

**INVENTING A UNIVERSE:
READING AND WRITING INTERNET FAN FICTION**

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Inventing a Universe examines the creative and critical writing of an internet fan fiction archive. First, I suggest that persistent theories of fan writing, including the influential notion of fans as “textual poachers,” have not adequately made visible the work of reading and writing that goes in at such sites. I reframe internet fan fiction as the work of amateur writers drawing on composition studies work on discourse communities and student writing to offer new ways of reading these texts and textual practices. Second, analyzing the discourse conventions and texts of a particular fan fiction archive, *Different Colored Pens*, I argue that members of this site share an explicit collaborative project of using fan fiction to help one another improve as readers and writers. This dissertation, which is among the first academic efforts to focus on and analyze fan fiction feedback practices specifically, will contribute to the rich and growing literature on the ways that online communities of amateur writers, including fan fiction writers, collaboratively develop their writing skills.

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1.0 INVENTING A UNIVERSE: INTERNET FAN FICTION IN CONTEXT

Do you know just when you realize a seemingly ordinary moment in your life is, in fact, truly extraordinary? Before you even ponder that question, let me just answer it—after the fact. *Well* after the fact.

Let me begin by telling you I'm not like most people. You won't see me reading in the park or having a light lunch at a local cafe in the early afternoon sun. You won't cross paths with me at the grocery store with your cart full of screaming kids. I take Vitamin E like it's going out of style. I have a special ultraviolet light at my desk at both home and work. Heavy tapestry curtains line my windows, and my bedroom door has sound proofing padding on it.

In other words, I work third shift.

—Trom DeGrey, “The Laundry Diaries,” *Different Colored Pens*

The black car, with its spray painted windows, thundered past the sign that marked the city limits of the half-assed town known as Sunnydale on the maps, but the driver was guessing the residents now referred to it as “this

godforsaken town.” He could have done with loud music to drown the monotony of the journey but the woman he accompanied would not hear of it. Matter of fact she probably would not even be aware of it anyway. She was off in her own little world once more and nothing was going to draw her out of it just yet. At least not until she was ready to come out.

—Katharyn Rosser, “The Sidestep Chronicle,” *Different Colored Pens*

S.S. Hannibal

Stardate 7845

Earth Year: 2280

Lieutenant Willow Rosenb[e]rg had no idea when she woke up that morning that her first solo mission was going to be her last.

“It's just a small ion storm, sir,” she had said on the bridge of the Hannibal, the viewscreen showing the diaphanous, multicolored disruption. Her voice had a wheedling sound to it that she herself despised, a tone not lost on the captain and the chief science officer. Over their shoulders, she could see her best friend, Lt. Summers, sitting at the tactical station, pretending not to listen to the conversation, rolling her eyes at Willow's pleading.

—Capt Murdock, “Equilibration,” *Different Colored Pens*

To a casual reader, these introductory paragraphs from three different works of fiction might seem to be connected only by the mention of *Different Colored Pens* in their

attributions. The first, a second-person address to the reader, introduces a pair of vignettes describing the experiences of two young women who meet in a 24-hour laundrette in contemporary Los Angeles with the help of a goofy but well-meaning police officer. The second opens a gothic novel of epic proportions, well over 100 chapters chronicling the attempts of a solitary warrior to save the soul of a vampire with whom she has become desperately entangled. And the third, beginning with a date and vessel stamp reminiscent of a *Star Trek* television episode, introduces a group of characters engaged in a science-fiction adventure saga that crosses centuries.

To an informed reader, however,—a reader who has gone to the internet fiction archive *Different Colored Pens*—each story is virtually instantly recognizable as a work of fan fiction based on the seven-season television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*.¹ The punch line “I work third shift” in “The Laundry Diaries” depends for its humor on a set of references that are true not only for graveyard shift workers but also for vampires: the lack of daylight, the carefully lined windows, the separation from other people. The spray-painted car windows and mention of Sunnydale in “The Sidestep Chronicle” specifically recall the opening episode of the third season of *BtVS*, in which the vampire Spike rolls into town intent on killing the Slayer, the one girl in each generation chosen to defend humanity against vampires and demons. And “Equilibration” not only names both Willow Rosenberg and [Buffy] Summers, characters from that program, but also refers to characteristic speech habits and facial expressions that regular viewers would recognize immediately: Willow’s pleading tone, Buffy’s rolling eyes.

