legitimacy, 2) praising the casting, 3) condemning the racists in the fanbase, 4) questioning canonical fidelity, and 5) engaging in further racism of their own. Notably, many of the posters were listed as “u/[deleted].” While these accounts could have been deleted for any number of reasons, it does illustrate the need to consider that, in looking at controversies years after the fact, many explicitly racist posts and users may have been removed after being reported by others. As such, the quantity of posts in my fifth category and those in Proctor’s three essays on the subject (which were published between 2018 and 2019) may be skewed in a manner to suggest fewer reactionary posts than there actually were.

Even so, the variety of focus in my categories is important to note, as the mere presence of the hashtag was considered overtly racist by many, and this presumption gave way to an array of discourses. Contrary to Proctor's claims, however, it is clear that racism was not absent in the discussions. This is confirmed by Boyega himself, who said that he began receiving violent, racist messages from so-called fans online as soon as the 2014 trailer premiered. In a 2020 interview, he recalled, "Nobody else in the cast had people saying they were going to boycott the movie because [they were in it]. Nobody else had the uproar and death threats sent to their Instagram DMs and social media, saying, 'Black this and Black that and you shouldn't be a Stormtrooper.'"<sup>409</sup> While the majority of the posts on Twitter may have been condemning nonexistent Twitter posts from imagined racist fans, that does not mean racist communication did not proliferate elsewhere, particularly in the more private realm of direct messaging—a realm researchers typically only have access to when users publicly share them.

The main point of Proctor's argument, however, is not to insist that no racist *Star Wars* fans exist. Rather, he hoped to illustrate how content of a seemingly reactionary nature is often attributed to reactionaries and discussed as such by various media platforms, which, in turn, amplifies reactionary content. I refer to this process as *spotlight magnification*, where through engaging with content, even to refute it, the media and others can bring more attention to it, magnifying the content, and exposing more people to that ideology—a risk this dissertation encounters through its case studies and analysis.<sup>410</sup> This concept, especially regarding amplifying reactionaries, has been explored by other scholars as well, including Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner who contend that "media coverage commonly augments the Alt-right's agenda

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<sup>409</sup> Jimi Famurewa, "John Boyega: 'I'm the only cast member whose experience of Star Wars was based on their race,'" GQ, September 2, 2020, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/john-boyega-interview-2020>.

<sup>410</sup> I detail my strategies for handling the risk of amplifying the reactionary content in the Introduction chapter.

and enables a stronger public presence.”<sup>411</sup> Bridget M. Blodgett argues that, during GamerGate, media coverage not only drew attention to the controversy but it often drew from limited information, which allowed the general public to become aware of GamerGate and the reactionary ideologies without having “a firm grasp on the real issues behind it [GamerGate],” ultimately serving to amplify the reactionary content rather than refute it.<sup>412</sup> The media, in general, has “tended to offer much more space to right-wing ideologies, if only to express outrage and virtue as a way to demonstrate progressive ideologies and worldviews.”<sup>413</sup> In contrast to their goals, the repudiation of these fans by media organizations and via social media can actually help strengthen the reactionary fans’ identities and bonding, as seen in GamerGate, PuppyGate, and many other controversies.<sup>414</sup>

While media coverage tends to attribute these reactionary tendencies to the “alt-right” and amplifies the hateful rhetoric, an important fact is that many of the fans involved in boycotts and social media campaigns against actors and productions do not explicitly identify as part of the “alt-right” or consider themselves aligned with a reactionary ideology. Even without the direct identification, however, a sizable population of fans came together to protest Boyega’s casting as Finn. The alliance of these disparate groups of fans calls to mind how scholars have demonstrated that when there are “possible threats to textual authenticity”—such as a stormtrooper not looking like Jango Fett—fans tend to form alliances.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 235.

<sup>412</sup> Bridget M. Blodgett, “Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 191.

<sup>413</sup> Proctor, “A New Hate,” 308-9.

<sup>414</sup> Blodgett, “Media in the Post #GamerGate Era,” 195.

<sup>415</sup> Matt Hills, “Psychoanalysis and Digital Fandom: Theorizing Spoilers and Fans’ Self Narratives,” in *Producing Theory in a Digital World: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Rebecca Ann Lind (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 114.

Beyond so-called threats to textual authenticity (largely a synonym of canonical fidelity), fans that are united in the dislike of a text or a specific added element of the text may overlook their ideological differences to work together. Jonathan Gray describes this type of fandom (or *anti-fandom*) as the “Bad Object Anti-Fandom.” A bad object can be bad due to personal taste (such as your own dislike of a particular band or director) or due to a broader, more popular conception that there is something morally, aesthetically, or politically objectionable about the object. Though, and significant for the idea of supposedly non-reactionary fans aligning with fans who identify as reactionary, “bad object anti-fandoms are coalitional and intersectional, as the object finds itself at the crossroads of multiple types of anti-fandom.”<sup>416</sup> Gray is not using “coalitional” or “intersectional” in the same sense as María Lugones’s sense of coalition or Kimberlé W. Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality; rather, he is saying that two groups may find a bad object objectionable for different, sometimes conflicting reasons but will still band together against the bad object.<sup>417</sup> To illustrate this, Gray describes pop star/actress Miley Cyrus as an example of a “bad object.” In 2013, Cyrus’s music, open drug use, and personal life attracted a great deal of public scrutiny and disdain. Gray notes there could be a variety of reasons why Cyrus became such a “bad object” but that the reasons of any individual are less important than how “hegemonic values are maintained or challenged through coalitional dislike.”<sup>418</sup> This is important because “a group may have nonsexist, nonelitist reasons for reviling her [Cyrus or any bad object] but may find themselves embroiled in an anti-fandom that often takes a virulently sexist, elitist form.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Jonathan Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?”, 29.

<sup>417</sup> María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: New Press, 2017).

<sup>418</sup> Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?”, 29.

<sup>419</sup> Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?”, 29.



For *Star Wars* fans and many other reactionary movements, their alliance is supposedly motivated by a nostalgic love for an idealized past version of the text but expresses its desires through a hate and disgust for the other. Being a fan entails having a strong affective attachment to a particular person or object. This is evident with the *Star Wars* fans who question the canonical fidelity of having a Black stormtrooper—if they did not have a strong connection to the series, canonical fidelity would be of little concern to them. This love for the text is important for their alliance, as Sara Ahmed argues that “love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal.”<sup>420</sup> Ahmed theorizes that love can enforce particular ideals on people.<sup>421</sup> If one does not live up to this ideal, they are not seen as part of the community—be that community the citizenry of a country, a political movement, or a fandom. As such, this binding love between people and an imagined ideal citizen and the binding love between fans and their preferred media objects is not just an alignment with others who share a similar love; rather, it “relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal.”<sup>422</sup> These “failed others” are typically those bodies that, just from their existence, “are already encountered as more hateful than other bodies”—namely people of color, women, and those part of the LGBTQ and disabled communities.<sup>423</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, white supremacists and hateful organizations often portray themselves as organizations of love that aim to protect those with whom they are aligned (primarily white men). When the media and others call out their messages as hateful—their messages that are intended to protect the victimized white men who are being erased from their fantasies—the reactionaries can claim these “others” are rejecting their love. Crafting narratives

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<sup>420</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 124.

<sup>421</sup> Ahmed’s theorization of love draws heavily from the distinctions between narcissistic and anacletic love in Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction” in *Collected Papers, Volume 4*, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1934) and Irving Singer’s theorization of the value love creates in *The Nature of Love, Volume 1: Plato to Luther* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>422</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 124.

<sup>423</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 54.

of love binds disparate groups together and further cements the “us” in opposition to the “them” that oppose their revanchist visions. Through doing so, these groups can more effectively propagate their hate for the other.<sup>424</sup>

Similar to love aligning individuals, Ahmed argues that disgust “generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event.”<sup>425</sup> Even if their concerns are couched as worries about canonical fidelity, *Star Wars* fans’ disgust of the inclusion of non-white characters led to a rejection of diversity. This shared disgust of the new elements—namely a Black stormtrooper and a female lead who they accuse of being a “Mary Sue”—ultimately bonded the fans.<sup>426</sup> The uniting force of disgust for another can be seen in broader politics as well. Renee Barnes and Renée Middlemost illustrate how the Tea Party movement was “not united by an ideological vision, but rather a shared dislike and hatred of Obama and the Democratic Party”<sup>427</sup> While there is an argument to be made that the #BlackStormtrooper controversy was more media-driven than widely assumed, it is clear from posts and direct messages on social media platforms beyond Twitter that disgust and hatred masked as love were motivating affects, just as they are in more openly white supremacist organizations.

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<sup>424</sup> This is particularly relevant when considering how social media enables hate groups to spread messages of both love and hatred more easily. As Anirban K. Baishya argues, through utilizing platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and even YouTube, right-wing extremists encourage digitally mediated hatred and violence. “Violent Spectating: Hindutva Music and Audio-visualizations of Hate and Terror in Digital India,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 19, no. 3 (2022): 293.

<sup>425</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 94.

<sup>426</sup> “Mary Sue” is a typically derogatory title given to a younger woman who unrealistically excels at everything in fiction. The term originated in speculative fiction fandom, as it was the name of a character in Paula Smith’s satiric short story of *Star Trek* fan fiction entitled “A Trekkie’s Tale” (1973).

<sup>427</sup> Renee Barnes and Renée Middlemost, “‘Hey! Mr Prime Minister!’: The Simpsons Against the Liberals, Anti-Fandom and the ‘Politics of Against,’” *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 8 (July 2022): 1125. See also, Cornel Sandvoss, “The Politics of Against: Political Participation, Anti-Fandom, and Populism,” in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 125-146.

In considering how love, hate, and disgust circulate in reactionary controversies—both in fandom and in the larger political arena—I have illustrated how affective alliances can form between fans when a particular text or an addition to a text is deemed a “bad object.” The love these fans profess to have for the object obfuscates a hatred and disgust of the other, but to understand how that hatred and disgust are expressed entails looking to the interplay between the affects of joy and cruelty. To best illustrate how this affective cluster plays out in reactionary movements, I now turn to the concept of anti-fandom.

#### 4.4 Love, Hate, and White Supremacists as Anti-Fans

As Jonathan Gray describes, anti-fans are “those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”<sup>428</sup> Despite an anti-fan sounding like the opposite of a fan, this is not the case. Both anti-fans and fans are motivated by their affective attachment to a text, genre, or person, whereas a *non-fan* is a person with little-to-no attachment to the media.<sup>429</sup> Similarly, fans and anti-fans both engage in fannish activities (sometimes known as “fanac”), such as posting about the text/person/genre online, contributing to wikis, writing reviews, and even joining campaigns related to their fan/anti-fan object. Gray argues that the difference between fans and anti-fans stems from which affects motivate their attachments: fans experience love for the object, while anti-fans experience hate and/or disgust. Cornel Sandvoss agrees, describing an “anti-fan object” as “a text or textual field (such as a politician, political party, or political cause) with which users regularly and emotively engage, yet through

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<sup>428</sup> Jonathan Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 70.

<sup>429</sup> Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities,” 64-81.

strongly negative emotions.”<sup>430</sup> Anti-fans often perform close readings of the hated text or textual field—some in a way that has been described as “hate watching.” It must be emphasized, however, that anti-fans do not need to have actually seen or significantly interacted with what they hate. These anti-fans “construct an image of the text—and, what is more, an image they feel is accurate—sufficiently enough that they can react to and against it.”<sup>431</sup> This idea reminds me of my childhood where my mother was vehemently opposed to my sister and I watching *Ren and Stimpy* (1991-1996) and *The Simpsons* (1989-present) despite having never seen either series. She constructed images of the series based on paratexts such as reviews and commercials then decided neither were suitable for her children to consume. This same idea calls to mind much of the discourse around speculative fiction in both popular and academic circles, where people may not know much about the genre, but they know they do not like it.<sup>432</sup> The construction based solely on paratexts is similarly apparent in how *Star Wars* fans hated the very notion of Boyega’s casting despite only having seen the trailer.

The example of #BlackStormtrooper reflects Henry Jenkins’s argument that “it is possible to remain a fan of a program while militantly rejecting producer actions that run contrary to one’s own conception of the narrative,” though Jenkins argued this before the advent of the concept of anti-fans.<sup>433</sup> Now, it is acknowledged that fans can become anti-fans when a part of the object—be that the inclusion of a character like Jar Jar Binks, the activities pop stars engage in their personal lives, or a particular narrative choice in media—is perceived to harm or somehow degrade the text as a whole. Fans have expectations and opinions “of what a text should be like, of what is a waste of media time and space, of what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt,” which, when

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<sup>430</sup> Sandvoss, “The Politics of Against,” 131-2.

<sup>431</sup> Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities,” 71.

<sup>432</sup> Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning From Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>433</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 132.

violated, can result in a fan becoming an anti-fan.<sup>434</sup> A Black actor playing a stormtrooper was deemed degrading enough to the *Star Wars* franchise that it resulted in many fans-turned-anti-fans. These new anti-fans act to “cure” the text of its perceived problems, removing the key element that angers, disappoints, or disgusts them.<sup>435</sup> If the disgusting element is removed, these anti-fans may return to being fans, but this return does not always occur. Disgust does not stop the fan from being a fan; rather, it reaffirms their love of the “original” objects through their hatred of the “new” or “altered” version. Just as love and disgust can bind disparate groups together, “hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful” and they can “produce just as much activity, identification, and meaning, and ‘effects’ or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture.”<sup>436</sup> Anti-fans, now bonded with others who share their dislike, may remain anti-fans of the object even when the objectionable element is removed. Now, they are in an alliance against more than just the objectionable element in the text—they object to its very existence and must remain militant against the threat that the element may return.

The shift from fan to anti-fan is key to Poe Johnson’s argument that Gray’s “notion of the anti-fan, while useful, does not account for moments when oppression toward marginalized people shapes the relationship between a fan and their chosen fandom.”<sup>437</sup> This is particularly important to consider when thinking about race, as fan studies scholars tend to elide discussions of people of color in fandom.<sup>438</sup> Race has historically been neglected by fan studies, at least partially because, considerations of fandom’s relationship with race trouble “some of the claims—and desires—at

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<sup>434</sup> Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities,” 73.

<sup>435</sup> Gray, “How Do I Dislike Thee?,” 30-31.

<sup>436</sup> Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 841.

<sup>437</sup> Poe Johnson, “Playing with Lynching: Fandom Violence and the Black Athletic Body,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 174.

<sup>438</sup> Mel Stanfill, “Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 126.

the heart of fan studies scholars and their scholarship.”<sup>439</sup> The gap is slowly being addressed as more scholars examine the assumed whiteness of fandom, and, as such, this chapter puts the increasing scholarship on anti-fandoms in conversation with that of race-in-fandoms. Johnson’s intervention in the conception of the anti-fan is notable for this contribution, as rather than consider a “fan” as someone who experiences positive feelings for a text and an “anti-fan” as someone who experiences negative feelings, Johnson contends that fandom/anti-fandom is “more about the collective intertwining of identity insofar as that object reinforces a particular ideological standing.”<sup>440</sup>

The idea that fan objects support fans’ ideologies mirrors an argument put forth in Jenkins’ seminal *Textual Poachers* monograph: fans choose “media products from the total range of available texts precisely because they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing [their] pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests.”<sup>441</sup> Extending from this argument, anti-fans select texts/objects to *reject* in order to express their pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests. This is especially true when someone who is previously a fan becomes an anti-fan due to an introduction of a new element—the “bad object.”<sup>442</sup> Anti-fans are highly emotionally engaged with the bad object, and they are just as committed to following its progress as fans are to their “good” objects, if not more so.<sup>443</sup> Sandvoss even argues that “the fan object is integrated into the fan’s sense of self and thus becomes an important identity resource, one that is reflected

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<sup>439</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, “African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 19 (2015): 1.4.

<sup>440</sup> Johnson, “Playing with Lynching,” 174.

<sup>441</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 34.

<sup>442</sup> There is a difference between “bad objects” and what Julia Kristeva calls the “abject,” as the abject is something that supposedly could never be assimilated by the subject. Further discussion of the abject is not necessary for my argument, but for more information on the abject, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>443</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, “Toward an Understanding of Political Enthusiasm as Media Fandom: Blogging, Fan Productivity and Affect in American Politics,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 266.

in the centrality of the cultural symbols and texts with which we build an affective relationship.”<sup>444</sup> From this, we can extrapolate that the object that is integrated into many recent *Star Wars* anti-fans is not *Star Wars* as it is, but rather an idealized version of *Star Wars* that fits into a narrative of white, male supremacy.

In Chapter One, I read social movements as fandom, but here I read white supremacists as an *anti-fandom*. The relation between anti-fans and reactionary groups is clear, as “anti-fan discourse is increasingly being used as a sort of metaphorical fig leaf for preexisting prejudice and bigotry,” but this can also be seen through the motivating affects of love, hate, and disgust.<sup>445</sup> Just drawing from Ahmed’s description that white supremacist organizations use narratives of love to disguise their hate for others, there is a clear connection between a love of one thing (whiteness) and a hatred for that which threatens it (multiculturalism). White supremacists craft narratives of loving whiteness and the need to defend themselves from their diverse victimizers as a way to propagate their hatred for the racialized other.<sup>446</sup> White supremacists also engage in many fannish activities, including holding rallies, posting about their love of whiteness and the Aryan nation on online forums, criticizing those who do not share their opinion, engaging in a participatory culture, and even creating merchandise and performing cosplay.<sup>447</sup>

The connection goes further, as Melissa A. Click contends that anti-fandoms and anti-fan activities are modeled around repeated actions of hate and disgust.<sup>448</sup> This can be seen in how anti-

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<sup>444</sup> Sandvoss, “The Politics of Against,” 133.

<sup>445</sup> Emma A. Jane, “Hating 3.0: Should Anti-Fan Studies Be Renewed for Another Season?,” in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 43.

<sup>446</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun follows Sara Ahmed in arguing the connection between love and hate, and ultimately arguing that love is based on hate. “Co-relating the Online Self,” in *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Online Self: A Savage Journey into the Heart of Digital Cultures*, eds. Donatella Della Ratta, Geert Lovink, Teresa Numerica, Peter Sarram (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 29-49.

<sup>447</sup> Mel Stanfill, “White Supremacy as a Fandom” (presentation, Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Online, March 17-21, 2021).

<sup>448</sup> Melissa A. Click, “Introduction: Haters Gonna Hate,” in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 14.

fans of media properties such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) or DC films repeatedly post online about how terrible a movie is or how poorly it is performing critically or commercially, even when that is not the case—recalling the psychoanalytic description of fantasy, where when one’s reality is unpleasant, they engage in communication and thought processes that alter it in a way to become pleasurable. One example is how whenever a box office pundit would tweet about *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), the replies would be flooded by people (presumably anti-fans of the MCU) saying it was a flop, despite the film earning nearly five times its budget at the global box office. MCU fans/DC anti-fans, however, would reply to the pundits’ tweets with posts arguing that *Doctor Strange* made significantly more money than any Zack Snyder film or recent DC film, attacking DC fans’ beloved objects often even before the MCU anti-fans had posted anything.<sup>449</sup> For both groups of anti-fans, there was a perceived need to distance themselves from and diminish the property they found to be inferior and disgusting. White supremacists similarly must repeatedly name and reject the object of their disgust in an effort to separate themselves from the vulnerability created by their proximity to non-whiteness. For both anti-fans in general and white supremacists, the bad object “is crucial to the formation of the collective, and the expulsion or incorporation of the ... other is needed to maintain the collective identity.”<sup>450</sup>

Barnes and Middlemost argue that while hatred and dislike are key motivators for anti-fandom, “a form of anti-fandom exists in which pleasure is derived from the use of humor to perform acts of citizenship and imagined community.”<sup>451</sup> This line of thinking calls to mind

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<sup>449</sup> For examples of both, see wdp, Twitter post, May 31, 2022, 4:26 p.m., <https://twitter.com/WDPNYC/status/1531733791101927432>; RockyDrago66, Twitter post, June 5, 2022, 11:14 a.m., <https://twitter.com/RDrago66/status/1533467361566769152>.

<sup>450</sup> Click, “Haters Gonna Hate,” 14.

<sup>451</sup> Barnes and Middlemost, “Hey! Mr. Prime Minister!”, 1124.



trolling, particularly how many academics and popular critics treat much reactionary online activity simply as trolling “for the lulz.” Proctor even asks how fan studies scholars are supposed to “distinguish trolling from genuine discourses of fan affect, whether toxic or benign” and emphasizes the importance in being able to separate trolls from fans/anti-fans.<sup>452</sup> I see this differentiation as less significant for a number of reasons. The first is that “trolling in pursuit of lulz is typically proclaimed to be ironic, even if the force or intent of those actions is not,” as irony and humor are often key practices with which to “lubricate the acceptance of sincere racism.”<sup>453</sup> Robert J. Topinka describes how this transgressive humor can become “a cloak disguising a network of racist sentiment.”<sup>454</sup> Just because something is ostensibly meant to be “for the lulz,” that does not preclude it from having serious, harmful effects. Second, anti-fans do not need to agree why something is a bad object/why something is deemed harmful before forming an alliance against it. Rather, the intersectional nature of anti-fandom can bond fans together with trolls, who may have different reasons for rejecting a text but ultimately work together in a way to remove the bad object and “cure” it. This has been shown to be the case many times before, as men’s right activism and GamerGate have been argued to be “gateway drugs” and “sirens” that lead participants to white nationalism.<sup>455</sup> The separation of fans-turned-anti-fans and trolls misses the point that through the shared affects of hate and disgust, anti-fans and trolls work to accomplish the same goals.

The alliance of so-called “true” fans and trolls has a direct link with the bonding seen in white supremacist organizations. While I have been discussing love and hatred in relation to white

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<sup>452</sup> Proctor, “Fear of a #BlackStormtrooper,” 252-3.

<sup>453</sup> Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme Again*, 112.

<sup>454</sup> Robert J. Topinka, “Politically Incorrect Participatory Media: Racist Nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 5 (2018): 2055.

<sup>455</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 59; Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Scotts Valley, CA: Eruditorum Press, 2017), 196.

supremacists and fans/anti-fans, Ahmed's argument for how the two affects intersect is vital for understanding white supremacy as an anti-fandom:

The passion of these negative attachments to others is redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subjects brought together through the repetition of the signifier, "white." It is the love of white, or those recognizable as white, that supposedly explains this shared "communal" visceral response of hate. *Together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together.*<sup>456</sup>

Through having a shared object of anti-fandom, white supremacists create a communal object to hate, and this hatred mobilizes supporters. While many fan studies scholars have discussed fan activism as being associated with a love for a text, social movement scholars have argued that people are more likely to politically act on "negative" emotions like anger, fear, hatred or disgust than they are "positive" emotions.<sup>457</sup> For white supremacists and anti-fans, however, there does not need to be a division between the "positive" and "negative" emotions, as the narratives of love can bring supporters together while the hatred for the bad object bonds them and motivates their actions.

Importantly, love and hate are not separable concepts. Love can even be "understood as the pre-condition for hate," which is evident for white supremacists and anti-fans more generally.<sup>458</sup> These groups "hate" their bad objects, but their hatred also binds them together as communities. Their actions of hate are not dissimilar from actions related to love: they read all about the bad object, they spend significant time talking about it, and they experience a strong passion toward it—a passion they make sure to proclaim through their verbal and often nonverbal communication, including their clothing and purchased and displayed memorabilia. The interplay

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<sup>456</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 118.

<sup>457</sup> Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *Outrage Industry: Political Opinion and the New Incivility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Brian L. Ott, "The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 1 (2017): 59-68; Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

<sup>458</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 50.

of love and hate is particularly important for white supremacists and other reactionary groups, as hate can portray “the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim,” which is key to maintaining these reactionary groups’ fantasies of persecution.<sup>459</sup> Through viewing white supremacists as an anti-fandom, one whose bad object expands to any person or ideology that threatens white male supremacy, we can better understand the recruitment and mobilization efforts of reactionary fans/anti-fans at large.

Click argues that “scholarship on anti-fandom can—and indeed, should—contribute to and further our understanding of the circulation and impact of dislike and hate through digital technology.”<sup>460</sup> I wholeheartedly agree, but following Johnson’s call to think of fandom/anti-fandom as more than just positive/negative emotions, I now turn to the fan-driven reactionary controversy of #NotMyJedi, where anti-fans and white supremacist trolls targeted and digitally attacked many involved in the production of *The Last Jedi*—particularly Kelly Marie Tran for her portrayal of Rose Tico. While this controversy demonstrates a strategy that so many reactionary controversies employ, that of masking a hatred for the diverse other through narratives of love for an imagined past, the way in which these anti-fans express their hatred involves not just the “negative” affects of hate, disgust, and cruelty but also the seemingly “positive” affect of joy.

#### **4.5 The Joy, Cruelty, and Sadism of #NotMyJedi**

The #NotMyJedi controversy surrounding the release of *The Last Jedi* is deceiving in its hashtag. While #BlackStormtrooper was a reaction to the casting of a Black actor as a

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<sup>459</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 118.

<sup>460</sup> Click, “Haters Gonna Hate,” 17.

stormtrooper, the #NotMyJedi controversy (also known as #NotMyLuke) is only ostensibly about the hashtag's subject, Luke Skywalker. This misdirection is evident through examining the film's central narrative. *The Last Jedi* picks up where Rey's story ended in *The Force Awakens*, with Rey finding Luke on the remote planet of Ahch-To. Coming face-to-face with the near-mythical Jedi Master, Rey extends Luke's lost lightsaber to him—a gesture that the Resistance needs him and it is time for him to enter the fight. Upon taking the lightsaber, however, the aged Luke discards it by tossing the hilt over his shoulder, then walks away. Rey soon learns that Luke has not avoided the fight because he was unaware of it, but rather that he is in a self-imposed exile, doubting himself after nearly taking Ben Solo's life out of fear—a decision that led to the destruction of Luke's fledgling Jedi Order and the corruption/transformation of Ben Solo (son of Leia Organa and nephew of Luke Skywalker) into Kylo Ren. Because of this, Luke believes the Jedi should end and has cut himself off from the Force. Following the encouragement of R2-D2 and the persistence of Rey, Luke eventually begins training Rey in the ways of the Force, though she leaves before her training is complete in an attempt to stop Kylo Ren and Supreme Leader Snoke and save her friends. Distraught, Luke goes to destroy the last remaining texts of the Jedi library, but he hesitates, unsure of himself. At that moment, the Force spirit of Yoda appears to Luke, destroys the library with a lightning bolt, then gives Luke one final lesson about learning from failure. The film climaxes with a projection of Luke engaging Kylo Ren in a duel to give the Resistance time to escape. During the fight, it is revealed that Luke's body was actually on Ahch-To and he was only projecting his image to distract Kylo Ren. The toll of creating the projection, however, is too great, and once the duel ends and the Resistance escapes, Luke releases the projection and dies how many Jedi Masters do—his corporeal body fading away as he becomes one with the Force.

For fans of *Star Wars*, some of this description may sound eerily familiar. In *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), a much younger Luke travels to the remote planet of Dagobah, where he finds Jedi Master Yoda. The aged Yoda is in a self-imposed exile after the fall of the Jedi Order twenty-two years previously. The prequel trilogy reveals that Yoda holds himself partially responsible for the fall of the Order and that the fall resulted in the corruption/transformation of Anakin Skywalker (father of Leia Organa and Luke Skywalker) into Darth Vader. While he originally declines to teach Luke the ways of the Force, Luke’s dogged insistence causes Yoda to relent. Before Luke can finish his training, however, he discovers that his friends are in trouble, so he leaves to try to stop Darth Vader. The film climaxes with Luke’s duel with Darth Vader that enables Luke’s friends to escape. Luke returns to Dagobah in *Return of the Jedi* to complete his training, but he finds Yoda weakened from his age and exertions. In his final moments, Yoda imparts a final bit of knowledge to Luke before his corporeal body fades away and he becomes one with the Force.

The similarity between Rey and Luke’s storyline in *The Last Jedi* and Luke and Yoda’s in *The Empire Strikes Back* is apparent, so, if fans enjoyed the original trilogy so much, why was a common objection among *The Last Jedi* anti-fans that the film was “ruining their childhoods?”<sup>461</sup> The fact that this was also a refrain for anti-fans of the female-led *Ghostbusters* reboot—a film that was despised long before it premiered, despite having a nearly identical structural framework as the original film and central characters who fill similar roles—indicates that the *narratives* are not the reason for these so-called “ruined” childhoods.<sup>462</sup> Instead, the rejection of these films

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<sup>461</sup> Jordan Zakarin, “How the Alt-Right and Nostalgic Trolls Hijacked Geek Popular Culture,” SyFy, September 3, 2019, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/how-the-alt-right-and-nostalgic-trolls-hijacked-geek-pop-culture>.

<sup>462</sup> Leigh Raper, “How Does the New ‘Ghostbusters’ Compare to the Original?”, The Take, <https://the-take.com/read/how-does-the-new-ghostbusters-compare-to-the-original>.

appears to be the result of other changes/additions—namely, that women and people of color are now in the lead roles.

It must be said, however, that disliking Luke’s arc is not a problematic or wrong take in itself. After all, there were thirty-four years between Luke’s success in *Return of the Jedi* and his exile and demise in *The Last Jedi*. In that time, novels, fan fictions, and a slew of other (non-canon) media imagined the *Star Wars* universe post-*Return of the Jedi*, so fans likely had their own ideas of what Luke’s life would be like and *The Last Jedi* did not fit with their conceptions. Even Mark Hamill, who has portrayed Luke since the debut of *Star Wars* in 1977, voiced concerns about the direction the film was taking with his character when he told writer-director Rian Johnson, “I pretty much fundamentally disagree with every choice you’ve made for this character [Luke].”<sup>463</sup> Hamill later regretted publicly expressing his doubts as 1) after seeing the full film, he realized he was wrong and greatly appreciated Luke’s arc, and 2) his comments were used to fuel the hate campaign against the film and those involved with its production.<sup>464</sup> This second point is key, as disliking Luke’s arc or his conclusion is not a harmful position, just as questioning canonical fidelity is not a harmful practice. Using these as justifications to attack the film and those involved with it, however, is clear evidence of revanchist nostalgia—this version of Luke does not fit with what we imagined Luke would be like, so therefore we must punish those involved with this film. In many cases, those seeking revenge for Luke’s portrayal focused their attacks on *The Last Jedi*’s non-male and non-white actors.

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<sup>463</sup> David Kamp, “*Star Wars* Nerds, Mark Hamill is One of You,” *Vanity Fair*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/mark-hamill-star-wars-nerd>.

<sup>464</sup> Ryan Parker, “Mark Hamill Regrets Criticizing ‘Last Jedi’ Version of Luke Skywalker,” *Hollywood Reporter*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/mark-hamill-regrets-criticizing-last-jedi-version-luke-skywalker-1070418/>.

*The Last Jedi* was not just targeted by anti-fans but also by far-right commentators at large. Conspiracy theorist and Sandy Hook-denier Alex Jones criticized the film as being “chock-full of political propaganda” and “total SJW.”<sup>465</sup> In his review, he also appeals to his audience’s nostalgia by reminding them what Leia and Luke *used* to be like—contrasting their iterations in *The Last Jedi* with his idealized version from the original trilogy, where he proclaimed men were in charge and the ones to save the day. Jones’s complaints are mirrored by Stephen in his comment/review of Michael J. Sullivan’s *Age of Empyre* that I mentioned at the start of my Introduction chapter. Jones, like Stephen, complains that “the women are the bosses, the women are the heroes” while “the men are a bunch of idiots that have to be put in line.”<sup>466</sup> White nationalist Stefan Molyneux and right-wing podcaster Ben Shapiro echoed much of this rhetoric in their own viral reviews of the film.

What is important to note is that some of the criticisms leveled by people like Shapiro, in a vacuum, appear sensible. For instance, Shapiro criticized the B-story of the film—in which Finn and Rose (whom he describes as “useless characters”) travel to the casino-city Canto Bight to recruit a master codebreaker—as excessive and largely “social justice warrior crap about income inequality and animal rights.”<sup>467</sup> Even though *The Last Jedi* is the second most critically acclaimed *Star Wars* film on the site Metacritic—a review aggregate site similar to Rotten Tomatoes, but one that provides a weighted average of critic scores instead of a percentage of positive versus negative reviews—this subplot was one many reviewers found could have been tightened. Shapiro, then, takes what many viewers likely saw as a valid complaint and couches it within reactionary

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<sup>465</sup> Katharine Swindells, “Alex Jones Says the New Star Wars is ‘Total SJW’ and Princess Leia is a Lesbian,” Pink News, December 27, 2017, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/12/27/alex-jones-says-the-new-star-wars-is-total-sjw-and-princess-leia-is-a-lesbian/>.

<sup>466</sup> Gabriel Bell, “Alex Jones Hates on ‘The Last Jedi,’ Calls Carrie Fisher an ‘Old Lizard,’” Salon, January 2, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/01/02/alex-jones-hates-on-the-last-jedi-calls-carrie-fisher-an-old-lizard/>.

<sup>467</sup> Zakarin, “How the Alt-Right and Nostalgic Trolls Hijacked Geek Popular Culture.”

language. These far-right commentators utilize a combination of reactionary talking points, valid criticisms, inflammatory statements, as well as appeals to nostalgia in their rhetoric. Through doing so, Shapiro, Jones, Molyneux, and other reactionary figures with large fanbases are able to draw anti-fans into their reactionary ideologies then, once these anti-fans have bought in, they use explicit hatred to motivate them to act against the bad object.

This raises the question of what was the bad object in *The Last Jedi*? The possible answers are myriad, ranging from the continued presence of Rey and Finn to the thematic messaging (including the anti-capitalist and anti-animal cruelty themes Shapiro hated) to the inclusion of more women and people of color in positions of power. While *The Force Awakens* also was preceded by a race-based controversy, it was not nearly as derided by anti-fans as *The Last Jedi* was, as evidenced by *The Force Awakens* having an audience score of 85% on Rotten Tomatoes while *The Last Jedi* has 42%, the lowest of any live-action *Star Wars* film or series as of this writing. As such, the additions between *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* seem to be to the primary bad object. Beyond the expansion of Luke Skywalker's story, the other notable addition—and the one that received a significant focus of anti-fans' hate—was Rose Tico and the actress who portrayed her, Kelly Marie Tran.

Rose is a member of the Resistance whose sister is killed while destroying a First Order Dreadnought, and both Tico sisters are portrayed as being “regular” people who are staunch Resistance supporters. Rose even idolizes Resistance heroes, including Finn, whom she first meets when he attempts to use her hero worship against her while he accesses an escape pod. After Rose catches on, she apprehends Finn, but he explains his reasoning was not to desert the Resistance like she assumed. In actuality, the First Order has a tracking device that, unless disabled, will prevent the Resistance from escaping to safety, and he was on his way to do just that. His plan,



however, is clearly flawed. After discussing options, the two agree to work together and set out to find a master codebreaker in Canto Bight. On Canto Bight, Finn is taken by the beauty of the Casino City, but Rose says that this beautiful exterior is only enabled by child slavery, weapons dealing, and the suffering of the poor. Before too long, the two are captured and prevented from hiring their master codebreaker. Instead, they form an alliance with an imprisoned slicer, who claims he can deactivate the tracker, for a price. After escaping from prison with the help of four enslaved children, they make it to the First Order tracking device only to be betrayed by the slicer at the last moment. Once again escaping prison, the two rejoin the Resistance who have landed on the planet of Crait in hopes of evading the First Order. They don't and instead are forced to barricade themselves in an old bunker. As the First Order powers up a laser meant to destroy the bunker's gate, Finn takes a speeder and begins a suicide attack to destroy the laser. Again at the last moment, Rose knocks Finn's speeder out of the way, saving his life (while allowing the laser to fire on the bunker). Gravely wounded, Rose kisses Finn then tells him she knows how the Resistance will win: "Not fighting what we hate, but saving what we love." The movie ends with the injured Rose receiving medical attention as the Resistance, using Luke's duel with Kylo Ren as a distraction, escapes Crait.

As a character, Rose exemplifies one of the film's central themes: that you do not need to come from greatness to be special or do great things. Rose is not Force-sensitive, an ace pilot, nor an ex-stormtrooper; rather, she is a volunteer who cares for the cause and doing what is right. Her conversations with Finn verbalize many of the film's themes, which, unfortunately, means her dialogue can be a tad on-the-nose at times. While some argue this makes Rose appear self-righteous, many of the anti-fan complaints boil down to two things: 1) Rose is yet another woman stealing screentime from the men, and 2) Rose is a woman *of color* stealing screentime from the

*white* men. Rose, who has no interaction with Luke Skywalker throughout the entire film, is often mentioned in tweets that include #NotMyJedi. It is not rare to find social media posts that begin with a complaint about the story of *The Last Jedi* or Rose's character and end with mentions of SJWs or liberal propaganda.

Before turning to the affective economy of #NotMyJedi, I must note that I have read and compiled a significant number of tweets, Reddit threads, and other social media posts related to #NotMyJedi and the hatred directed at Kelly Marie Tran, but I hesitate to replicate more of the content than I already have. As spotlight magnification suggests, even by refuting reactionary content, you amplify the content. One example of this phenomenon in relation to #NotMyJedi is the "Men Only" cut in which a group of men's rights activists edited together a version of *The Last Jedi* that only featured male characters. Rian Johnson mocked and criticized the effort on Twitter. His tweet was seen by thousands and ultimately resulted in giving the edit more attention, with its views increasing exponentially in the days following Johnson's tweet.<sup>468</sup> As such, with the remainder of the analysis, I will look more to the overall discourse of the controversy rather than specific posts, so as not to further amplify any specific posters or messages.<sup>469</sup>

Similar to Boyega, Tran received messages, comments, and replies that included death threats, claims that the posters would boycott the film because of her inclusion, and racial invectives. Some of these comments were couched within concerns about the canonical fidelity, seeing as *Star Wars* had only recently featured actors of Asian descent in their films (beyond Tran, this also includes Donnie Yen, Wen Jiang, and Riz Ahmed, all of whom appear in *Rogue One*).

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<sup>468</sup> "Star Wars: The Last Jedi Cast Mock 'Men-Only' Fan Edit," BBC, January 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-42719084>; Zakarin, "How the Alt-Right and Nostalgic Trolls Hijacked Geek Popular Culture."

<sup>469</sup> My Introduction chapter expands on this line of thinking. For more, see Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, "The Challenges of Studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: 'Come on in the Water's Fine,'" *New Media and Society* 24, no. 1 (2022): 5-30.

The fact that so many anti-fans justified their hatred of, first, a Black stormtrooper then a Resistance fighter played by a Vietnamese American actress by arguing that these characters violate *Star Wars* canon calls to mind arguments that all-white casts are necessary in films for historical accuracy. As Pande explains, these claims “are based on a violent and systematic erasure of non-white peoples from histories where they were very much present.”<sup>470</sup> This argument holds even less water if we paraphrase Marlon James and note that *Star Wars isn’t real*—we can do what we want with the stories. The second part of James’s quote holds true here as well. In a galaxy of over twenty million species, is it not a fantasy to pretend people of color do not exist or do not matter? That is exactly what many of these anti-fans are doing. They use canonical fidelity as an excuse to try to enforce the fantasy they want, not only in this fictional storyworld, but in reality as well. They desire this storyworld to resemble a galaxy that is populated by droids, aliens, and white people—either you are white or you are not human.<sup>471</sup>

The attacks on Tran extended to rape threats and commenters openly discussing what they would do to her body if given the opportunity. One interpretation could be that these threats aimed to cause Tran to so fear for her life and bodily sovereignty that she would never tarnish the anti-fans’ beloved *Star Wars* universe again. Another is that while these comments are addressed to Tran, they can be read rhetorically as addressing all those who may threaten the white, male dominance of *Star Wars* in the future—speaking to those who are not yet present by directing it an audience who is. These comments reveal more about anti-fans than just how they are bonded through a hatred masked as love for an imagined past of *Star Wars*. The posts describing how they

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<sup>470</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, 107.

<sup>471</sup> Representing non-white characters as non-humans is a typical move in Western speculative fiction. See Stephanie Betz, “‘Elf Lives Matter?’ The Racial Dynamics of Participatory Politics in a Predominantly White Fandom,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (2022): 14-29; Samuel R. Delany, “Racism and Science Fiction” in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, eds. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Warner, 2000), 383-97; Nathaniel Poor, “Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” *Games and Culture* 7, no. 5 (2012): 375-96.

would own, control, and destroy Tran reveals a cruelty among the users. While the internet has been celebrated for the participatory culture it creates for many fans, the internet also perpetuates power inequity and enables rampant cruelty.<sup>472</sup> This type of public cruelty—“the deliberate infliction of physical, and secondarily emotional, pain upon a weaker person or group by stronger ones in order to achieve some end, tangible or intangible”—is only made possible by power differentials, which are exacerbated by the anonymity granted by online spaces.<sup>473</sup>

Marina Levina describes cruelty as “an affective and social mechanism,” and because “cruelty emerges out of an encounter between the self and the Other,”<sup>474</sup> cruelty is often considered in relation to other affects. For Kumarini Silva, “cruelty is actually love by another name,” for when we love something so dearly, our aggressions toward others are justified.<sup>475</sup> We must secure and protect that which we love, even if that entails cruelty for others. This cruelty-as-love extends to the foundation of US American culture, justifying the cruelty toward the other as necessary to secure “white America for white Americans.”<sup>476</sup> This conception of cruelty-love, in many ways, builds on Ahmed’s connection between love and hate, where the love of whiteness is used as a justification for the hatred directed toward others. In direct relation to revanchist nostalgia, Kendall R. Phillips argues that through cruelty, violence is not intended merely to preserve but to dismantle.<sup>477</sup> Anti-fans, in their cruelty to Tran and the others involved in *The Last Jedi* are not just attempting to protect *Star Wars*, they are trying to destroy what it has become and those they

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<sup>472</sup> Betz, “Elf Lives Matter,” 25; Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, 49.

<sup>473</sup> Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 29.

<sup>474</sup> Marina Levina, “Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 75.

<sup>475</sup> Kumarini Silva, “Having the Time of Our Lives: Love-Cruelty as Patriotic Impulse,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 80.

<sup>476</sup> Silva, “Having the Time of Our Lives,” 83.

<sup>477</sup> Kendall R. Phillips, “‘The Safest Hands Are Our Own’: Cinematic Affect, State Cruelty, and the Election of Donald J. Trump,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 86.

hold responsible for that change, just like Vox Day and the Rabid Puppies attempted to do with the Hugo Awards (see Chapter Two).

In seeking to destroy the current state of *Star Wars* as they punish the bad object, the *Last Jedi* anti-fans appear to experience a form of joy. Levina argues that there is a connection between joy and cruelty: “The attachment to a joyful ideal, such as the American Dream, can be cruel insofar as the separation from the ideal would mean the loss of identity and sense of the world.”<sup>478</sup> This *joyful cruelty*, however, aligns with what Calum Lister Matheson describes as *sadism*. For Matheson, cruelty “may be indifferent, whereas sadism always depends on the enjoyment of (fantastized) pain in another.”<sup>479</sup> Much like love and hate, sadism requires a level of connection with the victim, as the fantasies of sadism “involve imagining suffering from the perspective of a target.”<sup>480</sup> This imagination requires an identification, an empathy that is not inherent to cruelty. One can be cruel without fantasizing about *how* they feel their pain. By threatening Tran’s bodily autonomy, by reducing her and Boyega to less-than-human, these anti-fans fantasize about how to most hurt them and how to effectively drive them and people like them out of *Star Wars*. These acts go beyond cruelty, as they provide joy for the anti-fans and require the fantasy and identification of sadism.

For *The Last Jedi* anti-fans the separation from their ideal version of a galaxy far, far away—and thus a separation from a storyworld that reinforces their ideologies and identities—causes them to sadistically lash out with at Tran, Boyega, and others. Yet, many of the actors and creative forces involved in *The Last Jedi* did not receive death or rape threats, nor were they driven

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<sup>478</sup> Levina, “Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty,” 75-6. See also, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>479</sup> Calum Lister Matheson, “Liberal Tears and the Rogue’s Yarn of Sadistic Conservatism,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2022): 347.

<sup>480</sup> Matheson, “Liberal Tears and the Rogue’s Yarn of Sadistic Conservatism,” 349.

off social media, so why target the actors the anti-fans did? A simple answer may be that these are the central characters and/or creative forces for the film, but that neglects to account for how Tran received such an outpouring of vitriol despite being only the twelfth highest billed actor in the film. Instead, it may be that in considering the connection between cruelty and joy, “cruelty is the joy with which whiteness asserts itself.”<sup>481</sup> As Levina explains, whiteness here is not necessarily a skin color but an affect—“it can attach itself to various bodies depending on historical, social, and cultural circumstances.”<sup>482</sup> This can be seen in the way that Jewish people may be treated as white in the United States but not when they are in Russia, or even how Elliot Rodgers—the 22 year old who killed six people in Isla Vista, CA in 2014—was treated as white despite his Asian ancestry.<sup>483</sup> Whiteness grants privilege, access, and the power to take that from those who are not white, then punish them for their existence. From this power, the cruelty provides joy and can become sadism.<sup>484</sup>

The sadism toward Tran, Boyega, and other actors of color in other speculative fiction media is part of the “emotional regime”—the “set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and ‘emotives’ that express and inculcate [members]”—in what amounts to the radicalization of fans-turned-anti-fans.<sup>485</sup> The fan-yet-to-turn-anti-fan may object to a seemingly reasonable bad object—the inclusion of a character that distracts from the main story, a narrative development that feels out of character, etc. In voicing this opinion, however, they come to find not only people with the same opinion, but those who dislike the media for other reasons, reasons that may not have anything to do with the narrative content and instead focus on more objectional

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<sup>481</sup> Levina, “Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty,” 76.

<sup>482</sup> Levina, “Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty,” 76.

<sup>483</sup> Kelly, *Apocalypse Man*, 95.

<sup>484</sup> Levina, “Whiteness and the Joys of Cruelty,” 77.

<sup>485</sup> William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129.

ideological content. The discourse merges as the now-anti-fans, trolls, and reactionaries bond over their hate (which is disguised as love) for the variety of bad objects. But they do not hate the media itself. No. They hate what the media has *become* and long for it to return to their nostalgic vision of what it once was. From here, the anti-fans work to remove the bad object, which often involves sadistically engaging with others to get their message across. While the repeated rejection of the bad object is necessary to protect oneself from the vulnerability that the proximity creates, through the sadism with which they reject the bad object, these anti-fans gain power they may have previously lacked, which provides them with joy. With a community bonded by hatred and a discovery of joy through cruelty, the aim is no longer just to remove the bad object from one film or television series. Rather, it is to work to restore a world the community believes in, even if it requires destroying others and what the original fan object has become in the process.