¹*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, produced by writer-director Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy Productions, aired on the WB television network from 1997-2001 and on UPN from 2001-2003.

While these three stories differ vastly in scope, style, setting, language use, literary tradition, and to an extent epistemology, they share a set of characters and premises from *BtVS*, and they work with mannerisms, expressions, character histories, and insider references that make these particular representations of Willow Rosenberg, Buffy Summers, Spike, and a variety of others familiar to their readers. Perhaps most importantly, they all adhere to a set of guidelines that the moderators of *Different Colored Pens*, a fan fiction forum and archive that publishes Willow/Tara fan fiction, require of all stories published there: they have narrative trajectories that end in each case with the two principal characters, Willow and Tara, in love; they are posted publicly and receive individual public responses from various readers; and they explicitly identify themselves as fan fiction.

Asking what is “at stake” in a set of texts is *de rigueur* both in composition studies and more recently, in vampire-savvy “Buffy studies,”² and it remains a question worth asking. What does this set of introductory paragraphs—and the vast online network of fan writing of which it represents the tiniest fraction—offer not only to the fans who read, celebrate, and critique this kind of work but also to scholars in composition studies who are interested in the cultural significance and pedagogical work of these kinds of amateur texts?

This question represents the overall motivation behind this dissertation: to read the creative and critical work of an internet fan fiction archive from a composition studies perspective, a move that, as I will discuss later in this chapter, is itself a departure from

² The sub-field of “Buffy Studies” includes an annual interdisciplinary conference on “Buffy Studies”; *Slayage*, an online journal; and several book length-essay collections and monographs. See for example Matthew Pateman, *Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); Lorna Jewett, *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2005); Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, eds. *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

most of the (relatively limited) scholarship on fan fiction to date. Previous scholarship on fans and fan communities has been successful in arguing that people who identify as media fans participate in communities and engage in creative work; one important difference in my work is its composition framework, by which I mean in part an insistence on reading fan texts for the ways they represent, reconfigure, and interrupt shared understandings of amateur writing processes and products. My hope is that this dissertation, which is among the first academic efforts to focus on and analyze fan fiction feedback practices specifically, will contribute to the rich and growing literature on the ways that online communities of amateur writers, including fan fiction writers, collaboratively develop their skills as writers.

In Chapter 2, “Metaphor as Canon: The Work of Textual Poaching,” I assess theories of fan writing and online fan communities, especially Henry Jenkins’ popular and persistent notion of fans as “textual poachers,” and I suggest that while the scholarship to date has continued to develop a nuanced sense of who online media fans are, how their communities operate, and what kind of work they do, it has not adequately accounted for the composition of the texts that those fans produce: texts that include not only the creative writing of fan fiction itself but also the analysis that interrupts and frames the whole enterprise. While “textual poaching” remains a compelling metaphor, I suggest that it must at least be juxtaposed with other critical lenses that make visible the work of reading and writing that fan fiction involves. In Chapter 3, “Reading and Writing at *Different Colored Pens*,” I use the framework of the discourse community as it has evolved in composition studies to explore and analyze the textual conventions and reading and writing practices of a particular fan fiction website. John Swales and Patricia Bizzell, for example, each argue

that the most important aspect of a discourse community is its shared project, and I suggest that writers and readers at *Different Colored Pens* share an explicit collaborative project of developing strategies for sustained response; specifically, I suggest that this group of readers and writers use fan fiction as an opportunity to encourage one another to improve as readers and writers. Fan fiction can be read—and has been discussed as—a largely celebratory enterprise, marked by mutual praise at the expense of critical engagement; however, in Chapter 4, “The Art of Leaving Feedback: Engaging Response at *Different Colored Pens*,” I suggest that the tendency of fans at this site to encourage and support one another is a way that this community creates a space in which its members can improve as readers and writers outside of the negative critical impulses they associate with school.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, “Writing Relationships That Matter,” I suggest that the relationships I have identified and discussed throughout the preceding chapters—relationships between creative and critical writing, readers and writers, archive and community, individual authorship and collaboration—offer to writing teachers powerful models for understanding the critical work of reading and writing. Throughout this dissertation, then, I argue that fan fiction is more than the product of people who might be identified as fans; indeed, fan fiction is also the work of people who identify as readers and writers. I rely on the practice in composition studies of reading individual student texts for the ways they represent, interrupt, and reconfigure the larger pedagogical work of a classroom, a way of writing, a way of thinking about writing.