#### **4.6 Disney and Lucasfilm Respond**

While Chapter Four focuses primarily on studio responses to reactionary fan controversies, it is worthwhile to consider how Disney and Lucasfilm responded to #NotMyJedi. Pande argues that, in the age of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, “it is clearly becoming a matter of brand positioning for entertainment companies to be seen as attentive to audience concerns around issues like racism, sexism, and homophobia.”<sup>486</sup> Pande makes this argument with the caveat that “this is not to say that big-budget productions produced in this atmosphere are any less likely to contain discriminatory stereotypes; however, social media today allows for criticism of them to reach a

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<sup>486</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, 81.

greater audience and potentially to affect box office performance.”<sup>487</sup> The phrasing of this argument seems to imply that studios are becoming increasingly aware that audiences are concerned with the *lack* of representation as well as the promotion of racism, sexism, and homophobia in media and hope to counter that. In the case of #BlackStormtrooper and #NotMyJedi, however, the fans/anti-fans objected to the *presence* of more progressive themes, and, as many critics have argued, Disney and Lucasfilm took the criticism to heart and crafted *Star Wars: Episode IX – Rise of Skywalker* (2019) to be attentive to reactionary fans’ concerns.<sup>488</sup>

Unlike the original or prequel trilogies, which had George Lucas involved as a guiding force throughout, the sequel trilogy was assembled by various directors and writers. Following *The Last Jedi*’s premiere, the planned directing and writing team for *The Rise of Skywalker* was replaced by J.J. Abrams, who co-wrote, directed, and produced *The Force Awakens*. This decision, to many fans and journalists, appeared to be Disney responding to the anti-fans’ protest, giving them what they wanted. They chose Abrams to finish the trilogy, as even with the #BlackStormtrooper controversy, *The Force Awakens* made significantly more money than *The Last Jedi* (it is, as of this writing, the highest grossing film in the domestic box office of all time), *and* because Abrams seemed amenable to creating a film that was “the opposite of *The Last Jedi*,” one that aimed to retcon Rian Johnson’s contributions to the *Star Wars* canon.<sup>489</sup> A clear indication of this is how Rose Tico, despite being the most prominent new character in *The Last Jedi*, had a scant one minute and sixteen seconds of screen time in *Rise of Skywalker*—a grand total of seventy-

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<sup>487</sup> Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, 81-2.

<sup>488</sup> For examples of this criticism, see Melissa Leon, “‘*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*’ Erases the Power of Rey’s Story and Surrenders to Sexist Trolls,” *The Daily Beast*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/reys-parents-and-how-star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-surrendered-to-sexist-trolls>; Sergio Pereira, “*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* Allowed Toxic Fandom to Win,” *Comic Book Resource*, December 24, 2019, <https://www.cbr.com/star-wars-rise-of-skywalker-toxic-fandom-wins/>.

<sup>489</sup> Alex Abad-Santos and Alissa Wilkinson, “*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* was Designed to be the Opposite of *The Last Jedi*,” *Vox*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/27/21034725/star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-last-jedi-j-j-abrams-rian-johnson>.



six seconds throughout the two hour and twenty-two minute film.<sup>490</sup> Another example is how *The Rise of Skywalker* undid the thematic work Johnson accomplished in *The Last Jedi*. Rather than Rey becoming someone special despite being the daughter of regular people, *The Rise of Skywalker* reveals that, *just kidding*, she is actually the granddaughter of Darth Sidious, the Sith Lord who overthrew the Jedi Order in the prequel trilogy and ruled in the Empire in the original trilogy (which climaxed with his death). While there are many potential reasons to explain Rose's shockingly reduced role in the film, the cutting of most LGBTQ content, and the shifting of the focus from an array of characters to solely the white characters, the criticisms that Disney, Lucasfilm, and Abrams himself levied at Johnson and *The Last Jedi* during the press tour prior to the release of *The Last Skywalker* signaled that they were giving the reactionary anti-fans what they asked for: Less Rose, less Finn, and more fan service nostalgia via making *Star Wars* white again.

Of course, gearing the production and promotion of *The Rise of Skywalker* to appeal to reactionary fans is not a new practice for Disney. Disney has a history of altering its products to suit more conservative sensibilities if it results in greater profits. A clear example is how, for the Chinese release of *The Force Awakens*, Disney minimized the presence of John Boyega and removed the only other character of color (Oscar Isaac's Poe Dameron) from the poster altogether (Figure 5). The downplaying of characters of color for studio releases outside of the United States is not a practice only Disney engages in. Perhaps the most egregious example in recent years is how the Italian posters for Fox Searchlight's *12 Years a Slave* (2013)—a film about Solomon Northup being kidnapped and sold into slavery for twelve years—shrank the image of Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) in order to more prominently feature Michael Fassbender (who

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<sup>490</sup> James Comtois, "Kelly Marie Tran Addresses Rose Tico's Screen Time in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*," Syfy, February 11, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/kelly-marie-tran-addresses-star-wars-screen-time>.

played slaveowner Edwin Epps) in one poster and Brad Pitt (whose character Samuel Bass is in the film for less than five minutes) in another.<sup>491</sup> Other examples of studios removing so-called objectionable content include cutting romance sequences between LGBTQ characters in certain international markets. While *The Rise of Skywalker* does feature a kiss between LGBTQ characters (one that was removed for Singapore and Middle Eastern markets), it occurs in the background between characters the audience has no investment in. Following the reactionary backlash over Luke, Rose, and Finn—a backlash that also accused the film as being SJW for “turning all the characters gay or lesbian”—Disney decided to move away from the romantic relationship that Abrams himself had sparked between the male characters Finn and Poe in *The Force Awakens*.<sup>492</sup>



**Figure 5. A side-by-side comparison of the promotional posters for *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* released in the United States (left) and in China (right).**

<sup>491</sup> Ben Child, “Italian Posters for *12 Years a Slave* Herald Brad Pitt over Chiwetel Ejiofor,” *The Guardian*, December 24, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/24/12-years-slave-italy-posters-pitt-ejiofor>.

<sup>492</sup> Nick Duffy, “Oscar Isaac Says ‘Disney Overlords’ Vetoed Gay *Star Wars* Romance,” *Pink News*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/12/30/oscar-isaac-disney-overlords-vetoed-gay-star-wars-romance/>.

Despite the praise the return of Abrams garnered from some reactionary quarters, the film received the second lowest critical reviews of the entire live-action franchise (only one point above the critically reviled *Phantom Menace* on Rotten Tomatoes) and earned less than half of what *The Force Awakens* did at the worldwide box office. Many fans and critics were distressed over the undoing of *The Last Jedi*'s developments, the sidelining of characters of color, and the blatant nostalgic fan servicing. The large-scale rejection of *The Rise of Skywalker* illustrates that while the #NotMyJedi anti-fans were loud and persistent, they were also a minority—an idea I expand upon in Chapter Four. It is extremely likely that these anti-fans, trolls, and white supremacists realized their minority status, as “toxic behaviors are often the result of hegemonic elites feeling as though they are marginalized or in the minority.”<sup>493</sup> Yet, because so many media outlets and other social media users (including Rian Johnson himself) engaged with this minority of anti-fans, their ideas were amplified, reflecting the process of spotlight magnification. The amplification garnered the white supremacists additional support while simultaneously making the dissent appear much louder and widespread than it actually was. This is what Proctor attempted to argue in his critique of the media response to #BlackStormtrooper. It is not that reactionary fans do not exist. They do, but through engaging with material we consider reactionary, even to dispute it, there is always the risk of making it seem larger than it really is. This process can result in something like *The Rise of Skywalker*, where the progressive themes and characters Johnson created were largely discarded in order to cater to a vocal minority.

Even with the controversies surrounding *Star Wars*, there are reasons to be excited by future of the *Star Wars* franchise. Adam Roberts argues that even as the new series goes through tropes and features common to the *Star Wars* franchise, “this new *Star Wars* [*The Force Awakens*]

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<sup>493</sup> Proctor and Kies, “On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars,” 130.

is proving what SF has always known, that this is a mode of art intensely hospitable to diversity. The vitality of contemporary SF cultures, not to mention their diversity and inventiveness, gives us cause to hope.”<sup>494</sup> This does not seem to be the case with *The Rise of Skywalker*, where much of the diversity and so-called progressiveness was sidelined, but since catering to reactionary fans did not net Disney the positive response and box office returns they expected, they have since changed tactics.

After Gina Carano, who plays Cara Dune on *The Mandalorian*, compared being a Republican in the United States to being a Jewish person during the Holocaust (following other controversies in which she mocked mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic and where she suggested there was voter fraud in the 2020 US presidential election), Disney and Lucasfilm announced she would not return for the series’ third season.<sup>495</sup> While this decision received pushback from reactionary quarters, Disney and Lucasfilm have not, as of this writing, hired her back. Additionally, when Black actress Moses Ingram was attacked by anti-fans following her appearance on the Disney+ limited series *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022), Disney and Lucasfilm defended Ingram in a number of statements, something that was largely absent with Kelly Marie Tran only five years earlier.<sup>496</sup> They have also started casting practices for central characters in series and films that could be read as a direct reaction to Tran’s treatment, such as casting Macau-born American actress Ming-Na Wen as Fennec Shand in *The Mandalorian*, *Star Wars: The Bad Batch* (2021-present), and *The Book of Boba Fett*. Disney and Lucasfilm have even started to warn their actors to expect reactionary attacks, which, while little solace to actors who cannot open social

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<sup>494</sup> Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2.

<sup>495</sup> Ryan Parker and Aaron Couch, “‘The Mandalorian’ Star Gina Carano Fired Amid Social Media Controversy,” *Hollywood Reporter*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/the-mandalorian-star-gina-carano-fired-amid-social-media-controversy-4131168/>.

<sup>496</sup> Ryan Parker, “‘Star Wars’ Defends ‘Obi-Wan Kenobi’ Star Moses Ingram from Vile Online Attacks: ‘Don’t Choose to be Racist,’” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/star-wars-defends-moses-ingram-obi-wan-kenobi-attacks-1235156463/>.

media without seeing hundreds of comments, posts, and direct messages that attack, threaten, and demean them, does indicate that Disney and Lucasfilm are not catering to the whims of a minority of anti-fans anymore, even if the reason may ultimately be financially-driven—a topic I expand on in Chapter Four.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Media fandoms are often considered predominantly white spaces, by non-fans and by fans themselves. These racial demographics affect not only who gets to be a fan but what objects are considered worthy of fandom and what issues within fandom are deemed important enough to address.<sup>497</sup> The #BlackStormtrooper and #NotMyJedi controversies demonstrate that while *Star Wars* is certainly considered worthy of fandom by the majority, some fans see only a *particular, imagined* version of *Star Wars* as worthy. Through working to maintain this nostalgic vision of *Star Wars*, anti-fans push back against anything that could threaten the whiteness of the franchise, and larger still, of their preferred culture.

While #NotMyJedi is one of the loudest reactionary fan controversies in recent years, just since beginning this project, the number of these controversies has increased dramatically. In addition to the controversies surrounding *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and *Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power*, 2022 saw numerous cases of television series being review bombed by anti-fans, two of the most notable centering on *Ms. Marvel* (2022) and *House of the Dragon* (2022-present). *Ms. Marvel* presents the story of how Kamala Khan, a Pakistani American teenager, gained her superpowers

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<sup>497</sup> Ashley Hinck, *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2019), 168.

and took on the superhero mantle of *Ms. Marvel*. Following the premiere of *Ms. Marvel*, anti-fans created a Facebook group titled “Christians Against Ms. Marvel” and protested that Marvel has moved away from Christian values by shifting the focus from Carol Danvers (played by white US American actress Brie Larson) to Kamala (played by Pakistan-born Canadian actress Iman Vellani) and ultimately is promoting the Muslim agenda, despite Danvers never expressing any Christian beliefs in her film appearances.<sup>498</sup> While the page has largely been considered a troll group, it attracted thousands of members, many of whom sincerely believe that the presence of a Muslim superhero of Pakistani descent is a bad object—one degrading to the Marvel brand overall—and joined the group to protest against it.<sup>499</sup> *House of the Dragon*, a prequel to *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), similarly features a female protagonist—notably, one played by nonbinary actor Emma D’Arcy. The series follows princess Rhaenyra Targaryen as she maneuvers the political landscape and becomes the queen of Westeros. Many anti-fans objected to the series’ focus on Rhaenyra and to the casting of Black actor Steve Toussaint as the central character Corlys Velaryon. Even though George R.R. Martin, who wrote the *Song of Ice and Fire* and *Fire & Blood* novels that *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon* are based on, co-created and executive produces the series, many anti-fans claimed that the Black characters and the focus on a female protagonist was a betrayal of the original *Game of Thrones* series. Anti-fans review bombed both shows, calling them full of “forced wokeism,” and accused the producers of filling a diversity quota that forced SJW propaganda on audiences.

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<sup>498</sup> This group has since been renamed “She Hulk twerking” then “Christians Against Black Panther: Wakanda Forever.” *She-Hulk* (2022-present) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) are a speculative fiction series and film, respectively, with a female protagonist. Both, but especially *She-Hulk*, have been review bombed on various platforms.

<sup>499</sup> Jamie Lerner, “A ‘Christians Against *Ms. Marvel*’ Troll Group has the Internet Up in Arms,” Distractify, June 9, 2022, <https://www.distractify.com/p/christians-against-ms-marvel>.

The anti-fans in these controversies did not exclusively couch their hatred within claims of historical realism or cry foul that the series violated canonical fidelity.<sup>500</sup> Rather, they claimed that their treatment of the women and people of color involved with the production of these series was justified as it was a reaction against the SJW content. They claimed to hate progressive politics, not the actors or writers, even as they continually harassed, threatened, and doxxed them. These arguments, while a bit more ideologically open than those of the *Last Jedi* anti-fans', still demonstrate a hatred and disgust for the other that is justified by a supposed love. Ultimately, these controversies illustrate that, for these anti-fans, the presence of any non-white, non-male, non-heteronormative identities in these series are political choices—choices that serve the SJW agenda.<sup>501</sup> By couching their hatred for the other in a disgust for forced wokeism, these anti-fans argue that the only non-political and unbiased representation would be content featuring and created by white, heterosexual men—similar to the Sad Puppies' push for “message fic” as discussed in Chapter Two.

The #BlackStormtrooper and #NotMyJedi controversies demonstrate the importance of considering speculative fiction and the controversies that surround them. In addition to its ability to interrogate gender and sexuality, speculative fiction is a genre that engages with race in complex and profound ways. Beyond representation *in* speculative fiction productions, the genre and its surrounding fan controversies can help us better understand the affective economies of reactionary groups. Since “imagining new futures can serve as a strategy to understand the nature of cruelty,”

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<sup>500</sup> While complaints about Corlys's race are rooted in canonical fidelity, the criticisms of Rhaenyra are not, as D'Arcy plays a cisgendered version of Rhaenyra. The criticism of Rhaenyra is particularly striking considering that Danyeris Targaryen (played by Emilia Clarke) was a protagonist in *Game of Thrones*, as were Arya and Sansa Stark (played by Maisie Williams and Sophie Turner, respectively). All three of their actresses, however, are cisgender and both Danyeris and Sansa were sexualized and objects of sexual violence, which may have made their leading roles more acceptable for anti-fans.

<sup>501</sup> The idea that anyone non-white must be engaging in the political when writing has long been the case in fan circles. Fan fiction written by non-white fans or fan fiction that features non-white characters is often automatically classified as “anti-racist work.” Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, 114.

speculative fiction plays an important role in how affects form communities and motivate collective actions.<sup>502</sup> Through the anti-fan controversies surrounding *Star Wars*, we can see how love, hate, and disgust are utilized in forming alliances among disparate groups of fans-turned-anti-fans and more explicitly reactionary groups; how anti-fandoms and white supremacy are linked; and how the emotional regimes of reactionaries utilize what some would call a joyful cruelty and others would call sadism to reinforce hateful ideologies. To return to Tennyson Foss's complaint that whites are being erased from their fantasies, #NotMyJedi reveals that it is not white erasure that so enrages reactionaries; rather, it is that these fantasies are expanding to include anyone other than white.

While Chapters Two and Three make it clear how revanchist nostalgia motivates fans and anti-fans to seek a return to an imagined past of white male supremacy, it is less clear is how the targets of this revanchism may greet the reactions. In discussing the #NotMyJedi controversy, I briefly analyzed how Disney and Lucasfilm largely gave in to the demands of reactionary fans only to later reject them (after their subservience led to a financial failure), but their response is by no means the only option. The same affects that motivate reactionary fans can, to borrow Ahmed's terminology, *stick* to those they are fighting against, be they voters, actors, or creatives. In Chapter Four, I turn to two separate controversies in which video game studios were the targets of reactionary protests due to their inclusion of queer main characters. The fear and the shame that these reactionary fans mobilized against the companies, however, motivated two very different responses.

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<sup>502</sup> Lonny J. Avi Brooks, "Cruelty and Afrofuturism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2018): 101.



## 5.0 Chapter Four: A Tale of Two Game Studios: BioWare's Shame, Naughty Dog's Pride, and Homophobic Video Game Fans

*“Keep in mind always the present you are constructing. It should be the future  
you want.”*<sup>503</sup> – Alice Walker, writing as character Ola

### 5.1 Introduction

In the year 2183, Commander Shepard of the Systems Alliance uncovers information on a synthetic race known as the Reapers—highly advanced beings of artificial intelligence that eliminate all advanced life in the galaxy once every 10,000 years. Shepard, tasked with uniting the various alien species and stopping the Reaper invasion, must make hard decisions to save the galaxy. Examples include 1) When a Reaper attacks the Citadel—the central hub of the galaxy—and puts a ship containing the galaxy’s governing body, the Citadel Council, in danger, does Shepard focus their attack on the Reaper to protect the Citadel or do they save the Council? If Shepard attacks the Reaper, the Council will die, leaving the galaxy without their political leaders during a massive war. If Shepard saves the Council, the Citadel with its millions of inhabitants may take irreparable damage. 2) While foiling a terrorist attack meant to destroy a human colony, Shepard learns the terrorist has rigged a mining facility to explode with hostages inside. Will Shepard apprehend the terrorist and let the hostages die, or will they focus on defusing the bombs and allow the terrorist to escape to continue his attacks on humankind? 3) After battling their way

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<sup>503</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1989), 236.

through a remote research center, Shepard finds an alien queen of a species long thought extinct—a species that once waged war across the galaxy. Does Shepard allow the queen to escape with her eggs to find a new home where the species can potentially regroup to launch another attack, or does Shepard kill the last remaining queen and destroy all her eggs to eliminate the species forever, ultimately committing genocide against the Rachni? All these decisions have drastic consequences for the fate of the galaxy, but the decision reactionary fans were most angry about following the release of the video game *Mass Effect* (2007) was whether Shepard had sex with men or women.

The video game industry is one of the fastest growing and most lucrative sectors in the US economy. While there were simple video games like tic tac toe as early as 1950, what has been referred to as the first computer gaming software, *Spacewar!*, was released in 1962, with Atari releasing *Pong* (1972) a decade later.<sup>504</sup> Since then, video game production has skyrocketed, with over 1,000 games released just on the distribution service Steam each year since 2014.<sup>505</sup> In 2011, the video game industry was described as “about three-fifths the size of the film industry, counting DVD sales as well as box-office receipts,” but as of 2020, Stefan Hall reported that the video game market had annual revenues four times the size of the film industry.<sup>506</sup> In just 2021, Nintendo launched nearly 1,700 games for its consoles and Sony and Microsoft released 980 and 725 games for the PlayStation and Xbox, respectively—all significant increases from the year before.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Logan Wade Blizzard, “Born Free: Gaming Software’s Noncommercial Roots, 1975-1988,” PhD diss., (University of Pittsburgh, 2021), 53. Additionally, *Spacewar!* is a space combat game where two players play through a dogfight with spaceships, so there is a clear historical connection between video games and speculative fiction.

<sup>505</sup> “Number of Games Released on Steam Worldwide from 2004 to 2022,” Statista, September 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/552623/number-games-released-steam/>.

<sup>506</sup> “All the World’s a Game,” *Economist*, December 10, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2011/12/10/all-the-worlds-a-game>; Stefan Hall, “How COVID-19 is Taking Gaming and esports to the Next Level,” *World Economic Forum*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-taking-gaming-and-esports-next-level/>.

<sup>507</sup> Eddie Makuch, “Here’s How Many Video Games Released in 2021--And How Few Had Physical Editions,” *GameSpot*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/heres-how-many-video-games-released-in-2021-and-how-few-had-physical-editions/1100-6499333/>.

While these are the major consoles, video games have proliferated across platforms, with many AAA titles being produced by large studios with significant budgets, the independent gaming industry flourishing, and mobile games becoming increasingly popular and profitable.

Video games, a medium long tied to speculative fiction, are capable of transporting the player to “thousands of unique and exciting new worlds,” but too often “the marketplace for games is thought to belong to only a narrow sliver of young straight white male hardcore gaming enthusiasts.”<sup>508</sup> Perhaps more so than even the typical speculative fiction fan, there is a stereotype held among many straight, white, male gamers and, more importantly, by many game studios of what video game fans look and act like—a stereotype reinforced by depictions of gamers in media like *Grandma’s Boy* (2006), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), *Pixels* (2015), and many others.<sup>509</sup> The assumption that video game players are almost exclusively heterosexual, white men means that AAA games with massive budgets devoted to their development and marketing tend to exclude character identities that do not align with their supposed audience.<sup>510</sup> It is not only the game content that is impacted by these assumptions, but also the accepted identity of other “gamers” by video game fans.<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 91.

<sup>509</sup> The assumption that fans of video games and fans of speculative fiction at large fit a narrow conception portrayed in various media brings to mind Nadine Hubbs’s argument about queer country music fans. Hubbs details how country fans are generally stereotyped as heterosexual, working class US Americans, but, in reality, the fanbase (and artists) is much more diverse. While Hubbs writes about country music fans and this chapter focuses on video game fans, the connection between the assumptions of fans’ identities is important to bear in mind. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>510</sup> In this chapter, I primarily focus on straight, white, male video game players and Western video game studios, but it is important to note that there are stereotypes regarding Asian and Asian American gamers as well. For more, see Christopher B. Patterson, “Asian Americans and Digital Games” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2018); Thien-bao Thuc Phi, “Game Over: Asian Americans and Video Game Representation,” *Transformative Works and Culture* 2 (2009).

<sup>511</sup> As Adrienne Shaw demonstrates, not all video game fans or even video game players identify as “gamers.” The term “gamer” is loaded with ideological baggage, not only tied to identity but also to emotional identification. As such, I use video game “fan” and/or “player” in this chapter unless referring to a self-identified “gamer.” “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2011): 28-44.