Throughout this dissertation, I draw on the three fan fiction texts evoked in the opening epigraphs, “The Laundry Diaries,” “Equilibration,” and “The Sidestep

Chronicle.”³ In this chapter, I use a set of terms from the introductory notes for each story to introduce and contextualize the materials and the scope of this dissertation. In order to proceed to my main focus—the critical composition of fan fiction at one website—I move quickly through a range of issues: history, scholarship, major frames of reference. Assuming that some readers will be unfamiliar with fan fiction texts, I take time in this introductory chapter to suggest the dimensions and texture of internet fan fiction and to introduce the conventions of fan fiction at the online forum and archive *Different Colored Pens*. Discussing internet fan fiction, and even discussing the comparatively limited set of texts to be found at the *Different Colored Pens* archive, is a project that continually threatens to expand. Within the past year, the first two book-length studies devoted solely to issues of fan fiction have seen publication, and the online *Distraction: The Journal of Fan Fiction Studies* has begun to issue calls for academic papers. Since approximately 1990, books and articles that include work on fan fiction have begun to proliferate, and there are now studies available on a wide range of fan fiction-related issues, from Kurt Lancaster’s study of *Babylon 5* fan performance to Sarah N. Gatson and Amanda Zweerink’s work on internet fan community formation⁴. In particular, sociological, ethnographic, communications, and media studies frameworks have been most commonly used, and while I touch on many of these studies in this and the following chapters, my aim

³ Technically, individual posts on internet message boards and website forums are considered to be public domain, but James E. Porter argues in *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetnetworked Writing* (1998) that precedents for treating any and all internet writing with integrity in research situations must be established.

Specifically, Porter suggests that it is methodologically valuable, if a little cumbersome, to treat every post as “writing” and every poster as, therefore, a “writer.” As I discuss in later chapters, I treat the use of fan fiction and fan criticism in the same way that I would treat the use of a student paper. Trom DeGrey, Capt Murdock, and Katharyn Rosser have all granted permission for their work to be used in this dissertation.

⁴ See Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2001. See also Sarah N. Gatson and Amanda Zweerink, *Interpersonal Culture: Television, the Internet, and the Making of a Community*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 2004 .

here is not to reproduce work that has been done well but to offer a framework that sheds light on fanfic reading and writing practices.

It is important to note that three samples of fan fiction I refer to here are not meant to be representative even of the work published at *Different Colored Pens*, let alone of internet fan fiction in general.. Internet fan fiction is a vast and vibrant textual system, made possible by the work of tens of thousands of writers and comprised of hundreds of thousands of texts (and even those numbers are probably underestimations). Rather, these three texts allow me to introduce the conventions and dynamics of a very specific subset of fan fiction, and they offer a series of pivotal moments and reader-writer exchanges that ground my discussion of the work. For example, Trom DeGrey, author of “The Laundry Diaries,” has been instrumental in making issues of writing and composition visible at *Different Colored Pens*, and her work to provoke thoughtful discussions about everything from pronoun use to writer’s block intersects productively with her own fan fiction. Capt Murdock’s story “Equilibration” is unusual at *Pens* in being a “crossover fic,” a story that blends the premises and characters of two unrelated media texts (*BtVS* and *Star Trek*) and thereby requires reading strategies not solely reliant on *BtVS* fandom and that, in fact, might disrupt conventional wisdom about fan reading. Finally, the 103 chapters of Katharyn Rosser’s “Sidestep Chronicle” offer a glimpse into the collective production of a fan fiction epic, with hundreds of readers publishing feedback and engaging one another, and Katharyn, in discussion about the text.⁵

While individual story notes at *Different Colored Pens* vary, all writers who post work use a basic template. Stories include a disclaimer; notes about distribution, spoilers,

⁵ The sequel, “Second Chronicle,” starts with chapter 104 and is, at the completion of this dissertation, at chapter 237.

and pairings; a rating; feedback preferences; and acknowledgments. The story notes themselves are quite dense, so on the following two pages, I present them in full (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).⁶ In this chapter, I quote relevant sections to frame the issues and introduce the terms that will allow an adequate discussion of internet fan fiction.

Title: The Sidestep Chronicle – Backstep 1 (Part 1)
Author: Katharyn Rosser
Feedback: Constructive criticism always welcome. [...]
Spoiler Warning: Pretty limited. The story occurs in an alternate universe though reference is made to events that occur in both realities across all seasons.
Summary: A look back at Willow’s fate in the immediate aftermath of the rise of The Master in S1 and how it came to be. Just setting the groundwork out for the Chronicle. Approximately 3 months after the time of the episode “The Harvest” in S1 which was the point at which the Master would have risen - as there was no slayer interference in this reality.
Disclaimer: I still don’t own any of the copyrights or anything else associated with BTVS. All rights lie with the production company, writers etc, etc. I am making zilch from this series of stories.
Rating: 15 across all parts.
Couples: Spike and Dru, X/W in as much as they ever were in S1 (don’t worry about that!) That’s it. What do you expect? It’s season 1 – Tara is three years from Sunnydale! But she is in here, in this part.
Thanks To: Those that urged the writing of this chronicle based only upon the teasers that I ran in The Beginnings Cycle. I hope this does not disappoint. Xita, who at a crucial low point in writing this told me what I needed to here – that a fic including Vamp Willow could be on topic (hey Zahir did it to Tara!) Louise – that one who is my always - once more and Kerry who has done so much for this fic. She wrote some little snippets, and half a part. She has also endured hours of chat about this thing of mine which resulted in much of what is good in it. I wanted to get this going before you had to vanish dearie, hope you like. Also to Jo who stepped into the beta reading harness at short notice and handled the first few parts in record time. My errors are my own, their genius is theirs.

Figure 1. Story notes for Rosser’s “Sidestep Chronicle,” *Different Colored Pens*

⁶ All identifying contact information has been removed to protect confidentiality. Throughout the dissertation, I excerpt but do not otherwise alter message posts. I have also chosen not to call attention to errors or typos with the standard denotation of “[sic].”

Vignettes, yes, plural, as in a whopping TWO! 🤔 The first I'm posting now, obviously, the second is written and just going through an editing process. I will have it up by Friday at the latest. This first one is Willow's POV, the second will be Tara's. Hope you enjoy!

Title- The Laundry Diaries: The Machinations of a Coin Operated Mind

Author name- Trom DeGrey

Email Address- [...]

Disclaimer- I don't own these characters and I'm not making any money. I'd be a lot happier if none of that were true though.

Feedback- Flail away!

Summary- Life changes in the strangest of places.

Notes- So many people have looked at this first part it's not even funny. Thanks to Tempest Duer for your time and thoughts. Thanks to Crimson Sunshine for all your encouragement. Thanks to Shamden, whose simple suggestion finally helped me get it right. And finally, thanks to Tulipp for giving me permission.

Figure 2. Story notes for Trom DeGrey's "Laundry Diaries," *Different Colored Pens*

Title: Equilibration

Part: Prologue (many chapters follow. Not sure how many just yet.)

Disclaimer: The characters of Willow Rosenberg, Tara Maclay, Xander Harris and Buffy Summers, or the reasonable facsimiles that I employ in this story, are the property of Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy productions. The setting for the story is within the universe of *Star Trek*, created by Gene Roddenberry and owned by Paramount Pictures, Inc. No infringement of copyright is intended. The other characters are the creation of either myself or several colleagues who don't care what I do with them. In any case, I'm a firm believer in Kasden's Law. YMMV.

Pairing: W/T (not precisely the Willow and Tara that we all know and love -- but close enough for government work.)

Spoilers: None (as this does not take place in the Buffyverse at all, we're all safe as far as that goes. As to Trek, this takes place mid- *Deep Space Nine* (call it third or fourth season).

Rating: PG-13.

Summary: A young 23rd-century Starfleet officer named Willow Rosenburg finds herself stranded in the 24th century. Guess who's there to ease her transition?

Warning: this story takes a while to get really going, so please be patient. For you non-Trekkers out there, I do ask that you give this story a chance. No, it does not involve anybody from TOS, TNG, DS9, Voyager or Enterprise, it just takes place in the Trek universe. All new characters.

Feedback: Email me at [...]. Thanks.