As evidenced by controversies like GamerGate (discussed in Chapter Two), there has been clear resistance to women as designers, critics, and even players in the video game community. Mia Consalvo has described it as a “toxic gamer culture,” where there is a seemingly normalized pattern of misogynistic behaviors and language usage that manifests as “patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position.”<sup>512</sup> A clear example of gaming culture’s misogyny is how competitive gamer and popular Twitch streamer Aris Bakhtanians (also known as “AvoidingThePuddle”) claimed that fighting game series such as *Street Fighter* (1987-present) and *Tekken* (1994-present) and sexual harassment are “one and the same thing”—that sexual harassment “is part of [the fighting video game] culture” and it would be “ethically wrong” to alter his or anyone else’s behaviors to be more inclusive to female players.<sup>513</sup> This belief is not restricted to Bakhtanians, as Consalvo argues that the rage expressed by many video game players over the increased presence of non-male, non-white, and non-heterosexual players can be attributed to sexist, racist, and homophobic beliefs as well as “fears about the changing nature of the game industry.”<sup>514</sup> These are the same fears evidenced in so many reactionary controversies in the speculative fiction community and beyond—these presumed changes threaten the status quo and now reactionaries’ privileged identities might not be the only ones catered to. Yet, as Elizabeth Sandifer argues, video gaming has “since the heyday of the NES [the Nintendo Entertainment System, released in 1983], in point of fact included countless women and minorities in its tens of millions of players, and currently shows a clear majority of women among console gamers.”<sup>515</sup> As

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<sup>512</sup> Mia Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology* 1 (2012).

<sup>513</sup> Quoted in Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*, 27. For more on Bakhtanians’s argument and the backlash to it, see Kirk Hamilton, “Competitive Gamer’s Inflammatory Comments Spark Sexual Harassment Debate,” Kotaku, February 28, 2012, <http://kotaku.com/5889066/competitive-gamers-inflammatorycomments-spark-sexual-harassment-debate?tag=fightinggames>.

<sup>514</sup> Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture.”

<sup>515</sup> Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Scotts Valley, CA: Eruditorum Press, 2017), 201

such, like many reactionaries, this subset of video game fans are clinging to an imagined past of video games—one that does not accurately reflect reality. Even so, there is an assumption among many fans and players that gaming culture, particularly in the US, is (and according to reactionaries *should be*) dominated by white, heterosexual men.

This vitriol is not limited to women, as Bo Ruberg argues that just as “toxic gamer culture has lashed out against women, it has also aimed its attacks at queer people.”<sup>516</sup> Much has been written about how common anti-LGBTQ language is among players in online settings, where calling someone gay is used to insult another player’s skill and/or to establish their own masculinity and gamer credentials.<sup>517</sup> Despite the casual homophobia in player communication, many heterosexual players argue that sexuality has no place in video games. When studios such as Blizzard and Riot Games announced their games *Overwatch* (2016-present) and *League of Legends* (2009-present), respectively, would add gay characters, there was fan backlash because some fans felt the inclusions would impact their escape from the “real world.”<sup>518</sup> The potential presence of queer characters would lessen their enjoyment because, as they argued, games should be escapist fantasies and “just for fun.” This argument, of course, ignores that video games have long been implicitly heterosexual, as I explain further in the next section. By insisting that characters’ (and players’) non-heteronormative sexualities should be hidden, these fans are

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<sup>516</sup> Bonnie Ruberg, “Straightwashing *Undertale*: Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 28 (2018): 1.3.

<sup>517</sup> Alexis Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in *World of Warcraft*,” *Games and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2013): 77-97; Crispin Thurlow, “Naming the ‘Outsider Within’: Homophobic Pejoratives and Verbal Abuse of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual High-School Pupils,” *Journal of Adolescence* 24 (2001): 25-38; John Vanderhoef, “Casual Threats: The Feminization of Video Games,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>518</sup> Tony Brown, “Reaction to LGBT Characters in *Overwatch*,” GameSpace, March 2, 2021, <https://www.gamespace.com/all-articles/news/reaction-to-lgbt-characters-in-overwatch/>.

implying that “LGBTQ communities should maintain a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy for the heteronormative majority.”<sup>519</sup>

Despite the increased frequency of homophobic fan backlashes in the past decade, there has been less attention paid to the increase of queer content and representation in video games than there has for the representation in literature, film, and television. This difference likely stems from the fact that video games are often not taken seriously, and, thus, “representation in games is viewed as inconsequential and fewer people are invested in demanding diversity in the texts.”<sup>520</sup> Yet, this line of thinking ignores four important points. First, just like other media, video games are encoded with ideologies and those ideologies can influence their audiences.<sup>521</sup> Second, video games are not static texts that can or should be read for problematic or non-problematic content. Rather, the discourse that surrounds games—game reviews as well as the communication of players during cooperative or competitive online sessions—“are just as much a part of the game as its images, gameplay mechanics, and narrative.”<sup>522</sup> Third, video games provide the consumer with a different experience than film, television, or literature. Players are not only exposed to difference through observation, but through an interactive experience with a character they control and often with whom they identify as an extension of themselves. Finally, even if some fans and players claim that games should be “just for fun” fantasies, that does not make them resistant to

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<sup>519</sup> Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games,” 87.

<sup>520</sup> Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer?”, 39.

<sup>521</sup> Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Form & Contexts* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); David J. Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 83-88.

<sup>522</sup> Lisa Nakamura, “‘It’s a [N\*\*\*\*\*] in Here! Kill the [N\*\*\*\*\*]!’: User-Generated Media Campaigns Against Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in Digital Games” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies: Media Studies Futures, Volume VI*, ed. Kelly Gates (New York: Blackwell, 2013), 3. See also, Christopher A. Paul, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design and Play* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

criticism. Rather, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation and as Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg so eloquently put it, “fantasy is always already political.”<sup>523</sup>

While my previous two chapters largely focus on a controversies surrounding one organization or franchise, with this chapter I turn to two highly successful AAA video game series: *Mass Effect* from the studio BioWare and *The Last of Us* from Naughty Dog. Following the release of the first entry in each series, both were met with reactionary fan controversies where fans’ vitriol centered on the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in a speculative fiction video game. The comparison between how BioWare and Naughty Dog dealt with the controversies is important to consider, as the two companies took very different approaches in crafting the games’ sequels to respond to the reactionary fans. In this chapter, I first detail a history of LGBTQ content in video games. This history lays the groundwork not only for how games have represented queer characters and content but for how fan communities have historically responded to their inclusion. Second, I turn to the controversy following the release of *Mass Effect*. While Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper have written about the response of fans who defended the game from the criticism that appeared on Fox News,<sup>524</sup> I instead turn to the rhetoric of those who *agreed* with the criticism and expanded upon it. This fan backlash provoked a response of perceived shame in BioWare creatives, causing them to change their plans for the sequel to appease these homophobic fans. Third, I illustrate how following the outcry of reactionary fans after the revelation that character Ellie from *The Last of Us* (2013) is lesbian, Naughty Dog responded by doubling down on her identity in the sequel and included further content that challenged the seemingly compulsory

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<sup>523</sup> Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, “Introduction: Imagining Queer Game Studies” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xxi.

<sup>524</sup> Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper, “Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches: Fan Responses to the *Mass Effect* News Debacle,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17, no. 3 (2011): 287–305.

heterosexuality of video games. Naughty Dog's response to fans demonstrates the affect of pride in the face of reactionaries' attempts at evoking shame. Through these case studies, I use the producers' responses to these reactionary controversies to illuminate not only the affective organizing principles of reactionaries but also possible responses that might occur when the demands of reactionaries are either satiated or denied.

## 5.2 The Historical Presence/Absence of Queerness in Video Games

Many video game scholars and journalists describe video game culture as predominantly white, heterosexual, and male. Similar to early fan studies scholars' findings being influenced by the fandoms of which they were a part, Shaw argues that "what researchers play affects their investigations as they often study the types of games they enjoy."<sup>525</sup> Due to this, academics and journalists may choose games and game communities they are familiar with while overlooking other games that could indicate a different trend. As Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem demonstrate, without properly historicizing video game trends, any claims of industry developments lack empirical grounding.<sup>526</sup> This grounding is an ongoing process as Shaw and her collaborators have created an archive of LGBTQ content in video games that, as of this writing, dates back to the 1976 game *Bunnies and Burrows*.<sup>527</sup> Before developing the archive, Shaw argued that most video

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<sup>525</sup> Adrienne Shaw, "What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010): 411.

<sup>526</sup> Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem, "Where is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, and Queer Content in Digital Games," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 3878.

<sup>527</sup> For more on the archive, see Bonnie Ruberg, "Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw," *Camera Obscura* 95, no. 2 (2017): 164-73; Adrienne Shaw, "What's Next?: The LGBTQ Video Game Archive," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 1 (2017): 88-94; Shaw and Friesem, "Where Is the Queerness in Games?," 3877-3889.



games were historically heteronormative, either implicitly or explicitly.<sup>528</sup> In an interview with Ruberg after the archive went public, however, Shaw stated that, “People’s understanding of game culture, if they are not inside it, is that it is homophobic, transphobic, and awful. Some aspects definitely are, but the games themselves are more nuanced.”<sup>529</sup>

Before continuing the idea of gaming culture being homophobic, transphobic, and awful, it is worthwhile to look at how video games have traditionally represented sexuality. Even with Shaw’s argument that the games themselves are more nuanced, heterosexuality is implicit and even compulsory in many video game narratives, which brings to mind Adrienne Rich’s theory of “compulsory heterosexuality.” In Rich’s theorization, compulsory heterosexuality describes the way in which heterosexuality is enforced in patriarchal society. Women, according to Rich, are assumed to have a “sexual preference” for men but that, in reality, heterosexuality is no more “natural” than homosexuality is.<sup>530</sup> Rather, compulsory heterosexuality is a patriarchal structure that aims to “enforce women’s total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men.”<sup>531</sup> While Rich’s writing is primarily focused on lesbianism, later scholarship expanded the concept to be applicable to other non-heterosexual sexualities.<sup>532</sup> Sara Ahmed describes compulsory heterosexuality more generally as “the assumption that a body ‘must’ orient itself towards some objects and not others, objects that are secured as ideal through the fantasy of *difference*.”<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Adrienne Shaw, “Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games,” *Games and Culture* 4 (2009): 228-253.

<sup>529</sup> Ruberg, “An Interview with Adrienne Shaw,” 166.

<sup>530</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980),” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 13.

<sup>531</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980),” 17.

<sup>532</sup> For examples of discussions regarding compulsory heterosexuality and homosexual men, see Debbie Epstein, Sarah O’Flynn, and David Telford, *Silenced Sexualities in Schools and Universities* (Stoke-on-Trent, England: Trentham Books, 2003); Deborah L. Tolman, Renée Spencer, Myra Rosen-Reynoso, Michelle V. and Porche, “Sowing the Seeds of Violence in Heterosexual Relationships: Early Adolescents Narrate Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Social Issues* 59, no. 1 (2003): 159-78.

<sup>533</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 145 (my italics).

Many video games have historically been built around compulsory heterosexuality through their narratives, characters, and gameplay. In her chapter on presentations of sexuality in video games, Consalvo analyzes the 1981 game *Donkey Kong* to demonstrate how heterosexuality while “peripheral to the actual gameplay” is implicit to the game.<sup>534</sup> The narrative of *Donkey Kong* was originally based on the love triangle from the cartoon *Popeye the Sailor* (1933-1957), with the idea being that the player would control Popeye as he sought to rescue his girlfriend Olive Oyl from the hulking villain Bluto. When the Nintendo designers, Gunpei Yokoi and Shigeru Miyamoto, could not secure the rights to the *Popeye* characters, they reworked the game’s narrative so that Bluto became the giant gorilla Donkey Kong, Popeye became a carpenter originally called Jumpman (who, when the game was released in the US, became a plumber named Mario), and Olive Oyl first became an unnamed woman, then Mario’s initial girlfriend Pauline (who was replaced in later games with Princess Peach).<sup>535</sup> The gameplay featured Donkey Kong throwing barrels at Jumpman/Mario as Jumpman/Mario climbed ladders and girders to reach Pauline, who was held captive by Donkey Kong.

*Donkey Kong* is notable for a number of reasons. First, *Donkey Kong* was the first video game in which the designers wrote the story before designing the gameplay, which started the trend of more narrative-driven games.<sup>536</sup> Second, *Donkey Kong* introduced what Rusel Demaria refers to as the “save the princess” or “damsel in distress” theme in video games, where a man must save a princess/damsel/woman, with whom he becomes or already is romantically involved.<sup>537</sup> This theme recurs in later Miyamoto games such as the *Legend of Zelda* (1986-

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<sup>534</sup> Mia Consalvo, “Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games” in *The Video Game Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 172.

<sup>535</sup> Rus McLaughlin, “IGN Presents: The History of Super Mario Bros,” IGN, September 14, 2010, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/09/14/ign-presents-the-history-of-super-mario-bros>.

<sup>536</sup> McLaughlin, “The History of Super Mario Bros.”

<sup>537</sup> Rusel Demaria, *High Score! Expanded: An Illustrated History of Electronic Games, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (New York: CRC Press, 2019), 86.

present) and *Prince of Persia* (1989-present) series as well as other video game series like *King's Quest* (1984-2016), *Dragon Quest* (1986-present), and *Fire Emblem* (1990-present). Third, and perhaps most notably, removing the *Popeye* IP from the game meant that the player had no familiarity with the characters, but, as Consalvo argues, "it was presumed that a 'rescue the princess' theme was sufficient back-story to explain why someone would want to dodge barrels and climb ladders."<sup>538</sup> Ultimately, this proved true, as *Donkey Kong* was hugely successful, launching the career of Miyamoto and the video game franchises of Donkey Kong and Mario.

The massive popularity of the game and the implicit heterosexual theme of a man rescuing his girlfriend proved influential to how future video game narratives handled sexuality. Just looking at the *Super Mario* franchise (1985-present), the games are largely about Mario going through a series of worlds and tasks to find and rescue Princess Peach, who is often kidnapped by the villainous Bowser. Even when the roles are switched and a game features a female protagonist, she is frequently sexualized and heterosexual, as Jane Pinckard illustrates with Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series (1996-present). Croft is a strong, smart archeologist but rather than emphasizing those qualities, the game art and advertising prominently focus on her breasts, cargo shorts, and guns—turning her into a "sex kitten" with the "brazen sensuality of a pinup queen."<sup>539</sup> While most games do not present Croft as having a love interest, she has been romantically linked with male treasure hunter Chase Carver in various games and comic books as well as with a range of men in the various *Tomb Raider* film adaptations (2001, 2003, 2018).<sup>540</sup> Even beyond popular

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<sup>538</sup> Consalvo, "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances," 172.

<sup>539</sup> Jane Pinckard, "Genderplay: Successes and Failures in Character Designs for Videogames," *Game Girl Advance*, April 16, 2003, <https://www.gamegirladvance.com/2003/04/genderplay-successes-and-failures-in-character-designs-for-videogames.html>.

<sup>540</sup> According to Aimee Hart, in the 2020 comic adaptation *Tomb Raider: Inferno*, Croft was meant to kiss and begin a relationship with female character Sam Nishimura, but the kiss was changed to a platonic hug before release, keeping Croft's romantic relationships, as of this writing, exclusively with men. "Tomb Raider: Inferno Originally Had Lara and Sam End Up Together," *Gayming*, July 21, 2020, <https://gaymingmag.com/2020/07/tomb-raider-inferno-originally-had-lara-and-sam-end-up-together/>.

game series like *Super Mario* and *Tomb Raider*, many video games following the release of *Donkey Kong* often featured (white) heterosexual male protagonists with a sexualized female love interest—typically one who needs to be rescued or protected, such as in *Dragon’s Lair* (1983), *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), and *Resident Evil 4* (2005).<sup>541</sup>

As of this writing, Shaw’s LGBTQ Video Game Archive contains entries on 1,286 games released between 1976 and 2020, and while this number seems significant, it is worth remembering that Nintendo released nearly 1,700 games in 2021 alone and that the archive catalogs *any* instance of LGBTQ content, not just so-called “positive” representation or even significant representation. While some AAA game studios have realized the importance of increased LGBTQ representation in their games,<sup>542</sup> representation is not a universal positive, as it can often present marginalized groups in stereotypical and problematic ways.<sup>543</sup>

As an illustration, the LGBTQ Video Game Archive has entries for six of the games from the *Leisure Suit Larry* series (1987-2020).<sup>544</sup> The series follows the misadventures of the middle-aged Larry Laffer as he attempts to seduce young women. There are five references attached to the 1993 game *Leisure Suit Larry 6*. The first is titled “Gary” and describes the inclusion of Gary Fairy, a gay towel attendant who attempts to flirt with Larry. If Larry flirts back, it leads to what the archive refers to as the “Gay Game Over,” where Larry gives up chasing women and gets together with Gary. If a player does this, a textbox appears on the screen with the title “Let’s Pick

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<sup>541</sup> Teresa Lynch, Jessica E. Tompkins, Irene I. van Driel, and Niki Fritz, “Sex, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years,” *Journal of Communication* 66 (2016): 564-584.

<sup>542</sup> Eddie Makuch, “‘It Can’t Be All White Males,’ EA Exec Says about Diversity in Gaming,” Gamespot, September 5, 2015, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/it-cant-be-all-white-males-ea-exec-says-about-dive/1100-6430348/>.

<sup>543</sup> Robert Schwartz, “‘The’ Problems of Representation,” *Social Research* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 1047-64; Corinne Mitsuye Sugino, “Multicultural Redemption: *Crazy Rich Asians* and the Politics of Representation,” *Lateral* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2019).

<sup>544</sup> “Leisure Suit Larry Series,” LGBTQ Game Archive, [lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/game-series/leisure-suit-larry/](http://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/game-series/leisure-suit-larry/).

Out Curtains...” and the text reads, “And as Larry and Gary Fairy float off into the sunset together, we all think, ‘What an ignominious end to a sterling career as the ultimate swinging single!’” The ending text aims to convey how humiliating and embarrassing it is that Larry should end up with Gary Fairy, a man (and a man with the last name that is often a derogatory term for a gay man, no less), instead of a young woman. Additionally, upon receiving this ending, the player is presented with two options: “restore” (to a previous save) and “try again,” where you play through the game again. In order to “successfully” complete the game, the player must play Larry as a heterosexual character. With Gary’s inclusion, we can see how Shaw’s archive, while demonstrating that LGBTQ content has been present in at least 1,286 games released between 1976 and 2020, only *catalogs* the content. It does not pass judgment on the “positive” or “negative” value of these representations; rather, the archive enables scholars to take the data and make their own arguments about the content.

While these are only a few examples of video games, along with the archive, they illustrate the long history of enforced heteronormativity in video games. Lisa Nakamura claims that “few media are as quintessentially personal as videogames.”<sup>545</sup> Video games grant players agency in controlling the characters, and, even when the story is the same (i.e., not influenced by player decisions), players may approach games in ways that most appeal to them. Yet, this agency typically does not include playing characters as anything but heterosexual. In fact, the gaming industry has historically tended to overlook its LGBTQ audience,<sup>546</sup> either not including LGBTQ content at all (as in *Donkey Kong*), making LGBTQ content the butt of jokes (like in the *Leisure Suit Larry* series), or making it optional and therefore skippable (as seen in my next examples).

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<sup>545</sup> Nakamura, “User-Generated Media Campaigns Against Racism,” 3.

<sup>546</sup> Tereza Krobová, Ondřej Moravec, Jaroslav Švelch, “Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink: Queer Playing in a Heteronormative Game Culture,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 9, no. 3 (2015).

One example of queer content being included but also being skippable is *Fallout 2* (1998). *Fallout 2* is a role-playing game set in the year 2241, 164 years after a nuclear war led to the world largely being a wasteland. In the game, the player creates a character that can be either male or female and embarks on a journey to find a “Garden of Eden Creation Kit” for their community. The player character can encounter the siblings Miria and Davin, a woman and man, respectively. Regardless of the player character’s gender, their character can have sex with and marry either sibling. While *Fallout 2* was the first game to feature same-sex marriage, this was completely optional.<sup>547</sup> If the player does not attempt to initiate a relationship with one of the siblings or they only do with the sibling of the opposite gender, the siblings’ bisexuality is not revealed. Queerness can also appear with other non-playable characters (NPCs) that the main character can “romance” (perhaps a generous term for it within the context of the game), but it is again optional. Other NPCs, like the woman Amanda and the man Joshua, are in heterosexual marriages, indicating that while queerness is optional, heterosexuality is not.

In another, more extreme example, Consalvo demonstrates the optional nature of queer content in video games through her analysis of *The Sims* (2000)—a computer game where players fill virtual neighborhoods with characters called “Sims” that they create and control. The goal of *The Sims* is not so much to “beat” the game, as the game does not have an explicit narrative. Instead, it is a life simulation, where players design Sims then have these characters live a life, complete with eating food, sleeping, showering, finding careers, and forming relationships with other Sims. These Sims can have a variety of body shapes, skin tones, and sexualities, but, importantly, they do not have to. A player can create all-white, all-heterosexual neighborhoods for

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<sup>547</sup> Yannick LeJacq, “A Brief History of Gay Marriage in Video Games,” Kotaku, June 26, 2015, <https://kotaku.com/a-brief-history-of-gay-marriage-in-video-games-1714251913>.

their Sims, where “gayness can be coded out of existence.”<sup>548</sup> Like in *Fallout 2*, queerness can be present in *The Sims*, challenging the idea that video game characters *must* be heterosexual, but it can also be completely avoided in if players choose for it to be. Heterosexuality, however, is coded into the game with premade Sims such as the Goth family—where Mortimer and Bella Goth are married with a daughter Cassandra—and notably the tutorial of the game features premade Sims Bob and Betty Newbie, a married man and woman. While heterosexuality already exists in *Fallout 2* and *The Sims*, queerness does not unless players *actively seek* to include it.<sup>549</sup>

While *Fallout 2* and *The Sims* do present options for players to create queer characters, many other games do not. Alexis Pulos illustrates that while the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (2004-present) is a fantasy game that “has the potential to be queer or even to avoid gender or sexual associations,” the game’s narrative constructs “storylines and fictitious digital bodies using a heteronormative framework.”<sup>550</sup> Pulos argues that “male characters are stereotypically hypermasculine and female characters are hypersexualized,” fitting with more historical portrayals of men and women in video games.<sup>551</sup> I discuss the discourse around queer content in *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPG games in the next section, but games like these—games where the players are in a fantasy world with control over what their characters look and act like, yet are still restricted by the characters’ and story quests’ encoded heteronormativity—illustrate how video games are rooted in compulsory heterosexuality. From as early as *Donkey Kong*, games would force players to assume the role of a heterosexual character and infrequently provided any queer content that was not a portrayed as

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<sup>548</sup> Consalvo, “Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances,” 188.

<sup>549</sup> The idea of the tacit inclusion of a normative (white) heterosexuality versus an active effort to consider queerness as existing calls to mind José Esteban Muñoz’s discussion of queer people of color and their positions outside the dominant racial and sexual ideology in *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

<sup>550</sup> Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games,” 79.

<sup>551</sup> Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games,” 79.

a joke or was not completely avoidable. While Shaw's archive and industry journalists have indicated this trend is changing with games such as *Undertale* (2015), *Celeste* (2018), and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) featuring non-optional LGBTQ content and even protagonists, much of the video game industry and even the video game fan community has historically been built around catering to heterosexual gamers and reinforcing an ideology of compulsory heterosexuality.