Distribution: For God's sake, don't put this on a Trek board without asking me first! I'll lose all my street cred.:)

Figure 3. Story notes for Capt. Murdock's "Equilibration," *Different Colored Pens*

1.1 DISCLAIMERS: DEFINING INTERNET FAN FICTION

Let me offer a tentative working definition of “internet fan fiction” or fanfic, as it is often called by those who read and write it: it is writing

- 1) by amateur fans of a particular media text or texts (television program, book, film, role-playing game, anime, cartoon, etc),
- 2) commencing from (but not limited to) some of the characters and sometimes premises of that text or those texts,
- 3) explicitly calling attention to itself *as fan fiction*, and
- 4) published on the internet.

The first part of this deliberately broad definition shares many of its major terms—original, fans, amateur, characters, media texts—with most other definitions in widespread circulation to date (whether offered by fans themselves or reporters and columnists). Critical opinion more or less agrees on the fact that fan fiction is written not by casual viewers, readers, or players but by *fans*, people who generally have an extensive and expansive knowledge of the specific text about which they are writing. However, uncomplicated definitions of fan fiction seem to be the province of online glossaries and articles in the arts and culture sections of newspapers rather than critical studies, which tend instead to annotate such definitions carefully and at length or, more commonly, to reach provisional, even implied definitions, over the course of their work.

This hesitancy to pin down terms may arise from the fact that any attempt to construct an authoritative definition for such a huge body of text invites trouble. Sheenagh Pugh, for example, suggests in *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (2005) that fan fiction is “fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by

someone else” (9). This definition attempts both too much and too little; while a number of studies have argued persuasively that fan fiction has its roots in fan-written contributions to the 1920’s periodical *Amazing Stories* (Coppa), in anonymous and sometimes plagiarized magazine stories of the 19th century (Duncombe), in 19th century sensational novels (Pflieger, Pearson), or in the collective oral storytelling traditions dating back to Ovid (Aden),⁷ very few critics would agree that *any* fiction based on pre-existing work qualifies as fan fiction *per se*.⁸ An overly elastic definition of fan fiction would include texts from Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, both “based on a situation and characters originally created by” Charlotte Bronte, to the entire Shakespeare corpus. Stretched to its limits, considering the inherently intertextual nature of language, this definition could be considered to include *all* literature.

More specifically, Pugh’s almost incidental elision of “situation and characters” suggests that fan fiction is more bound to this particular combination of elements than it actually is. In Trom DeGrey’s “The Laundry Diaries,” for example, the characters of Willow and Tara meet and ultimately fall in love, and this is in fact a situation that takes place within *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*...but it is also a situation that occurs in a host of other media texts, and in “real life,” all the time. In the fourth season of the television show, Tara and Willow meet through a college campus Wiccan group, and their

⁷ For an excellent review of suggestions about fan fiction’s roots, see Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom.” Hellekson and Busse 41-60. See also Roger C. Aden’s *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*. Tuscaloosa and London: U of Alabama P, 1999; Stephen Duncombe’s “The Zine Scene” in the *Post-Subcultures Reader*; Pat Pflieger, “Too Good to be True: 150 Years of Mary Sue.” American Culture Association. March 31, 1999. San Diego. Online 26 March 2003. Avail: <http://www.merrycoz.org/papers/MARYSUE.HTM>; and Roberta E. Pearson. “Kings of Infinite Space: Cult Television Characters and Narrative Possibilities.” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*.

⁸ An argument could be made, for example, that fan fiction participates in the tradition of serialized fiction, which Jennifer Hayward notes depends on a “process of collaborative interpretations, predictions, [and] meta-commentary” (2).

relationship develops over time, with Willow only gradually realizing that she is a lesbian and agonizing over the discovery, which results in her choosing Tara over her erstwhile werewolf boyfriend. In “The Laundry Diaries,” a story set in an alternate universe to the one suggested by *BtVS*, both women already identify as gay, neither are college students or witches, and there is a singular lack of angst. The characters are certainly drawn from *BtVS*, but the situation is from DeGrey’s own creation, possibly with built-in nods to a Stephen Frears film or an episode of the television program *Friends*. This may be an overly minute criticism of Sheenagh Pugh’s work, which is more nuanced than the single sentence I quoted suggest, but it is indicative of the difficulty of any attempt at a wholesale definition.