### 5.3 It's Just Gaming Culture, Bro

While compulsory heterosexuality has been historically present in many video games, heteronormativity is also reinforced through the rhetoric of video game fans. As Graeme Kirkpatrick argues, gaming discourse produces a sense of normativity, to the extent “that there is a right and a wrong way to participate in gaming.”<sup>552</sup> This normativity extends beyond the types of games one is allowed to play—as “casual” or “cozy” games (games that have lower stakes narratively and feature limited-to-no combat) are frequently deemed “too feminine” and/or “too gay” for “real” gamers—to the way one interacts with other players to even one's own identity.<sup>553</sup> While not about sexuality, the policing of “normal” in video game culture is exemplified in the opening of Lisa Nakamura's chapter on media campaigns against racism, sexism, and homophobia. Nakamura begins her chapter with an account of UFC champion Quinton “Rampage” Jackson's experience playing *Halo 2* (2004) online, where, upon hearing Jackson's voice, his own teammates would say, “It's a [n\*\*\*\*\*] in here! Kill the [n\*\*\*\*\*]!” As Nakamura illustrates, “The

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<sup>552</sup> Graeme Kirkpatrick, “Making Games Normal: Computer Gaming Discourse in the 1980s,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1440.

<sup>553</sup> Vanderhoef, “Casual Threats”; Agata Wazkiewicz and Martyna Bakun, “Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 3 (2020): 225-40.



racism that Jackson experienced while playing did not originate from the programmed experience of the game but, rather, from its players. It was not the game *Halo* that offended through negative representations of African Americans or other minorities; rather, it was other players.”<sup>554</sup> Jackson’s own teammates would hurt their chances at winning the match and kill his character just because Jackson did not fit their accepted image of a “bro gamer”—a white, heterosexual man.<sup>555</sup>

One reason for the conception that video game players are primarily white, heterosexual men, despite the historical evidence to prove otherwise, is the presence of these identities in games. Drawing from Vincent Price and David Tewksbury’s conception of “knowledge store” and “social objects,” Dmitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory argue that “social objects which are not chronically accessible will be recalled less often. Demographic groups of people who are not represented are slowly rendered invisible by virtue of their relative inaccessibility in the knowledge store.”<sup>556</sup> Their survey of social objects in video games indicated that white, adult men were over-represented compared to the actual US population while women, children, the elderly, and racial minority groups were underrepresented.<sup>557</sup> This disparity is even greater in more popular games, particularly AAA titles that have millions of players. The overrepresentation of white men, combined with the implicit and compulsory heterosexuality of many video games, leads to the idea that video game players are primarily “bro gamers,” and thus must fit this archetype to participate in the gaming community.

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<sup>554</sup> Nakamura, “User-Generated Media Campaigns Against Racism,” 2.

<sup>555</sup> Joe Baxter-Webb, “The ‘Bro Gamer’: An (Imaginary?) Intruder in Videogame Culture” in *Mapping the Digital: Cultures and Territories of Play*, eds. Lindsey Joyve and Brian Quinn (Oxfordshire, England: Brill, 2016), 51-64.

<sup>556</sup> Dmitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory, “The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games,” *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (2009): 821. See also, Vincent Price and David Tewksbury, “News Value and Public Opinion: A Theoretical Account of Media Priming and Framing” in *Progress in Communication Sciences, Volume 13*, eds. George A. Barnett and Franklin J. Boster (New York: Ablex, 1997), 173-212.

<sup>557</sup> Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, “The Virtual Census,” 828.

It must be noted, however, that while much of the discussion so far has cast video games and video game communities as sexist, racist, and/or homophobic, this is not always the case. Video games have the potential to challenge players' ideas regarding concepts like masculinity, racial stereotypes, and parenthood.<sup>558</sup> The design of player-influenced narrative games, such as Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series (2012-2019), BioWare's *Dragon Age* series (2009-present), and Larian's *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) make players think more critically about their in-game choices, as their decisions can have both immediate and long-term consequences on the narrative and the characters within the storyworld. These video games can make players play more empathetically and even aid players in unlearning hegemonic gaming practices.<sup>559</sup> Kristina Bell's article on online discussion forums for Telltale Games reveals that players of these games rejected many of the communication styles associated with "toxic gaming culture" and created a much more accepting and inclusive community for frequent posters.<sup>560</sup> Beyond message boards, video games that feature an online component where players interact with other players, either competitively or cooperatively, can actually "encourage [their] players to leave behind their normative assumption[s] and engage with other players and the game through a transgressive lens," though this is often not the case, as seen with Jackson's experience playing *Halo 2*.<sup>561</sup> The question, then, is if video games have the ability to challenge preconceptions about gender, race,

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<sup>558</sup> Steven Conway, "Poisonous Pantheons: *God of War* and Toxic Masculinity," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 8 (2020): 943-61; Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012): 401-16; Paul Barrett, "White Thumbs, Black Bodies: Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Fantasies in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2006): 95-119; Gerald Voorhees, "Daddy Issues: Constructions of Fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *BioShock Infinite*," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, no. 9 (2016).

<sup>559</sup> Kristina Bell, Nicholas Taylor, and Christopher Kampe, "Of Headshots and Hugs: Challenging Hypermasculinity through *The Walking Dead* Play," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, no. 7 (2015).

<sup>560</sup> Kristina Bell, "'I Am Sorry if I Have Ever Given Any of You Guys Any Crap': The Community Practices Within Telltale Games' Online Forums," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 3 (2021): 225-239.

<sup>561</sup> Pulos, "Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games," 81.

and sexuality, why are video game communities considered so white, so male, so heterosexual, and, really, so toxic?

While there are myriad potential explanations, one reason for the violent and exclusionary behaviors toward non-heterosexual players is that the compulsory heterosexuality of video games extends to the online communities for the games as well. That is not to say that a person cannot contribute to online communities if they are not white, heterosexual, or a cisgender man, but that there has been a push both from reactionary fans and companies to keep other identities hidden. For example, in 2006, Blizzard, the company behind *World of Warcraft*, stopped players from creating an LGBTQ-friendly guild in the game. Guilds are in-game associations where players form a group that complete quests together, making things such as in-game raids more manageable. Guilds also serve to create a social atmosphere, where players can connect with each other and communicate with just guild members rather than broadcasting their communication to players more widely. Upon posting the proposed credo of the LGBTQ-friendly guild—“peace and unity without judgments or intolerance of others, whatever they may be”—administrators contacted Sara Andrews, the guild’s creator, to inform her that she violated the game’s terms of service, which stated that language that “insultingly refers to any aspect of sexual orientation pertaining to themselves or other players” is banned.<sup>562</sup> When Andrews persisted with her attempts to create the guild, Blizzard went so far as to threaten to ban Andrews from the game, though they cast this threat as protecting Andrews from other players, saying that “topics related to sensitive real-world subjects—such as religious, sexual or political preference, for example—have had a tendency to result in communication between players that often breaks down into harassment.”<sup>563</sup> Homophobic

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<sup>562</sup> Pulos, “Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games,” 78.

<sup>563</sup> Daniel Terdiman, “Online Game Warns Gay-Lesbian Guild,” ZDNet, January 31, 2006, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/online-game-warns-gay-lesbian-guild/>.

slurs are common in online video game discourse and attacks against LGBTQ players are anything but infrequent. For just this reason, BioWare briefly banned the words “gay” and “lesbian” from their discussion forums—claiming their goal was to crack down on derogatory uses of the terms. While the intention of protecting players may appear noble, rather than taking action to root out homophobic players and posters that attack LGBTQ players, Blizzard and BioWare’s decisions made it more difficult for queer players to connect with one another and forced them to conceal their identities so as not to disrupt the heteronormative status quo.

As mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, there are players who believe that video games should be “just for fun” fantasies where (non-hetero)sexuality is not mentioned/does not exist. In 2009, following the requests of many fans that queer content to be included in BioWare’s newly announced *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011), reactionary posters pushed back, saying that a gaming forum was not the place to bring up social issues. The poster indelible went as far to say, “If people start attacking gays and lesbians, it is simply because you have drawn attention to the issue which—in all reality—didn’t need attention drawn to it within this community. ... [This] certainly isn’t the place to encourage some kind of social change, mainly because many of us could give a flying hoot who or what you sleep with.”<sup>564</sup> Posts like indelible’s blame queer players for bringing sexuality into games and/or digital spaces (ignoring how historically implicit heterosexuality has been in video games), then argue that if LGBTQ players suffer attacks from other players, it is their own fault, as no one *needed* to reveal their sexuality. indelible’s post claims that many of the posters don’t “give a flying hoot who or what you sleep with,” but that is clearly not the case, otherwise there would be no debate as to whether there could be an LGBTQ-friendly guild or if LGBTQ content should be included in games. Rather, there is a belief among certain

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<sup>564</sup> Quoted in Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*, 80.

players that all players are and should be heterosexual. As Megan Condis argues, censoring references of sexualities “simply reinforce[s] the assumption of universal straightness among gamers and forum dwellers.”<sup>565</sup> The repression of any expression of queerness does not do anything to help those of other identities find more fulfillment or representation in digital spaces or games—it only provides comfort for homophobic players.

The push for a just-for-fun fantasy where only certain identities are allowed is not an atypical move for reactionaries, in terms of video game communities and beyond. While game developers have largely catered to white, heterosexual men with their games, when Nintendo was developing its Wii console, it decided to broaden its audience to include not only men but also older, female, and/or lapsed players.<sup>566</sup> White, heterosexual men took umbrage at this proposed development, as they believed the move was meant to exclude them and claimed that if Nintendo made games for women and older players, there would no longer be games for them. This logic is an extension of the reactionary rhetoric that believes any progress or adaptation for another identity is an attack on their own that I have discussed in previous chapters. While an unlikely comparison, the fan reaction to Nintendo’s plan for the Wii brings to mind the boycotts aimed at the restaurant chain Cracker Barrel. In 2022, Cracker Barrel announced on social media that they were adding sausage patties made by Impossible Foods, a manufacturer who creates plant-based substitutes for meat products, to their menu. Cracker Barrel was not replacing traditional sausage patties when they added “impossible sausages” to the menu; rather, they were catering to a group of people who had been unable to enjoy their restaurant previously. In response to Cracker Barrel’s announcement, there was a flood of comments, posts, and tweets where people claimed that they

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<sup>565</sup> Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*, 80. See also Jenny Sundén’s theory of “heterotextuality” in *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>566</sup> Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture.”

had lost respect for the once-great company (wanting to Make Cracker Barrel Great again) and accused Cracker Barrel of being “woke.” One Facebook user parodied the many the complaints by commenting on Cracker Barrel’s initial post, “Thanks Cracker Barrel now my family won’t be able to dine there because the troves of hippy stoner vegetarian lib cucks will now be invading my favorite chain restaurant and pushing their immoral commie lifestyle on me and my children”—with the comment receiving praise from other commenters who thought the post was satiric as well as those who thought it was genuine.<sup>567</sup>

Despite these boycotts and vitriolic posts, neither Nintendo nor Cracker Barrel intended to cease creating content/food for their more “traditional” consumers. There would still be ground meat sausage on Cracker Barrel’s menu, and Nintendo would continue producing the games that won them white, heterosexual, male fans originally. They simply planned to offer *more*. Importantly, the reactionaries ascribed a “woke” political agenda to these added items when, in reality, the decisions to include these options were likely driven by potential profits rather than any kind of “woke” ideological move to serve another identity. This capitalistic reasoning makes a certain sense, as Shaw has argued that a main reason for illustrating that there is a diverse group of people who play video games is that “groups are representable only insofar as they are marketable.”<sup>568</sup> If a studio thinks only white, heterosexual men play their games, they will only make games and only represent experiences that appeal to white, heterosexual men. Since the Wii proved successful, there has been a growing realization among studios that the audience is more diverse than originally believed. In recent years, games from Nintendo and other studios have started featuring more diverse characters, narratives, and mechanics.

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<sup>567</sup> Joel Enneking, “Thanks Cracker Barrel,” Facebook, August 3, 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/crackerbarrel/photos/a.207628002620308/5288633637853027/?comment\\_id=816550582670372&\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=R\\*F](https://www.facebook.com/crackerbarrel/photos/a.207628002620308/5288633637853027/?comment_id=816550582670372&__tn__=R*F)

<sup>568</sup> Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer?”, 33.

With these developments in mind, I now turn to a controversy bookended by Blizzard's banning of the LGBTQ-friendly guild in *World of Warcraft* and the arguments over if BioWare's forums were a place where sexuality should (or even could) be mentioned. With this section I look to the reactionary fan controversy surrounding the release of *Mass Effect* and its impact on the LGBTQ content in *Mass Effect 2*. From this controversy, I demonstrate how reactionaries aim to evoke fear and shame in those who threaten their supremacy in order to restore what they deem as correct.

## 5.4 BioWare's Shameful Reworking of *Mass Effect*

### 5.4.1 *Mass Effect* Makes the (Fox) News

The *Mass Effect* series was created by the company BioWare and follows the character Commander Shepard as she or he (the player chooses between female and male for the character's gender) gathers support from various alien species to fight back against the Reapers. A feature that made *Mass Effect* stand out from other speculative fiction video games when it premiered was how integral the player's choice was to the story.<sup>569</sup> Not only could a player choose Shepard's gender, skin tone, facial features, and background, but the players' narrative choices would impact the story and how other characters react to Shepard throughout the series. The narrative choices may be significant, like whether to kill the Rachni queen and commit genocide against her people or to set her free and possibly face the threat of another war in the future. Or the decisions might seem

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<sup>569</sup> Alex Dale, "Mass Effect Review," Computer and Video Games, November 19, 2007, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/175911/reviews/mass-effect-review/>.

trivial, like whether to bribe your way into a room or to fight your way in. These decisions, however, are meant to culminate in a different experience for each player, and this player-influenced narrative format was a key part of BioWare's storytelling even before *Mass Effect*, as it had previously been featured in BioWare games such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) and *Jade Empire* (2005).

The central choice upon which the reactionary controversies surrounding *Mass Effect* focused were the romantic relationships Shepard could have with NPCs. The controversy largely centered on the inclusion of a sex scene, as journalists exaggerated the scene's prominence and explicit nature, with the potential queer elements of the scene becoming the main focus for many homophobic anti-fans (the concept of the anti-fan is discussed in depth in Chapter Three). *Mass Effect* was released on November 20, 2007, and on January 11, 2008, Evan Moore posted an article on the conservative website CNS News (or the Catholic News Service, with their tagline being "The Right News. Right Now."), which decried and falsely characterized the sex scene in *Mass Effect*. Moore claimed that the game "allows the characters to engage in explicitly graphic sexual intercourse" and that "the storyline culminates in a cutscene in which the characters copulate in full digital nudity."<sup>570</sup> The article includes quotes by prominent conservatives such as Cathy Ruse, a senior fellow for legal studies at the Family Research Council, who claimed the game is "clearly marketed to minors" (despite it having an ESRB rating of "M" for "Mature"). The article also features a conversation with Bob Waliszewski, media specialist for the fundamentalist Protestant organization Focus on the Family, who criticized the game for going "so far as to allow homosexuality to be on par with heterosexuality."<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Evan Moore, "Sex in Video Game Makes Waves Through Industry," CNS News, July 7, 2008, <https://cnsnews.com/news/article/sex-video-game-makes-waves-through-industry>.

<sup>571</sup> Moore, "Sex in Video Game Makes Waves Through Industry."



Just two days after Moore's article, right-wing radio host Kevin McCullough posted on the politically conservative website Townhall that "'*Mass Effect*' can be customized to sodomize whatever, whoever, however, the game player wishes. With it's [sic] 'over the net' capabilities virtual orgasmic rape is just the push of a button away." He continued to say that the players (whom he characterizes as "universally male") could "custom design" the hair style, race, breast size, and overall body of the characters then watch "as the video game 'persons' hump in every form, format, multiple, gender-oriented possibility they [the player] can think of."<sup>572</sup> What is key in this post is not the continued misinformation that the player engages in a fully interactive sex simulation or the false claims that players can rape other players (an especially egregious lie, as there was no multiplayer element in the *Mass Effect* series until *Mass Effect 3* [2012], which released over four years after McCullough's post). Rather, it is the criticism that builds on that by Waliszewski: that the sex scene has every "gender-oriented possibility they can think of," specifically focusing on what McCullough later described as "lesbo-alien sex."<sup>573</sup>

In *Mass Effect*, there are two romantic options possible for Shepard. One is a human character of the opposite gender (either Ashley Williams for the male Shepard or Kaiden Alenko for the female Shepard), and the other is Liara T'Soni (Figure 6), an alien from the mono-gendered species known as the Asari. While the Asari are mono-gendered, they present in a way that is traditionally considered feminine: higher voices (the central Asari characters are voiced by actors who identify as women), smaller musculature, enlarged breasts and buttocks, and even head tentacles that look like a chic feminine haircut. Even more, Asaris are referred to as maidens,

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<sup>572</sup> Kevin McCullough, "The 'Sex-Box' Race for President," Townhall, January 13, 2008, [http://www.townhall.com/Columnists/KevinMcCullough/2008/01/13/the\\_sex-box\\_race\\_for\\_president?page=full&comments=true](http://www.townhall.com/Columnists/KevinMcCullough/2008/01/13/the_sex-box_race_for_president?page=full&comments=true).

<sup>573</sup> Kevin McCullough, "LIFE LESSONS: GAMER NERDS' 'RIGHTS' TO LESBO-ALIEN SEX!" Townhall, January 2008, <http://kevinmccullough.townhall.com/blog/g/ad4fece3-3a1e-42bd-8546-295599024191>.

matrons, then matriarchs as they age through their life cycle and the majority use she, her, and hers as pronouns. As such, there was umbrage, not just from McCullough and Waliszewki but from many anti-LGBTQ activists that through the inclusion female Shepard's (or FemShep as she has become popularly known) romantic/sexual relationship with Liara, *Mass Effect* was encouraging homosexual relationships. Many reactionary video game fans, long primed to believe video games were a space of implicit and enforced heterosexuality, agreed.<sup>574</sup>



**Figure 6. Liara T'Soni in *Mass Effect 3*.**

Of course, many of these anti-fans were likely unaware of the homophobic criticism just from Waliszewki and McCullough's complaints, which were confined to websites with generally smaller readerships. What really brought *Mass Effect* to the attention of anti-fans and anti-LGBTQ activists was when, on January 21, 2008, Fox News ran a segment on the controversy on *The Live*

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<sup>574</sup> Ed Nightingale, "Fans Launch Petition for LGBT+ Romance in Remastered Mass Effect After Previous Right-Wing Backlash," Pink News, April 9, 2021, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/04/09/mass-effect-petition-lgbt-romances-legendary-edition-remaster-bioware/>.

*Desk* (2006-2021) titled “SE’XBOX? New Video Game Shows Full Digital Nudity and Sex.” The segment featured host Martha MacCallum discussing *Mass Effect* with author Cooper Lawrence and video game journalist Geoff Keighley. Notably, while MacCallum uses similar rhetoric as Moore and McCullough, rather than an explicitly homophobic discussion regarding Shepard and Liara’s relationship, the focus of the segment is on the sex scene’s supposedly interactive nature, the alleged full digital nudity, and how the sexual content could impact children. Despite the lack of explicit anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, the segment proved to be affectively motivating for anti-fans, parent councils, and anti-LGBTQ activists. News media, like Fox News, are particularly well-suited to establishing and challenging affective regimes, as news reports can stimulate affective responses in their audience, including that of anger, fear, and shame.<sup>575</sup> While more viewers tune into Fox News than read CNS News or Townhall, the controversy likely gained the attention it did due to the fans who defended the game after the broadcast—another example of spotlight magnification, as described in Chapter Three. In the fan backlash, clips of the segment were shared widely on personal blogs, professional gaming websites, and on YouTube.

Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper’s article on the fan response illustrates how wide-reaching and, ultimately, how misogynistic the backlash was. Fans of the game targeted and harassed Lawrence, who made several criticisms of *Mass Effect* and video games in general—including that most people who play video games are adolescent boys, that *Mass Effect* and other video games portray women as objects, and that the main character in *Mass Effect* is a man that can have sex with as many female NPCs as the player desires—despite admitting on the broadcast

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<sup>575</sup> Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 9; Åsa Wettergren, “How Do We Know How They Feel?” in *Methods for Exploring Emotions*, eds. Helena Flam and Jochen Kleres (New York: Routledge, 2015), 115-24. For more on affective responses to news media, Fox News in particular, see Tobin Smith, *Foxocracy: Inside the Network’s Playbook of Tribal Warfare* (New York: Diversion, 2019).

that she had never played the game.<sup>576</sup> The article features a somewhat surprised tone that misogyny was so rampant in the fan communication, and the authors postulate that this reaction was different than fan activism, as the fans were “intent on supporting an object of interest through the selective destruction of what they deem obstacles to that object’s commercial success.”<sup>577</sup> As illustrated with the Rabid Puppies in Chapters Two, however, this kind of fan activism is typical from reactionary fans. *Mass Effect* and its development team have been described as “pretty progressive,” which may account for some of the authors’ surprise.<sup>578</sup> Yet, as Bell argues, “a gaming community is influenced by the game it surrounds, but it is not shaped entirely by the game”—a particularly relevant sentiment given the reactionary fans’ attachment to the at least relatively progressive games *Mass Effect* and *the Last of Us*.<sup>579</sup> It is important to note that Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper’s article focuses exclusively on fans who *disagreed* with Moore, MacCallum, and Lawrence’s criticism when, in reality, the controversy found many who agreed. In fact, the backlash exposed many people to the controversy and led to an anti-fan reaction that was loud/significant enough that BioWare ultimately altered their plans for *Mass Effect*’s sequel.

In 2008 when this controversy occurred, sites like 8chan, Gab.ai, and Parler did not yet exist and 4chan, Reddit, and Twitter were in their early years, so much of the communication by fans was sent directly to BioWare (just as the fans Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper discussed sent many of their messages directly to Fox News) or posted on company/game-specific discussion forums, making a thorough analysis of the fan communication itself less precise. Even turning to the forums and social media sites active at the time of the controversy does not turn up a significant

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<sup>576</sup> A common refrain among fans was that since you could play Shepard as a woman, *Mass Effect* could not be sexist, and while this does counter Lawrence’s claim about Shepard being exclusively a male character, historical evidence shows that female character-led games are just as susceptible to sexism as games with male protagonists.

<sup>577</sup> Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper, “Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches,” 302.

<sup>578</sup> Patricia Hernandez, “Report: Mass Effect 2 was Once a bit More Gay, but then Fox News Happened,” Polygon, January 22, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/22/22244546/mass-effect-2-romance-jack-pansexual-fox-news>.

<sup>579</sup> Bell, “I Am Sorry if I Have Ever Given Any of You Guys Any Crap,” 236.

amount of posts, as discussion forums delete older posts to avoid the cost of expanding servers and more problematic and offensive tweets and threads may be flagged and removed—an issue that influenced William Proctor’s and my separate readings of the #BlackStormtrooper controversy discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>580</sup> Instead, with the controversy established and clear evidence of reactionary tendencies in right-wing journalists and anti-fans, I now turn to BioWare’s response to the controversy.

#### **5.4.2 Shame in the Eleventh Hour**

Despite Electronic Arts, the publisher of *Mass Effect*, demanding a correction and apology from Fox News and Cooper Lawrence later recanting her criticism in a *New York Times* interview—saying of the sex scene in *Mass Effect*, “I’ve seen episodes of *Lost* [2004-2010] that are more sexually explicit”<sup>581</sup>—the controversy caused a great uproar at BioWare. Already at work on *Mass Effect 2* (2010), the company had planned for the newly introduced characters Jack (a female character) and Jacob (a male character) to be pansexual and bisexual, respectively. Brian Kindregan, the lead writer for Jack, explained that it was not until late in the development of the game that the production team shifted so Jack became exclusively a romance option for the male Shepard and Jacob a romance option only for FemShep. These changes occurred so late in the development process that many of Jack’s dialogue lines alluding to her previous relationships with men and women were left in the game, which caused confusion among players when Jack was only romanceable by a male Shepard. Kindregan claimed that “it wasn’t like some anti-gay person

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<sup>580</sup> Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper, “Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches,” 302

<sup>581</sup> Seth Schiesel, “Author Faults a Game, and Gamers Flame Back,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/26/arts/television/26mass.html>.

high up on the *Mass Effect 2* team [said], ‘we’re not going to have that,’” but rather that BioWare executives were attempting to minimize the criticism the sequel could receive from outspoken anti-fans, conservative authors, and news outlets such as Fox News.<sup>582</sup>

This reaction can be seen as a form of what I call *protective propagation*, where a norm is ultimately reinforced not through intolerance but through protective concern and the minimization of an imagined future violence. This violence could be physical violence but it could also include violence against one’s profits, such as is the case with BioWare. BioWare’s protective propagation could be cast as primarily financial, as while *Mass Effect* sold 1.6 million copies within six weeks, BioWare might have worried the sequel would perform worse if controversy hung over its release.<sup>583</sup> While BioWare’s protection of profits with *Mass Effect* may seem more selfish than when Blizzard attempted to stop the formation of an LGBTQ-friendly guild or when BioWare banned “gay” and “lesbian” from their discussion forums to “protect” their queer players, they are ultimately the same. None of the examples are explicitly driven by producer intolerance, but through their practices (be they seemingly selfish or altruistic) they reinforce the harmful norm. Due to this, I argue that BioWare’s protective propagation is driven by the affects of shame and fear (or at least the perception of them) and that the generation of shame and fear in others is vital to the affective economy of reactionaries.

Shame is considered a “negative affect” by scholars such as Silvan S. Tomkins, who contrasts it with other negative affects like fear. Fear and distress, for example, are described by Tomkins as “wounds inflicted from the outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego,”

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<sup>582</sup> Cian Maher, “Mass Effect 2’s Jack was Originally Pansexual, but Non-Straight Romances were Cut because of Fox News,” *The Gamer*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/mass-effect-2-jack-gay-pansexual-fox-news/>.

<sup>583</sup> James Brightman, “Xbox 360 Sells 17.7 Million, Halo 3 Reaches 8.1 Million,” *Game Daily*, January 3, 2008, <http://www.gamedaily.com/articles/news/xbox-360-sells-177-million-halo-3-reaches-81-million-18979/?biz=1>.

while shame is “an inner torment, a sickness of the soul.”<sup>584</sup> Sara Ahmed unpacks this explanation to posit that shame is an “intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels *about itself*.”<sup>585</sup> While Tomkins seems to imply that fear and distress originate from an outside source and penetrate the inside while shame is entirely internal, the difference is the *object* of fear and distress is external while the object of shame is oneself. While we are terrified and distressed about something outside ourselves, our shame is about our own actions, beliefs, and/or self. Shame, then, does not *have* to originate internally. It certainly can, as our self-mocking and self-deprecation can lead to shame, but shame typically arises from interactions with others. One is shamed by others for failing to live up to their expectations. This failure can be as simple as not performing as well as one was expected to on a school exam, and those who utilize shaming rhetoric aim to alter the student’s behavior so they will perform better in the future. Shame can also extend to larger societal expectations. Religious conservatives, for example, have long utilized shame to influence how sex education programs teach (or don’t) sexuality to children—reinforcing heteronormativity and erasing and/or demonizing non-hetero sexualities.<sup>586</sup> As Janice M. Irvine argues, “Shame is a social function, fostered in order to bring about (and discourage) certain forms of conduct.”<sup>587</sup> This social function of shame discourages particular practices, beliefs, and ideologies. To paraphrase Donald L. Nathanson, shame is the affect of conformity.<sup>588</sup>

Shame’s ability to cause one to change their actions and to conform to a particular societal script is key to the use of shame by reactionaries in the *Mass Effect* controversy, particularly because, as Ahmed argues, someone can only be shamed by another who has “already elicited

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<sup>584</sup> Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York: Springer, 2008), 351.

<sup>585</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103 (my italics).

<sup>586</sup> Janice M. Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>587</sup> Janice M. Irvine, “Shame Comes Out of the Closet,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 6, no. 1 (2009): 71.

<sup>588</sup> Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 16.

desire or even love”—essentially, by another whose view is deemed to *matter*.<sup>589</sup> This raises the question of why do the views of these anti-fans, anti-LGBTQ activists, and Fox News viewers matter to BioWare? Perhaps more importantly, do their views matter *more* than those of the fans who appreciated or felt represented by the inclusion of LGBTQ content? The answer would appear to be yes, as, again, “groups are representable only insofar as they are marketable.”<sup>590</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality has been so implicit to video games throughout the medium’s history that these homophobic reactionary fans were likely considered to be among the primary audience for an expensive AAA game. As Irvine argues, politics of shaming “draw on existing social norms for their power and operate to strengthen those norms,” which is exactly what the reactionaries involved in this controversy did.<sup>591</sup> They shamed BioWare by drawing on this existing history of “normal” video game sexuality in an effort to prevent future transgressions against heterosexuality.

It is worthwhile to pause and ask what it means for these reactionary fans to have shamed BioWare. Can corporations experience shame, fear, or other affects? And if they do, how would a critic know? Virginia Haufler demonstrates how the “name and shame” strategy was successful in changing the diamond industry. The campaign labeled diamonds from conflict zones in Sierra Leone as “blood diamonds,” shared photographs of wounded and brutalized child soldiers, and utilized shaming rhetoric by arguing that those who bought blood diamonds were financing child murder.<sup>592</sup> In response, the diamond industry worked to identify “clean” diamonds and policies were put in place around the world to not trade in blood diamonds. Haufler argues that this example illustrates the importance of *reputation* for the diamond industry, which applies to corporations

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<sup>589</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 105.

<sup>590</sup> Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer?,” 33.

<sup>591</sup> Irvine, “Shame Comes Out of the Closet,” 75.

<sup>592</sup> Virginia Haufler, “Shaming the Shameless? Campaigning Against Corporations” in *The Politics of Leverage in International Relations*, ed. H. Richard Friman (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2015), 185-200.



like BioWare as well. Executives at BioWare may have worried that if anti-fans and news media continued to discuss their games in a negative light, the studio's reputation would suffer, leading fewer players supporting their next game. Importantly for the initial questions, one could argue that neither BioWare nor the diamond industry experience shame themselves; rather, it is a constellation of individuals who create the games/who mine and sell diamonds that do. As I stated in the Introduction chapter, I approach affect as "the representational (usually described with language of the emotions, with linguistic referents) and nonrepresentational attachments, forces, and energy that push and pull communicative encounters."<sup>593</sup> The critic interprets affect based on the person's or the constellation of persons' (i.e., a corporation's) collective rhetoric and actions. Alternatively, this section demonstrates how one could interpret that there could be a shaming force (generated by anti-fans or activists) that creates a sense of momentum that builds against the developer, be it BioWare or the diamond industry. This momentum grows until the developer issues a response to that real or imagined consensus force. This interpretation does not require the presence of shame as a feeling in any particular individual. In this way, we can see how shame can be felt both by a corporation as an entity and by the individuals who make decisions and act for the corporation's interest.

From here, we should consider another possible interpretation of BioWare's response. Rather than shame, might the removing of the queer content from *Mass Effect 2* been driven primarily by fear (an affect discussed in depth in Chapter Two) over potential profit loss? The response from reactionary fans and Fox News may not have caused executives at BioWare to feel shame over their disruption of social norms for video games; rather, it may have alerted them to the fact that a portion of their audience might not buy the sequel if queer content was included.

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<sup>593</sup> Caitlin Bruce, "The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 2015): 45.

The same could be said for *Star Wars: Episode IX – Rise of Skywalker* (2019) following the misogynistic and racist backlash of the #NotMyJedi controversy discussed in Chapter Three: The downplaying of Rose and Finn could have been less about being shamed about the presence of diversity and more about a fear of what the continued disruption to *Star Wars* norms could do to the film's box office receipts. Perhaps BioWare and Disney's reactions of shame were accompanied by fear, distress, and especially by greed—the desire for increased profits outweighing the artistic and social commitment to represent non-heteronormative experiences, another example of protective propagation. I argue that regardless of whether BioWare and Disney acted in response to being shamed for breaking expected social constructs of gaming/*Star Wars* culture or in response to fear and greed over selling their content, the end result is the same. Whether it is an actual expression of shame or a *perceived* expression of shame, the offending content has been removed and the shaming strategies of the reactionary fans succeeded. From the perspective of reactionary fans, there is no difference between actual and perceived shame. Perceived subservience to shame emboldens reactionaries just as much as actual subservience to their attempts at shaming. In either case, they successfully influenced the outcome through their shaming rhetoric, which only encourages this rhetoric in future situations when they are offended by the presence of a non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual other.

What, then, does reading the response of BioWare as either real or perceived shame do? Shame could be seen as particularly reactionary given that shame polices people into maintaining existing social norms—it relies on a shared sense of propriety such that individuals feel disgust for themselves when they violate a social rule. But, as evidenced in Haufler's chapter, shame can also be used to change the status quo by naming a practice as wrong then shaming those for contributing to it. For BioWare, the inclusion of queer content was named wrong as it violated historical video

game trends, and fans shamed them for participating in this so-called disgusting practice. While the reaction could be read as shame alone, *fear* may be the key addition in the example of BioWare's shame. The reactionary shame names something as wrong, but fear reveals the consequences of not changing their actions—be they threats of bodily harm or of lost profits. Just as people may attempt to shame politicians for their votes, if the politician has no fear of losing their seat, there is likely little need to change their actions or even to apologize.

In considering how the changes to *Mass Effect 2* were a response to reactionary shame, it is important to note that shame does not require an apology. Rather, shame “can be a substitute for an apology.”<sup>594</sup> This is a particularly relevant idea to consider regarding not only the changes made to *Mass Effect 2* but also the rewriting of *Rise of Skywalker* (discussed in Chapter Three). Neither BioWare nor Disney apologized for the content that reactionary fans deemed harmful. Instead, in what one can read as an expression of shame and fear, they removed it from the sequels, making the new game and film more palatable for these racist, misogynistic, and/or homophobic fans. By bending to the will of the reactionary anti-fans, the *Mass Effect* controversy illustrates the dialogic relationship of art and fandom. It is not only that art creates fandom, but fandom alters art as well.<sup>595</sup> While this has been written about in terms of more progressive fan activism for fan casting and even fundraising, BioWare's response is an example of a more reactionary fan-driven change. Importantly, through cowing to reactionary fans, the removal of queer content strengthened the position of reactionaries that these characters, these identities, do not belong in their speculative

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<sup>594</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 120.

<sup>595</sup> Drawing from J.L. Austin's discussion of how the response to an illocutionary act (or, as he describes, the “sequel”) requires another act by the speaker, we can read the inclusion/non-inclusion of queerness in both *Mass Effect 2* and *Rise of Skywalker* as responses to prior utterances (the previous entries). This challenges the traditional way of imagining how the media spectator relates to media objects, where they enter the work freshly and the form of the product is shaped by the spectator's experience. In the current franchise/IP-driven marketplace and fandom, this is no longer the case. Sequels can respond to previous entries, influencing both the spectator experience and their fandoms. *How to Do Things with Words* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1962), 108-19.

fiction media. With *Mass Effect 2* being successful despite the removal of the queer characters, a fan might ask why BioWare would need to include queer relationships in the future. The LGBTQ players appeared to buy the game despite the lack of representation, so the logic must be that adding non-heterosexual characters would only serve to isolate those homophobic fans.

Ultimately, following *Mass Effect 2*'s release, BioWare did begin to include more queer romance options in their other games. Two instances come to mind as direct results from their reaction with *Mass Effect 2*. First, when BioWare announced that their game *Dragon Age II* (2011) would feature queer romance options (with the assurance that they would be entirely optional), many reactionary fans, again, expressed outrage. They claimed that the mere option for a queer romance was an insult to straight, male gamers and called for a “‘No Homosexuality’ option to be implemented in the game so that [they could] be certain that [their] personal version of the fantasy setting of Thedas would be free from the incursion of queerness.”<sup>596</sup> BioWare did not include this option, but the suggestion that a so-called “No Homo” feature be implemented likely would not have been considered a realistic demand if BioWare had not caved so quickly to reactionary fans’ demands in the past.

Second, after many LGBTQ fans petitioned for BioWare to include queer relationships in their upcoming game *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, BioWare did, but with a catch. Despite the fan requests being made shortly after the announcement of the game, when there was time to integrate added queer content to the core game, BioWare did not. Instead, they included queer romanceable characters in an expansion pack that one had to purchase for an additional fee. Moreover, all the queer romanceable characters exist on a single planet (Makeb, which many refer to as “The Gay Planet”), as opposed to the other non-queer romance options that exist throughout the game’s

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<sup>596</sup> Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*, 83.

universe.<sup>597</sup> By charging players extra for access to the queer content, BioWare ensured that those players demonstrated their value—affirming that their representation is marketable. Confining all the queer romance options to one planet is yet another example of the developers hiding this supposedly shameful content, despite, as evidenced by the response to *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age II*, even when the content is optional, homophobic fans will object to its very existence, just as they do to the existence of queerness outside of video games.

The success of *Dragon Age II* and the Makeb expansion pack for *Star Wars: The Old Republic* likely proved to BioWare that they did have an audience interested in LGBTQ content, so in *Mass Effect 3*, they introduced a number of queer characters (including making Kaiden bisexual, with his transition away from a FemShep-only romance option being discussed more in the conclusion), and in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) there are homosexual and pansexual romance options in addition to a non-romanceable transgender NPC. While BioWare eventually realized the benefits of including LGBTQ content in their games, their initial response of real or perceived shame and fear following the reactionary backlash provided ammunition for reactionary fans as they strove to maintain the historical compulsory heterosexuality of video games and their gaming communities. This not only hampered representation of LGBTQ characters in AAA video games, but also strengthened the belief that queerness is shameful and needs to be hidden. I now turn to a controversy that stands in contrast to BioWare's *Mass Effect* controversy, where instead of hiding their “wrongdoings” following a fan backlash to a queer character, Naughty Dog greeted the vitriol of homophobic fans-turned-anti-fans with pride.

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<sup>597</sup> Mary Hamilton, “Star Wars: The Old Republic, the Gay Planet and the Problem of the Straight Male Gaze,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/jan/25/star-wars-old-republic-gay-planet>.

## 5.5 Naughty Dog's Prideful Doubling Down of *The Last of Us*

### 5.5.1 The Kiss Heard 'Round the Gaming World

*The Last of Us* and its sequel, *The Last of Us Part II*, were developed by Naughty Dog, and they take a much different approach to the speculative fiction genre than *Mass Effect* does. While *Mass Effect* features spaceships, alien species, and characters with technologically enhanced powers, *The Last of Us* is a story of two people struggling to survive as they travel across a post-apocalyptic United States. The game is in the vein of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) but with the added twist that the post-apocalyptic nature of the world is due to a fungal plague (the *Cordyceps* brain infection) that essentially turns any humans who contract it into zombies—reminiscent of Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007) film adaptation.<sup>598</sup> In the game, an anti-government organization known as the Fireflies hires Joel, a black-market smuggler in his late 40s, to smuggle Ellie, a 14-year-old girl, outside of the quarantine zone so she can be taken to a Firefly facility. After accepting the job, Joel learns that Ellie has been bitten by an infected human but rather than succumbing to the plague in two days as is the norm, she displays no symptoms of infection three weeks after the attack. Due to her apparent immunity, the Fireflies hope to use Ellie to manufacture a vaccine. Unfortunately, upon making it to the rendezvous point, Joel and Ellie find that the Fireflies who were meant to escort Ellie to the facility have been killed. Throughout the remainder of the game, Joel and Ellie traverse the country as they attempt to connect with other Firefly groups and/or to find the Firefly base that can produce the vaccine. As they travel, Joel and Ellie develop a surrogate father-daughter

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<sup>598</sup> *The Road* was such an inspiration for the game that *The Last of Us* includes an homage to Cormac McCarthy: A joke book owned by Ellie is authored by Kathryn McCormack.

relationship that ultimately complicates Joel's mission when he learns that creating the vaccine will result in Ellie's death.

Nearly a year after the release of *The Last of Us*, Naughty Dog released a downloadable expansion pack entitled *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014) that served as a prequel to *The Last of Us*. Instead of playing as Joel, which the players do for the majority of *The Last of Us*, *Left Behind* has the players take control of Ellie and play through the sequences of events that culminate with her being bitten. The prequel provides important backstory on Ellie's condition, but, perhaps more importantly, the story focuses on Ellie and her female friend Riley exploring an abandoned mall, an exploration that features the two teenagers sharing a kiss. While Ellie's sexuality was not as explicitly present in the main game, it became central to the series moving forward, which I discuss more in the next section.<sup>599</sup> Ellie and Riley's kiss was praised by many reviewers as a beautiful, natural expression of burgeoning teenage sexuality, with some suggesting that Ellie may be the first non-optional lesbian character in a video game.<sup>600</sup> As Shaw argues, games often present queer content as optional,<sup>601</sup> but one cannot play *Left Behind* without playing as Ellie or experiencing her romance with Riley.

Many reactionary fans, however, were vocally displeased with the inclusion of Ellie and Riley's kiss. While *The Last of Us* received 257 Game of the Year (GOTY) awards—199 from media outlets and 58 as readers' choice awards—the most of any game in history up to that point,<sup>602</sup> *The Last of Us: Left Behind* has a user score of 4.8/10 on Metacritic (compared to the 88/100

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<sup>599</sup> *The Last of Us* also features the gay character Bill, so while Ellie's sexuality is not revealed until *Left Behind*, there was at least one openly gay character who is important to the narrative of *The Last of Us*.

<sup>600</sup> Kirk Hamilton, "Video Gaming's Latest Breakthrough Moment," Kotaku, February 17, 2014, <https://kotaku.com/video-gamings-latest-breakthrough-moment-1524555480>; Keza MacDonald, "The Significance of The Last of Us: Left Behind," IGN, February 19, 2014, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/02/19/the-significance-of-the-last-of-us-left-behind>; Edward Smith, "The Last of Us: Left Behind Review," International Business Times, February 17, 2014, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/last-us-left-behind-review-1436809>.

<sup>601</sup> Shaw, "Do You Identify as a Gamer?," 36.

<sup>602</sup> "2013: Overall Game of the Year," Game Awards, <https://www.gameawards.net/2020/09/2013.html>.

aggregate from critics).<sup>603</sup> The user score for *The Last of Us* is 9.2/10, but when it was rereleased for the PlayStation 5 in 2022 with updated controls, integrated accessibility features, and better graphics but the same narrative and characters, the user score dropped to 6.0/10 (the critic scores were 95/100 and 88/100 for the 2013 and 2022 releases, respectively).<sup>604</sup> This drop in the user score could be partially attributed to the fact that some fans were upset over Naughty Dog charging full price for a game that they already paid for a decade earlier (some twice, given that Naughty Dog released versions of *The Last of Us* for the PlayStation 3 in 2013, the PlayStation 4 in 2014, and the PlayStation 5 in 2022), but given the consistent criticism Ellie’s sexuality received from fans since 2014, it is likely this decline is a result of review bombing.<sup>605</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Three, review bombing is a typical tactic trolls and reactionary fans employ to express their displeasure and outrage. While review bombing is common for film and television series, it is especially impactful for video games and their fans. Clara Fernández-Vara argues that game reviews are “one of the first (and often only) types of game writing that mainstream audiences are exposed to,” and, as such, they greatly influence players in what games to buy, even more than film reviews influence their readers’ purchasing decisions.<sup>606</sup> Bo Ruberg adds that the content of game reviews influence not only how players think about individual games

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<sup>603</sup> “The Last of Us: Left Behind – PlayStation 3,” Metacritic, 2014, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/the-last-of-us-left-behind>.

<sup>604</sup> “The Last of Us – Play Station 3,” Metacritic, 2013, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/the-last-of-us>; “The Last of Us Part I – PlayStation 5,” Metacritic, 2022, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-5/the-last-of-us-part-i>.

<sup>605</sup> While the low user scores could be for several reasons, a comparison could be made to the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), which the studio Bethesda has rereleased repeatedly. After the base game premiered in 2011, Bethesda released a “Legendary Edition” in 2013, a remaster in 2016, a version for the Nintendo Switch in 2017, a virtual reality edition in 2017 (PlayStation 4) and 2018 (Windows), an anniversary edition for the PlayStation 5 and Xbox X/S in 2021, and an anniversary edition for the Nintendo Switch in 2022. Despite these rereleases, as *Skyrim*’s content has not been deemed controversial like *The Last of Us*’s has, it was not until recently that fans have begun to express discontent with the rereleases. Even then, however, most of the comments are focused on the lack of a *new* game rather than the content of the old one.

<sup>606</sup> Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.



and their meanings, they influence how players think about the entire medium of video games.<sup>607</sup> Critical reviews on video game-focused websites sites such as IGN, Kotaku, and Game Informer are influenced by economic pressures from video game fans just as game studios like BioWare and Naughty Dog are, and since reviews can serve as sites for players to learn what is and is not acceptable in games, their reviews can impact what forms of representation appear in future games.<sup>608</sup> With the increased ability for fans to make their opinions known via message boards, social media, and review aggregate sites, review bombing by reactionary fans can greatly impact the overall sales and reception of games as well as what ideologies are considered “allowed” in future games.

It is also important to consider the environment in which *The Last of Us* premiered. Despite only being released six years after *Mass Effect*, *The Last of Us* was released in a time where LGBTQ content was becoming increasingly present in video games. According to Shaw’s LGBTQ Video Game archive, 2007 only featured fifteen games with any LGBTQ content (*Mass Effect* included), while 2013 had sixty-three.<sup>609</sup> Even though LGBTQ representation in video games was becoming more common, there were many reactionary fans who accused Naughty Dog of pushing “wokeness” and a “gay agenda” on their players. Part of this accusation may stem from the fact that Neil Druckmann, the writer and co-director of *The Last of Us*, during a presentation at for the International Game Developer Association, stated that he “had this secret agenda. [He] wanted to create one of the coolest, non-sexualized female video game protagonists. And [he] felt that if

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<sup>607</sup> Bonnie Ruberg, “Straightwashing *Undertale*: Video Games and the Limits of LGBTQ Representation,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 28 (2018).

<sup>608</sup> Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 37.

<sup>609</sup> The archive becomes spottier after 2017 and stops altogether in 2020 with only three entries (*The Last of Us Part II* not included), but this trend continues as 2014’s entry lists 86 games, 2015’s lists 161, 2016’s lists 259, and 2017’s lists 226. “2010s,” LGBTQ Game Archive, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/games-by-decade/2010s/>.

[Naughty Dog] did that, there's an opportunity to change the industry."<sup>610</sup> Clearly, Druckmann's "secret agenda" was not about queer representation like many upset players claimed; rather, it was to challenge the industry status quo that female characters were either damsels in distress or uber-sexualized heroines. Ellie stood in contrast to many female characters of the time, proving to be competent, crafty, and memorable for traits other than her sex appeal. Ellie's sexuality is not even a part of Druckmann's agenda, as Druckmann later revealed that they did not explore Ellie's sexuality in *The Last of Us*, so "it was up for grabs" in terms of how they chose to write her narrative arc in *Left Behind*.<sup>611</sup> Even so, reactionary fans complained that Naughty Dog's wokeness prevented them from escaping real-world issues and enjoying the escapism video games should provide.

Not content to let their beloved game be tainted by Druckmann's wokeness, there were some players who attempted to rationalize Ellie and Riley's kiss. Despite the romantic nature of the kiss being clear—beyond the fact that much of *Left Behind*'s narrative follows Ellie and Riley exploring an abandoned mall on a post-apocalyptic date, *Left Behind* was released on Valentine's Day—there were those who asked if maybe it was a kiss just between friends. Players justified the moment as non-queer by saying that Ellie and Riley were too young to know if they were gay, that they were confused because it was the apocalypse, and/or that girls platonically kiss each other all the time so it didn't *really* mean anything. These rationalizations aim to reassert the compulsory heterosexuality of video games and of US culture more widely by dismissing female

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<sup>610</sup> Andrew Webster, "The Power of Failure: Making 'The Last of Us'," *The Verge*, September 19, 2013, <https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/19/4744008/making-the-last-of-us-ps3>.

<sup>611</sup> Sal Mattos, "Is Ellie Gay? Naughty Dog's Neil Druckmann Weighs in On *The Last of Us: Left Behind*," *Gay Gamer*, February 21, 2014, [gaygamer.net/2014/02/is-ellie-gay-naughty-dogs-neil-druckmann-weighs-in-on-the-last-of-us-left-behind/](http://gaygamer.net/2014/02/is-ellie-gay-naughty-dogs-neil-druckmann-weighs-in-on-the-last-of-us-left-behind/).

homosexuality as a “phase” or nonexistent.<sup>612</sup> If Riley had been a male character instead, there likely would have been no claims that the kiss was just friendly, as heterosexuality is expected and accepted in video game culture, but as it was two girls kissing, their relationship was deemed wrong and either needed to be removed in future installments or rationalized as something more acceptable in the present.

The deviant nature of Ellie and Riley’s kiss caused players to review bomb *Left Behind* in hopes that, similar to the reaction BioWare had to the controversy surrounding a potential sex scene between a woman and a mono-gendered alien, Naughty Dog may reverse this narrative choice and create a sequel where Ellie’s kiss is either forgotten or cast as a mistake on her path to heterosexuality. This erasure, however, did not occur. Rather, in contrast to the shame shown by BioWare, Naughty Dog displayed pride in their response to the controversy.

### **5.5.2 Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (and Gamers too)**

*The Last of Us Part II* picks up five years after the conclusion of *The Last of Us*. In the penultimate chapter of *The Last of Us*, Joel learns that the Fireflies plan to remove Ellie’s brain to make the vaccine. Unwilling to let her die, Joel breaks Ellie out of the hospital, killing the surgeon and virtually all other Fireflies at the base in the process. Ellie, unaware that the Fireflies needed to kill her to make the vaccine, wakes up in the backseat of the car as Joel drives away from the hospital and asks what happened. Joel lies, telling her that the Fireflies found other people who were immune to the plague but determined they were unable to synthesize a vaccine. In the years

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<sup>612</sup> For critiques of the female-queerness-is-a-phase argument, see Ana Carolina de Barros, “‘Gay Now’: Bisexual Erasure in Supernatural Media from 1983 to 2003,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 20, no. 1 (2020): 104-117; Sheena C. Howard, “Identity as a Rite of Passage: The Case of Chirlane McCray” in *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*, eds. Adria Y. Goldman, Vanatta S. Ford, Alexa A. Harris, and Natasha R. Howard (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 293-306.

between the games, Joel and Ellie join a community with other survivors in Jackson, Wyoming; Ellie eventually learns the truth about what happened at the hospital, causing a rift between her and Joel; and further tension arises between the two as Ellie becomes more independent and Joel remains as protective of her as when she was younger.

In the first game, players primarily control Joel, a man who exemplifies a rugged brand of masculinity between his physical appearance and deep voice, his previous sexual relationships with attractive women, his protective instincts regarding women and children, and the very narrative that he was able to fight his way across a zombified United States with nothing but a horse, a backpack, and a few guns. In the second game, however, players instead primarily control Ellie as well as a new character named Abby, who proved perhaps even more controversial than Ellie. Part of the vitriol toward Abby, the actress who portrayed her, and Naughty Dog in general was the fact that, early in the game, Abby—the daughter of the Firefly surgeon who was meant to perform the operation on Ellie—tracks down and murders Joel in revenge. Many players likely expected Joel to be a central character in the game or to be their playable avatar again. Instead, the first half of the game after the Joel’s death has the player controlling Ellie as she hunts down Abby and all of those who helped her kill Joel. In a surprising turn, the second half of the game presents Abby’s side of the story, making the player play as a character they considered the antagonist. While playing as the antagonist and/or “bad guy” is not entirely novel in video games, *The Last of Us Part II* forces the player to control and ultimately empathize with a character they may have initially hated as they parse through the cycle of revenge that Abby and Ellie are stuck in.

There are many notable aspects of the sequel that respond to the previous controversy surrounding Ellie and her sexuality, responses that reactionary fans answered with further review bombing as well as death and rape threats sent to the creators and actresses playing Ellie and Abby

(Ashley Johnson and Laura Bailey, respectively). Naughty Dog's first response clearly builds on the reactions to Ellie and Riley's kiss. *The Last of Us Part II* was officially announced to fans with a 2016 reveal trailer/teaser that showcased the familiar post-apocalyptic world from the first game. Following the establishing shot of the world, the teaser cuts to a 19-year-old Ellie sitting alone on a dilapidated bed. With bloody knuckles and tattooed arms, she begins playing the guitar and singing "Through the Valley" by Shawn James. Towards the end of the song, Joel enters the room and asks, "You really gonna go through with this?" Ellie stops playing and responds, "I'm gonna find and I'm gonna kill every last one of them." The teaser sets up a narrative for the sequel, one that is driven by revenge, though, at this point, it is unclear what exactly Ellie wants revenge for. Two years later, at the 2018 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), Naughty Dog unveiled a longer gameplay trailer. Rather than opening on the violence of the world or even showing a player-controlled gameplay sequence, the trailer begins with a cinematic of Ellie at a community dance in Jackson, watching a young man and woman dance together. The first three and a half minutes follow the narrative scene where the young woman (Dina) approaches Ellie and convinces her to dance. While on the dance floor, the two discuss their feelings for one another then kiss passionately before the trailer transitions to a later scene from the game (one that *is* gameplay) where Ellie sneaks and kills her way through a forest and parking garage (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Ellie and Dina kiss on the dance floor, as showcased in the 2018 *The Last of Us Part II* trailer.

The prominent focus on Ellie and Dina’s kiss appears to be a direct rebuke to the reactionary fans upset over Ellie and Riley’s kiss in *Left Behind*. This trailer (which returns to their kiss again in the final thirty seconds) establishes that Ellie and Riley’s kiss from *Left Behind* was not because Ellie was confused or that it was just a friendly kiss—it was because Ellie had feelings for Riley, just as she now does for Dina. The focus, however, is not merely to “shove” Ellie’s sexuality down the throat of players, as many reactionary fans complained following the trailer. The discussion of their romantic feelings and the kiss also set expectations for the game. While much of the game does feature Ellie having to sneak and kill her way through landscapes on her way to find Abby (aligning with the revenge narrative teased in the 2016 trailer), a significant portion of the narrative focuses on Ellie and Dina’s romance and how they build their life together. In *The Last of Us Part II*, Ellie struggles between her desire to avenge Joel and to have a family with Dina. Ellie’s part of the story is built around the tension between her commitment to Joel’s

memory and her commitment to Dina. This focus extends so far that, at a certain point in the narrative, Ellie and Dina escape the revenge and the violence (at least temporarily) and start a peaceful life together with their infant child. Unlike BioWare, who removed potential queer content in an act of shame, Naughty Dog instead doubled down and made the primary objection of so many reactionary fans from *Left Behind* the central focus of their gameplay trailer as well as one of the driving narrative forces in the overall game. Rather than BioWare's response of shame, Naughty Dog's retort can be read as a display of pride.

It is fitting to talk about Naughty Dog's pride in relation to BioWare's (real or perceived) shame, as affect studies scholars often link the two. Ahmed argues that "shame and pride have a similar affective role in judging the success or failure of subjects to live up to ideals, though they make different judgements."<sup>613</sup> While shame tends to accompany a failure to live up to a particular script and causes one to change their actions, pride instead leads one to continue them. Importantly, unlike shame, which is used to encourage conformity, pride can inspire one to deviate from a cultural script. Pride as an affect has long been associated with queerness. Not only does queer pride aim to make one appreciate and celebrate their sexuality, but, according to Deborah Gould, the expression of gay pride is supposed to work against gay shame.<sup>614</sup> In fact, queer pride is "a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you."<sup>615</sup> It is the ability to recognize that while others may attempt to shame you or express that they are ashamed of you, *you* do not need to experience that shame. You do not need to hide away your sexuality. Instead,

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<sup>613</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 109.

<sup>614</sup> Deborah Gould, "Rock the Boat, Don't Rock the Boat, Baby: Ambivalence and the Emergence of Militant Aids Activism" in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, eds. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polleta (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>615</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015), 18

you can embrace it. Through rejecting the enforced conformity fueled by shame, pride can lead one to castoff the felt shame and continue the action that brings one joy.<sup>616</sup>

Reactionary fans attempted to shame Naughty Dog into conforming to a heteronormative script for Ellie (and to scare them by communicating they will not buy future Naughty Dog games), but shaming rhetoric and fear tactics may backfire.<sup>617</sup> Nathanson posits that pride needs to arise out of goals set and achieved, and, with Ellie and Dina’s relationship taking a central focus in the marketing and narrative of *The Last of Us Part II*, the goal of illustrating that Ellie’s queerness is neither a phase nor a mistake but rather central to Ellie’s identity is clear and accomplished.<sup>618</sup> For BioWare’s Makeb content and even Naughty Dog’s *Left Behind* expansion, however, the queer content was not in the base game, it was downloadable after the fact. This reinforced the heteronormativity of games by shunting queerness into an optional path—queerness was an expansion pack to the base experience of heterosexuality. That, however, changes with bringing Ellie and Dina’s relationship into a central focus. Ellie’s queerness is no longer optional nor is it content one can ignore. It is the base game content, and it is a statement of pride to feature it in both in the game and the first gameplay trailer.<sup>619</sup> Through this display of Ellie’s queerness, a queerness in defiance to the reactionary fans’ criticisms, other players can experience pride as well. Nathanson argues that pride is infectious, those who watch the display of pride (in this case, non-reactionary fans and players) “tend to smile happily with the victor, thrilling at the victory” while

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<sup>616</sup> Importantly, however, shame does not necessarily have to be defeated or morphed into pride. Laura Alexandra Harris argues that rather than overcoming shame, we need to address how to make it an empowering, resistant political stance. “Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle,” *Feminist Review* no. 54 (Autumn 1996): 23

<sup>617</sup> Irvine, “Shame Comes Out of the Closet,” 77.

<sup>618</sup> Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*, 84.

<sup>619</sup> This move aligns with what Judith Butler argues in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” where lesbianism and queerness in general is often viewed as a “bad copy” of the original heterosexuality, but Butler’s argument inverts the idea. In *The Last of Us Part II* a range of sexualities are present in the base game, and there is no downloadable content after the fact that adds, removes, or changes a character’s sexuality. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307-20.



the ones experiencing the pride (in this case Naughty Dog), when their goal is successful, spur further actions in the same vein.<sup>620</sup>



**Figure 8. Abby Anderson in *The Last of Us Part II*.**

This pride/rejection of the reactionary fans’ shaming extends beyond the characterization of Ellie to that of Abby. While the pro-GamerGate website One Angry Gamer calls Ellie “the much-beloved lesbian icon for SJWs,” it argues that Abby is the other key tenet to Naughty Dog’s “woke anti-Christian agenda.”<sup>621</sup> In many ways Abby continues Druckmann’s “secret agenda” from the first game. Her character challenges gender norms for female video game characters, particularly in her character design. While historically, female characters have been designed with large breasts and buttocks, miniscule waists, and toned stomachs, Abby’s physique is muscular with broad shoulders, a flatter chest, and biceps featuring visible veins (Figure 8). Abby is notably

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<sup>620</sup> Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*, 84.

<sup>621</sup> Quoted in Jen Glennon, Dais Johnston, and Eric Francisco, “*The Last of Us 2* Trans Controversy, Explained,” *Inverse*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/last-of-us-2-trans-controversy-explained-abby-tlou>.

even more muscular than her ex-boyfriend Owen, causing many reactionary fans to decry her as disgusting and unattractive to any straight white male gamer.

In fact, many reactionary players assumed that since her body did not conform to the traditional curvaceous body of a video game woman, Abby must be transgender. The Australian outlet *Sausage Roll* condemned Naughty Dog before the release of the game based on information leaked about Abby's appearance, writing, "The characters in *The Last of Us Part II* are designed in such a way to not make trans people feel uncomfortable. Every single new character introduced in the sequel does not have definitive feminine or masculine qualities."<sup>622</sup> Criticizing Naughty Dog for not wanting to make transgender people feel uncomfortable ensures the reactionary underpinnings of this comment are crystal clear, but the post also uses misinformation to rile up its readers. It seeks to create fear in the readers that the lack of concrete and traditional gender identities could become the norm in video games, and then it shames them into not supporting the game. Abby does challenge the typical feminine video game character (not only physically, but narratively too, as she is the active driver of her story), but she is not transgender, though that did not stop reactionary fans from sending her voice actress a slew of death and rape threats due to that assumption. Importantly, the game *does* feature a prominent transgender character (Lev), who is voiced by the transgender actor Ian Alexander—another sign that Naughty Dog responded to the reactionary fans' criticism that decried *Left Behind* for not being straight and masculine enough, not with shame or fear, but with a pride in the diversity of their characters' identities. This pride is evident in how, following the review bombing of *The Last of Us Part II*, Druckmann declared, "We made this game, we believe in this game, we're proud of this game."<sup>623</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> Quoted in Glennon, Johnston, and Francisco, "*The Last of Us 2* Trans Controversy, Explained."

<sup>623</sup> Rob Nowill, "'The Last of Us Part 2' Director Responds to Heated Online Reaction," Hypebeast, June 30, 2020, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/6/the-last-of-us-part-2-neil-druckmann-response>.

On a Reddit thread titled “The ‘Infamous’ Kiss,” the original poster asks, “Why were many people taken aback by this [Ellie and Dina’s kiss] and call it gross?” There were many posters who responded that those players were bigoted and others who explained the various arguments those players made only to have the arguments ridiculed in the comments as fallacious, but two responses in particular stand out. The first is from the poster ReyHabeas, who writes, “Many people aren’t taken aback. Only a very small minority had a problem with it. Stop giving them attention. Ignore it.” The user allgreek2me2004 responds with, “Yeah, the problem is the people who had a problem complained the loudest. I also believe that they account for a small number of TLOU [*The Last of Us*] fans.”<sup>624</sup> This exchange gets to the key aspect of these reactionary controversies that Naughty Dog realized but BioWare did not—reactionary fans are a vocal minority.

*The Last of Us Part II* has a 93/100 score from critics on Metacritic, but a 5.7/10 from users.<sup>625</sup> Notably, it has 160,135 user ratings, a startling number compared to other popular and critically acclaimed PlayStation 4 games such as *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) with 11,925; *Marvel’s Spider-Man* (2018) with 8,548; and *God of War* (2018) with 22,070. The sheer number of reviews indicates that review bombing took place, yet, despite the review bombing, *The Last of Us Part II* shattered the GOTY Award record with 322 wins.<sup>626</sup> While 208 came from media outlets, 114 came from readers’ choice. The other nine games in the top ten of 2020 GOTY recipients received 60 readers’ choice awards, cumulatively. *The Last of Us Part II*’s dominance of GOTY awards could suggest that it was a weaker year for games overall, but it clearly indicates

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<sup>624</sup> “Why were so many people taken aback by this and call it gross?” Reddit, July 27, 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/thelastofus/comments/92br9k/the\\_infamous\\_kiss/](https://www.reddit.com/r/thelastofus/comments/92br9k/the_infamous_kiss/)

<sup>625</sup> “The Last of Us Part II – PlayStation 4,” Metacritic, 2020, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/the-last-of-us-part-ii>.

<sup>626</sup> “2020: Overall Game of the Year,” Game Awards, <https://www.gameawards.net/2020/09/2020.html>.

that the reactionary fans who review bombed the game were in the minority.<sup>627</sup> Other fans not only liked the game, but many preferred it to virtually all other releases that year. Druckmann has acknowledged that with projects such as AAA games, there is “a certain level of vitriol that you just have to deal with. There is no other way to make it go away.”<sup>628</sup> This idea of not engaging with reactionary fans, not giving in, and instead showing pride may not make reactionary vitriol go away, but it does expose it as coming from a smaller group than it may have originally appeared. While the small group can wield much power and influence, as I discuss in my Conclusion chapter, there are still many who support speculative fiction media that challenge entrenched norms and represent experiences for people other than straight, white men. While the LGBTQ representation and challenging of female character design tropes may have only been a part of the reason for its reception, responding with pride rather than shame or fear enabled *The Last of Us Part II* to present nuanced depictions of character identities that, only a decade before, were all but disallowed in video games as anything other than fodder for jokes.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In 2020, BioWare announced they were releasing *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* (2021)—a remaster of the *Mass Effect* trilogy with updated graphics, combat mechanics, and other technical improvements. Shortly after the announcement, James W (aka MShenko2187) and four other queer fans launched a petition for BioWare to restore the queer relationships that were cut

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<sup>627</sup> Given that 2020 also saw the release of critically and popularly acclaimed games such as *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Hades*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Marvel’s Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*, *Spiritfarer*, and many more, it does not seem that 2020 was a “weak” year for video games.

<sup>628</sup> Nowill, “‘The Last of Us Part 2’ Director Responds to Heated Online Reaction.”

from *Mass Effect* (they claimed to have uncovered information that showed Kaiden was originally planned to be a bisexual character in *Mass Effect* but the content was removed pre-release) and *Mass Effect 2* and to apologize for cutting the content in the first place by laying out a plan to “ensure diverse, accurate, and comparable LGBTQIA+ representation in future ME [*Mass Effect*] projects.”<sup>629</sup> Despite the attention the petition received from various media outlets, when *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* released, no additional queer content was restored. The director of the project, Mac Walters, explained that in looking at previously cut material, he decided adding it in would require too much work and take attention away from the remastering of already released material, so the team would “not chang[e] anything in the story or the way the characters or the plot points [work] out.”<sup>630</sup>

In addition to the rationalization that the restoration of queer content would require too much effort (effort that likely would not manifest in significantly more revenue), discourse among fans pointed to the fact that since they had read moments and characters as queer before, they still could even if the content was not explicitly added. The fan discourse reminds me of Todd Harper’s autoethnographic account of playing through the *Mass Effect* trilogy with a Shepard who is a closeted gay man. Harper’s Shepard ultimately romances Kaiden in the third game, and his account details the ways the narrative and dialogue slowly reveal Kaiden’s sexuality—a sexuality that is assumed hetero unless your Shepard instigates a relationship with him in *Mass Effect 3*. Harper asks, “In a universe where a human and an alien can have an unquestioned, unproblematic relationship, why would coming out as gay suddenly involve drama?”<sup>631</sup> This question brings to

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<sup>629</sup> James W, “Restoring Same-Sex Romances in the Mass Effect Legendary Edition,” ipetitions, June 2, 2021, <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/mass-effect-legendary-romances>.

<sup>630</sup> Megan Farokhmanesh, “*Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* Won’t Add New Content – Or Gay Romances,” The Verge, February 2, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/2/22256391/mass-effect-legendary-edition-content-story-dlc-jack-jacob>.

<sup>631</sup> Todd Harper, “Role-Play as Queer Lens: How ‘ClosetShep’ Changed My Vision of *Mass Effect*” in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 130.

mind two thoughts. The first is that, as evidenced in this chapter, the human-alien relationship is only deemed unproblematic if it is coded and interpreted as heterosexual. The second is the conclusion to Ruberg's article about the indie game *Undertale*, where Ruberg argues that queerness suffuses the world and characters of *Undertale*.<sup>632</sup> The game uses its speculative fiction environment to create a queer utopia, but despite the clear queer content, since the queerness of the storyworld was not portrayed as a disruption, straight players managed to ignore the queer themes and many even viewed the queer content as parody. Ruberg suggests that despite speculative fiction enabling creators to build worlds where queerness is not only present but normalized, there are players who are so accustomed to the compulsory heterosexuality of video games that, for them, non-disruptive queerness can be ridiculed while disruptive queerness needs to be eradicated.

Much of the rhetoric reactionary fans utilize in their attempts to enforce heteronormativity in games relies on shame and fear. They shame producers for including queer content and threaten their profits through review bombing, they shame other players for supporting these games and induce fear by painting a potential future built on the slippery slope fallacy, and they shame queer players for merely existing while attempting to scare them into obscuring their identities for the supposed heterosexual majority. While social media, online forums, and online cooperative and competitive play have made it much easier for reactionary fans to circulate this rhetoric, the shaming of queer players occurs even within video game content. Games that include homophobic and transphobic jokes and characters shame their queer players by suggesting that these identities are jokes as well and, ultimately, that these games are not meant for them. Instead, they are for straight, white players and if queer players want to participate in the gaming community, they need

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<sup>632</sup> Ruberg, "Straightwashing *Undertale*."

to adopt a heteronormative script. This clearly stands contrary to the argument of many reactionary fans that “games are fantasy environments in which real world political concerns should not matter,” as the casual homophobia and transphobia in games reveal that “it is not difficult for game makers to see the relevance of LGBTQ content in these texts. The challenge moving forward is to see if casual inclusivity is as possible as casual offensiveness.”<sup>633</sup> This idea of inclusivity is vital to consider, as it is not about counting the amount of LGBTQ characters and eventually deeming it as satisfactory. The point is not that we have *enough* LGBTQ representation in video games; rather, like all aspects of identity in speculative fiction, “it’s a question of who gets to be imagined in these fantasy environments in the first place” and, more importantly, *how* they are imagined.<sup>634</sup>

BioWare and Naughty Dog demonstrate two responses for when reactionaries attempt to evoke a reaction of shame. With BioWare, when confronted by the shaming rhetoric of reactionaries, they reacted by hiding their supposed wrongdoing, removing content deemed objectionable and protecting their profits and reputation. While the response may have been perceived shame rather than actual shame, it had the same effect of ultimately emboldening reactionary fans through the process of protective propagation, and these fans continued shaming BioWare for any inclusion of queer content in the future. Naughty Dog, on the other hand, chose to include even more of the objectionable content in their sequel, displaying pride in the identities of their characters. This display of pride, however, did not stop reactionary fans from harassing them. In fact, it likely caused a greater reaction from fans, but it also illuminated how reactionary fans are in the minority of their overall fanbase. The expression of pride for their characters enabled other players to experience pride and resulted in the game becoming one of the highest selling and most awarded video games of all time.

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<sup>633</sup> Shaw and Friesem, “Where is the Queerness in Games?”, 3885.

<sup>634</sup> Ruberg, “An Interview with Adrienne Shaw,” 166.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the affective economy of reactionary fans involve anger, hatred, disgust, fear, cruelty, and shame, but the responses one can have to reactionaries can vary. One cannot ignore reactionaries and hope they go away, as they will not, and that is not what Naughty Dog did. Rather, through a display of pride, Naughty Dog defied what was all but assumed to be a required cultural script and shed light on what the demographic and societal makeup of video game fandom/culture is. As pride in one's actions can spur one to continue on that path, Naughty Dog's success likely inspired other AAA developers to follow in the footsteps of *The Last of Us* and smaller indie games that continue to challenge the compulsory heterosexuality of the video game medium.



## 6.0 Conclusion: Speculative Pasts, Presents, and Futures

*“Trying to predict the future is a discouraging hazardous occupation.”*<sup>635</sup>

– Arthur C. Clarke

### 6.1 All This Happened

On August 5, 2021, nearly seventeen months after the United States first went into lockdown due the COVID-19 pandemic, a Dodge Durango drove through Destin, FL with a distinctive rear windshield (Figure 9). On it, there were stickers of two varieties. The first included text such as “COVID-19 is a hoax,” “Vaccines kill,” “masks are for slaves & criminals,” “Alex Jones was right,” and “the *media* is the virus.” The second were illustrations of the foul-mouthed Marvel character Deadpool, who has risen in popularity after being played by Ryan Reynolds in the films *Deadpool* (2016) and *Deadpool 2* (2018). Reynolds is an outspoken liberal and cheekily tweeted “Finally got 5G” with a picture of himself receiving the COVID-19 vaccination in March 2021—a clear trolling of anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists, many of whom resisted the vaccine due to claims that the government was using the vaccine as a means to inject tracking devices into people and others who argued that 5G towers were the cause of COVID-19.<sup>636</sup> While there is a degree of separation between actors and the characters they play, Reynolds writes, produces, and

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<sup>635</sup> *Horizon*, season 1, episode 6, “The Knowledge Explosion,” created by Nicola Cook, Adriana Timco, and Catherine Wyler, aired September 21, 1964, on BBC2.

<sup>636</sup> Ryan Reynolds, Twitter Post, March 31, 2021, 9:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/VancityReynolds/status/1377251952304750593>.

stars in the *Deadpool* films, and his take on the “merc with a mouth” has a distinctly progressive spin. As such, there is a dissonance in seeing the anti-vaccination stickers on the same windshield as the Deadpool ones.



**Figure 9. The rear of a vehicle in Destin, Florida (with license plate censored).**

The rear windshield of this Dodge Durango, while appearing contradictory, is not an uncommon phenomenon for speculative fiction fans. Tom Shippey describes how he has often seen fans engage in “a comfortable, distancing reading of the text[s].”<sup>637</sup> These fans latch onto media, or at least certain elements of the media while ignoring aspects that do not fit with their ideologies. Perhaps rather than embracing the progressive elements of Deadpool, such as his

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<sup>637</sup> Tom Shippey, *Hard Reading: Learning From Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 233.

support of queer relationships and how the second film critiques the criminalization of youths of color through the character of Russell (played by Māori actor Julian Dennison) and Deadpool's relationship with him, the owner of the Dodge Durango latched onto the idea that Deadpool resists authority and uses the guns he open-carries to right the wrongs others have committed.<sup>638</sup> When fans identify with particular elements of a text at the expense of other, they may become incensed if other fans interpret the media differently than they do or if the media does not align with their imagined version of it. This is true even if those interpretations have always been present in text. As an example, there likely would be a negative reaction from certain fans if Deadpool has a queer relationship in the third film, despite the second film conveying that he is attracted to the male character Colossus and his character identifying as pansexual in the comic books.

Affect is key to understanding this selective identification phenomenon, as Sara Ahmed argues that “attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become invested in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death.”<sup>639</sup> How would the owner of this Dodge Durango respond if in the third Deadpool film, *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024), Deadpool wears a medical mask over his superhero mask and makes comments about the importance of vaccination? Would Deadpool no longer be a figure they would willingly identify with, or might they argue that this narrative decision is out of character for Deadpool and declare it to be non-canon? Importantly, how would the affects generated by seeing Deadpool wearing a mask influence their reaction to the overall film/franchise, to Reynolds, to the other creative forces behind this hypothetical scene, and to the fans who did enjoy the inclusion?

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<sup>638</sup> This idea calls to mind The Punisher, a Marvel character whose symbol has been openly adopted by reactionary groups such as the Proud Boys, despite the character not aligning with reactionary ideologies. See, Eric Francisco, “The Punisher isn’t Marvel’s Anymore. He Belongs to the Proud Boys Now,” *Inverse*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/marvel-punisher-skull-proud-boys-nazis-capitol-riot>.

<sup>639</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 12.

In my Introduction chapter I stated that the overarching research question for this dissertation is “What is the relationship between the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion?” Through the various controversies discussed over the past four chapters, I have demonstrated that anger, hatred, melancholy, disgust, sadism, and shame are all part of reactionary affective economies in which they are used to motivate others to act. Often, this motivation is to act against a particular group with anger and hatred aiming to change or destroy the present, respectively, while fear brings the group to action to prevent an imagined future. This prevention can even take the form of demolishing media or organizations reactionaries once loved as a means to prevent others from “ruining” it—a “if I can’t have it, no one can” kind of mentality. Other affects, like shame and sadism, are instead utilized to halt actions by directing the affects not at the fellow reactionaries but at the ones who are responsible for necessitating the reaction in the first place—be they directors, actors, writers, or just the people who inhabit the same fan space but are non-white, non-heterosexual, and/or non-male. In each controversy, there is a (real or imagined) group of people who, just through their existence, supposedly threaten reactionaries’ supremacy. The central binding component for reactionaries across these controversies is nostalgia, particularly the modality of restorative nostalgia that is revanchist nostalgia. These groups not only want to restore an imagined past to create a preferred future, they also aim to punish those who caused that past no longer to exist in the present. In some cases, this means excluding certain identities from media, so the media remains “pure,” but in others it expands to creating campaigns and movements that disallow particular people from participating or even existing in spaces, fan or otherwise.

The key connection between the affective attachments fans have to speculative fiction media and the logics of violence/exclusion is nostalgia, and I argue that nostalgia *itself* is a form

of speculative fiction. As I describe in the Introduction chapter, nostalgia “is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. [It] is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>640</sup> Nostalgia is not only a longing for an idealized past; it is an imagining of how things could be different *in the present* if that idealized past returned. Be it the Sad Puppies attempting to recreate a supposedly better time for speculative fiction publishing that never actually existed, *Star Wars* fans arguing that a supposed canon would disallow the presence of a Black stormtrooper in a fictional galaxy, or gamers ignoring longstanding trends and developments in order to advocate for a compulsory heterosexuality in video games, a nostalgia for a past where their group held unquestioned supremacy binds these reactionary fans together.

This nostalgia is frequently rooted in an interpretation of the past that these reactionary fans claim is factual, and these claims make up a so-called “canon.” With fictional media like speculative fiction, canon is more easily understood—it is the imagined and compiled history of a text, the accepted or “official” version of the story. This includes backstories for the characters, the rules of the magic systems, and the timeline of events. Any future stories set in these universes should not contradict that canon. But, if we replace “magic systems” with “government,” could one argue that *histories* are also narratives crafted to communicate a version of the past, that history is itself a “canon” version of the past? One example is the differing curriculums regarding the US Civil War in history classrooms. Much has been made about how in the Southern US, the Civil War is called the “War of Northern Aggression,” but more often, the differences in how the history is presented is more subtle: certain curricula stress the war as a result of tension over states’ rights and the increasingly pronounced economic and cultural differences between the North and South

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<sup>640</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii.

rather than focusing on the issue of slavery.<sup>641</sup> These differences lead to separate conceptions of what is historically canon. Just like with fandoms that develop around media franchises, the fandoms that develop around these histories (see people displaying Confederate flags on their lawns and vehicles) often consider their version of the canon to be factual and dismiss other interpretations as violating fidelity and truth—another example of the political being a fandom, as discussed in Chapter Two. In the controversies I discuss, the material that reactionary fans claim breaks canon is often equated with “wokeness,” even if this material is just the presence of non-white, non-heterosexual, and/or non-male characters or storylines, such as including Black stormtroopers or revealing that Ellie is lesbian.

When it comes to objections that the introduction of more “progressive” material violates canon, reactionary fans often have to speculate what the original creators would have wanted. A prime example is the controversy over the casting of non-white actors to play dwarves, elves, Harfoots, and humans in Amazon’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* series (2022-present). In protesting the casting of these actors, fans argued that the series dishonored what original *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) author J.R.R. Tolkien wrote and what he would have wanted for the series. This response ignores two things. The first is that showrunners of *The Rings of Power* made it clear early on in development that they would be compressing the timeline of Tolkien’s stories (largely drawn from *The Silmarillion* [1977], a collection of myths about Middle Earth that was published four years *after* Tolkien died), and that the Tolkien estate approved the changes.<sup>642</sup> The fact that the showrunners already announced their intention to alter Tolkien’s

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<sup>641</sup> Chara Haeussler Bohan, Lauren Yarnell Bradshaw, and Wade Hampton Morris, “The Mint Julep Consensus: An Analysis of Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Southern and Northern Textbooks and Their Impact on the History Curriculum,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 44, no. 1 (2020): 139-49.

<sup>642</sup> Campbell Clark, “Rings of Power Time Compression Approved by Tolkien Estate Says Showrunner,” *LRMonline*, August 25, 2022, <https://lrmonline.com/news/rings-of-power-time-compression-approved-by-tolkien-estate-says-showrunner/>.

material drastically—something revealed even before the casting announcements—should have informed fans that the series would veer from strict canonical fidelity. Second, and more importantly, these fans ignore the descriptions Tolkien himself provided for Hobbits, particularly the Harfoots (the breed of Hobbits featured in *The Rings of Power*). Tolkien writes that “the Harfoots were browner of skin, smaller, and shorter” compared to the Stoors and Fallohides breeds of Hobbits, and then he describes the Harfoots as “the most normal and representative variety of Hobbits,” meaning that “browner of skin” is the norm for Hobbits.<sup>643</sup> Now, browner of skin does not necessarily mean Black, especially as the statement is made in comparison to the Stoors and Fallohides Hobbits. The reactionary defense that Tolkien did not *actually* mean “brown skin” was common among fans and is evident in the Twitter exchange between fantasy author Neil Gaiman and an apparent Tolkien fan. After Gaiman tweeted that “Tolkien described the Harfoots as ‘browner of skin’ than the other hobbits. So I think anyone grumbling is either racist or hasn’t read their Tolkien,” he received a response from the user Mr Potato saying “Browner of skin means tanned white similar to people who work in the sun as they are in a temperate environment like England, you are both lying and trying to deceive people Gaimen [*sic*], shame on you.”<sup>644</sup> Here, Mr Potato, like many reactionaries who aim to stop a particular action, invokes shame. If shamed by his supposed inaccuracy of the Tolkien lore, Gaiman may stop pushing the idea that characters in the *Lord of the Rings* universe do not need to be uniformly white.

It is worth noting, however, that in original description of Hobbits in *The Hobbit* (1937), Tolkien wrote that Hobbits “are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery soles and thick

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<sup>643</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: Mariner, 2004), 3.

<sup>644</sup> Neil Gaiman, Twitter Post, September 2, 2022, 9:04 AM, <https://twitter.com/neilhimsel/status/1565687114649554944>; Mr Potato, Twitter Post, September 2, 2022, 9:46 AM, <https://twitter.com/Mrpotatygods/status/1566422568319549440>.

warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); *have long clever brown fingers*, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs.”<sup>645</sup> Here, the description of brown fingers is not in comparison to other Hobbits as the “browner of skin” comment was; rather, it is explained as a characteristic that apparently all Hobbits share. From this description, it does not appear that Gaiman is engaging in deceit, either intentionally or accidentally. In fact, it is not until *The Lord of the Rings* that Frodo Baggins is described as “taller than some [Hobbits] and fairer than most.”<sup>646</sup> Frodo’s fairness and height is contrasted to other Hobbits, who, based on this *canon* description, appear darker skinned and shorter than he does. In this case, it is not only *The Rings of Power* that violates canon (as the Harfoots in that series are multiracial), but Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) too. Frodo (played by Elijah Wood) is shorter and has the same skin tone as the other three central Hobbits: Samwise Gamgee (Sean Astin), Peregrin Took (Billy Boyd), and Meriadoc Brandybuck (Dominic Monaghan). While Jackson did receive criticism regarding some of his deviations from the novels, most of it focused on narrative compression and reorganization, while his casting of the Hobbits did not receive nearly the vitriol as the casting practices in *The Rings of Power*.<sup>647</sup> This discussion is not to say that Hobbits are canonically Black, tan, or otherwise. Rather, it demonstrates that by arguing it violates canonical fidelity to cast non-white actors to play elves, dwarves, humans, or Harfoots because Tolkien intended all peoples of Middle Earth to be white, reactionary fans are not relying on a “true” history in any sense. Instead, they are picking and choosing aspects of the canon and relying on their own interpretations of these canonical details to support their ideologies.

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<sup>645</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Mariner, 2012), 4 (my italics).

<sup>646</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 166.

<sup>647</sup> Elana Shefrin, “*Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and Participatory Fandom: Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 3 (2004): 267.



The impulse to turn to an imagined past, to what one speculates the original creator would have wanted with the original text, extends beyond fandoms' desire for canonical fidelity. It is a common feature of reactionary activity and beliefs, especially when considering that they can choose the moment or moments from history that make up the supposed canon. The appeal to a particular moment in an imagined past draws a parallel to Constitutional Originalists. In general, originalists believe that the US Constitution must be interpreted based on how it was intended when it was adopted. Rather than the Constitution being a living document that needs to be interpreted in the context of the present, originalists argue we must consider what the founding fathers meant in the context of 1787 (when neither women nor people of color had the same rights as white, landowning men) to determine how we should govern in the present. According to Jill Lepore, originalists rely on five documents for historical corroboration: the US Constitution, James Madison's notes on the Constitutional Convention, the records of the ratifying conventions, the Federalist Papers, and Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*.<sup>648</sup> Gerard N. Magliocca, however, argues that "no Supreme Court case or significant extrajudicial writing with a normative goal" relies on documents such as Madison's notes in the present day, and that those that cite them are largely aiming to support "legal conclusions arrived at through other means."<sup>649</sup> And truly, no set of five documents, however detailed, will provide the full picture of the thinking of any person, let alone an entire convention of men drafting the Constitution. As such, any attempt to consider what the founding fathers may have meant in 1787 requires speculation of what could have been, and that speculation, as Magliocca implies with the legal conclusions being "arrived at

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<sup>648</sup> Jill Lepore, "The Supreme Court's Selective Memory," *The New Yorker*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-supreme-courts-selective-memory-on-gun-rights>.

<sup>649</sup> Gerard N. Magliocca, "A Faction of One: Revisiting Madison's *Notes* on the Constitutional Convention," *Law & Social Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 269.

through other means,” is largely dependent on the historical canon from which one chooses to draw.

In Supreme Court cases such as *District of Columbia v. Dick Anthony Heller* (2008) and *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen, Superintendent of New York State Police* (2022), both of which expanded the rights of gunowners, the originalists justices ignored and/or distorted historical evidence to support their own ideologies—much like the reactionary fans claiming that Harfoots should not be Black do. While the second amendment states “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed,” the history of gun control in the US indicates that there have frequently been regulations on gunowners, or at least, as Saul Cornell and Nathan DeDino write, “bearing arms [has been] subject to more stringent regulation than keeping arms.”<sup>650</sup> Cornell and DeDino note that the Act of June 26, 1792, the Act of Apr. 13, 1784, the Act of Dec. 6, 1783, and many other acts passed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries restricted the storage and transporting of gunpowder.<sup>651</sup> These statutes were intended to protect communities from accidental explosions, but they were explicit in applying to shops, stores, and private individuals.<sup>652</sup> These statutes, along with court cases such as *Aymette v. State* (1840) and *State v. Buzzard* (1842), established that it is reasonable for the government to institute restrictions on gun ownership and the ability to open carry. Yet, originalists choose to ignore these statutes and cases when advancing their arguments for the expansion of gunowner rights. According to Clarence

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<sup>650</sup> Saul Cornell and Nathan DeDino, “A Well Regulated Right: The Early American Origins of Gun Control,” *Fordham Law Review* 73, no. 2 (2004): 516-7.

<sup>651</sup> Cornell and DeDino, “A Well Regulated Right,” 510-1.

<sup>652</sup> Cornell and DeDino, “A Well Regulated Right,” 512.

Thomas, “When it comes to interpreting the Constitution, not all history is created equal,” which is evident in how originalists select particular historical moments and documents as evidence.<sup>653</sup>

While originalists are typically in the minority, as of February 2024, there are five originalists on the US Supreme Court: Samuel Alito, Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Clarence Thomas. The nostalgia that fuels their drive to return to a version of the past—notably a past when only three of them would be able to vote—influences what they consider to be canonically historical and what should influence their decisions in the present. Just as I establish in Chapter Four that a vocal minority of reactionary fans could reverse decisions regarding the representation of queer characters, this small group of originalists has the ability to dictate who and what is an “acceptable” presence in a variety of spaces and how they are allowed to live their lives. The results of Supreme Court opinions and fan controversies over canonical fidelity are different in scale and consequence, but the affects that motivate these and the binding nostalgia for a particular moment in the past—one that tends to overlook conflicting evidence—is a common thread for reactionary speculative fiction fans and reactionary groups like white supremacists, anti-LGBTQ activists, men’s rights advocates, and the originalists on the US Supreme Court and those in Congress. Examining the affective economies present in various reactionary controversies is critical to understanding the factors that motivate and bind together these seemingly disparate groups.

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<sup>653</sup> *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, 597 U.S. (2022).

## 6.2 Be Patient. The Future Will Soon Come

Since I began writing this dissertation, many more reactionary fan controversies have occurred. Typically, they are over the casting of people of color in roles traditionally assumed to be white (such as Halle Bailey as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* [2023]) or the continued presence of queer characters in speculative fiction spaces (such as Bill and Frank in the television adaptation of *The Last of Us* [2023-present], even though both characters were canonically gay in the original game, and Seyka and Aloy in the video game *Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores* [2023]). One controversy surrounded *Rick and Morty* (2013-present) co-creator and voice actor Justin Roiland, who was accused of domestic battery with corporal injury and false imprisonment then was revealed to have exchanged sexually charged messages with underaged girls. Following the accusations, a subset of fans expressed that they didn't care what he did or who he hurt, they just didn't want the series to be cancelled. While the woman who Roiland abused was listed as Jane Doe, many other women shared the disturbing messages Roiland sent them. They were then harassed online and accused of fabricating the conversations for clout.<sup>654</sup> Many of these fans advocated for just ignoring the whole thing and letting Roiland continue his work on the series.

This controversy is of a different kind than the ones I discuss in this dissertation, but it is motivated by a similar nostalgia. These *Rick and Morty* fans choose to explicitly ignore historical evidence to create their desired future—one in which Roiland could continue working on *Rick and Morty*. They not only long for a moment in the past, but they encourage a future where men like

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<sup>654</sup> Notably, *Rick and Morty* is often described as having an incredibly “toxic” fanbase for more reasons than a footnote can accommodate. This toxicity is often centered around their treatment of women, as after the series hired female-identifying writers for the series' third season (after two seasons of having an all-male writing staff), these women received death and rape threats then had their personal information leaked, as fans accused them of ruining the series. For more, see Dave Trumbore, “‘Rick and Morty’: Dan Harmon Has No Time for Your Misogynistic Bullshit,” Collider, September 21, 2017, <https://collider.com/rick-and-morty-dan-harmon-female-writers/>.

Roiland can continue their harmful behavior as long as they perform in the desired way. While for Roiland, this performance would mean creating more *Rick and Morty* episodes, for the other controversies I discuss that could mean only publishing speculative fiction by white, male authors; creating *Star Wars* content where the main characters are solely white men; removing any queer characters from video games, unless they are the butt of homophobic and transphobic jokes; and perpetuating white, heterosexual, male supremacy in and out of media.

The question, then, is where do we go from here? The speculative fiction elements of nostalgia are vital to the affective economy of reactionary fans and the driving motivations for much of the logics of violence/exclusion that govern reactionary groups at large. Reading nostalgia as speculative fiction provides the key connection between these seemingly disparate groups. White supremacists, anti-LGBTQ activists, and other reactionary groups can be considered fandoms, or anti-fandoms. Fans and anti-fans are typically defined by their affective attachments to a piece of media, to a person, to an idea, and the fans and anti-fans I discuss in this dissertation experience a variety of emotions regarding speculative fiction media. Often, they are angry if the media changes from what they want or are used to. They are fearful of what these changes mean for the future. But, in order to feel this anger, to experience this fear, there needs to be an initial connection. This connection, however, as I have demonstrated through connecting speculative fiction fans to reactionaries, is not always to the media itself; rather, it can be for what the media *represents*. This is an important distinction. Anti-fans do not need to have even engaged with the media to decide they are against it. Ben Shapiro, for example, criticized the third episode of *The Last of Us* television series as being “Brokeback Zombie Farm” while also acknowledging that he

did not play the original game “because [he is] not a child.”<sup>655</sup> Shapiro makes it clear that he is not a fan of the source material or the series. Instead, he is a fan of heterosexuality and reacts against media that depicts a moving portrayal of two men finding love in the apocalypse.

While it is beyond the scope of a single dissertation or communication scholar to provide a framework for preemptively stopping reactionary activity, through analyzing the affective economies of these controversies, I have demonstrated the various ways that looking to the interactions of fans of the seemingly pulp genre of speculative fiction can enable scholars and the public to understand reactionary groups’ formation, communication, and continuation. Ray Bradbury, in his short story “No News, or What Killed the Dog?” (1994), has character Roger Bentley wax philosophic about the role of speculative fiction.<sup>656</sup> According to Bradbury/Bentley, speculative fiction is not about predicting the future. Nor is it laser beams and scantily clad alien women. Speculative fiction is for the people who realize that things could be better, could be different and their attempt at imagining ways for it to be so. But the version of better that Bradbury/Bentley discusses is up to individuals. Anti-fans of *Star Wars* hate the current trajectory of the series and imagine a future where the galaxy far, far away is only populated by white characters in the same way that there are fans of *The Last of Us* who see a game rejecting the seemingly compulsory heterosexuality of the video game industry and imagine a future where a single queer relationship is not a monumental achievement, but something common to games. Many of the affects that reactionary fans mobilize in these controversies can also be utilized in more progressive causes. The key, then, is to consider what future we are constructing from our

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<sup>655</sup> Quoted in Samantha Bergeson, “Ben Shapiro Slammed for Wondering Where the Zombies are in ‘The Last of Us’,” IndieWire, February 7, 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/2023/02/ben-shapiro-slammed-the-last-of-us-queer-no-zombies-1234807659/>.

<sup>656</sup> Ray Bradbury, “No News, or What Killed the Dog?” in *Quicker than the Eye* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 166.

pasts. Is it one where there is continued supremacy for the few? Is it one driven by fear and hatred? Or is it driven by a pride over how far we've come and an anger over the lack of progress? Affect is not inherently "good" or "bad," progressive or reactionary. Neither is speculative fiction. They are politically ambivalent, able to be used by authors, fans, and anyone else in the way they choose. But through engaging with the emotions that motivate us to act and those that motivate others to react, through considering what affect and speculative fiction can accomplish, perhaps an imagined future that embraces diversity, difference, and a more socially just society is not so far out of reach.

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