Attempts to explicate at length do not solve the problem, as Angela Thomas’ definition of fan fiction in an article about fanfic by adolescent writers indicates. Thomas suggests that

[b]orrowing settings, plots, characters and ideas from all forms of media and popular culture, fans weave together new tales, sometimes within the accepted canon (the real works from which they are borrowing), sometimes blending several ideas from different stories (i.e. Star Wars meets Middle Earth) together in a type of fiction called “Crossovers”, and sometimes imagining new possibilities for additional characters, different histories or different settings to build on existing stories, called “Alternate Universe” fiction. (2)

Thomas is more attentive to the creative possibilities of fan fiction, using words like “weave,” “borrowing,” and “blending” to suggest the inherent intertextuality of fan fiction

composition and acknowledging in her mention of “imagining new possibilities” the fact that not *everything* in a work of fan fiction derives from its media text. She also uses several terms that are critical to an understanding of fan fiction “genres,” terms that I take up later in this chapter: canon, crossover, and alternate universe. However, her uncomplicated use of the word “real,” as in “the real works from which [fan fiction authors] are borrowing,” threatens to undermine the whole project, nearly erasing the integrity of the very works she seems to want to celebrate.

Imagine a college writing instructor announcing at CCCC, for example, that the work her students do is not *real*; this is an untenable position to take in the current composition studies climate, and for good reason. As David Bartholomae argues persuasively in “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins,” the work that student writers do is no less real because it is written in response to a prompt, or because it lacks disciplinary acumen and a familiarity with the conventions of a field. Rather, students are learning the work of a discipline by writing. Students may falter in their attempts to write psychology or anthropology, Bartholomae writes,

and they will not *get* the canonical interpretations preserved by the disciplines. But they will learn something about what it means to study a subject, to carry out a project. And they will begin to learn what a subject is—how it is constituted, how it is defended, how it finds its examples and champions, how it changes and preserves itself. (181)

In the same way, a fan writer is not a screenwriter or professional writer and may have no such aspirations. But in experimenting with an existing “canon” of material, he is engaging in a very similar process of research and learning. The writing he does is “real.”

To return to definitional considerations, more productive, perhaps, are those works that resist straightforward declarative definitions, preferring instead to take an entire chapter or article to come to an approximation of what the production of fan fiction involves, as in Henry Jenkins' groundbreaking 1992 book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Jenkins writes that “[f]an writing builds upon the interpretive practices of the fan community, taking the collective meta-text as the base from which to generate a wide range of media-related stories. Fans, as one long-time Trekker explained, ‘treat the program like silly putty,’ stretching its boundaries to incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires” (156). Jenkins' definition is not perfect; for instance, read out of context, it might seem to suggest that there is a single monolithic “fan community” agent rather than multiple individuals in multiple communities. However, in suggesting that the “collective meta-text” that fans have created, in addition to the source media text—in this case *Star Trek*—feeds the creative process, Jenkins' language comes closer to allowing for fans' independent sources of invention: not just a television show but a wide range of resources contribute to a work of fan fiction, and fan fiction writers can be considered to be doing a form of research-based writing.

Interestingly—I think appropriately—the editors of the first book collection devoted entirely to issues of fan fiction resist defining it at all, preferring instead to accumulate a set of definitions based on the overall work of the individual chapters that follow. Editors Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse suggest that defining fan fiction precisely is notoriously difficult, in part because of differences in

the formulation of boundaries. Are media tie-in novels fan fiction? Is any derivative literature? What about commercial fiction that is really fan fiction with the serial numbers filed off? Most definitions emphasize the amateur aspect, the community that surrounds the production, dissemination, and consumption of fan fiction. This aspect places fan production in a specific postmodern, postcapitalist moment with easy access to the source text—usually TV programs—and reproductive tools. As such, fan fiction is as much a function of its engagement with the source text as [of] the way stories are disseminated and the communities that surround these fannish engagements. (26)

Here, Hellekson and Busse present the questions about boundaries that Sheenagh Pugh obviates, and further, they gesture to the fact that fan fiction writers rely not only on a source text but on a variety of tools, which I take to mean the many resources that are available to fan fiction writers.

As I discuss at more length in Chapters 3 and 4, fanfic writers not only use their knowledge of the source text in question to write but also tend to rely on research and resources relevant to the texts they write (the degree varies, but the impulse seems to be widespread). For example, writers at *Different Colored Pens*—recall that these are writers who, in this iteration of their work, are fans of *BtVS* generally and of the relationship between the characters Willow and Tara specifically—might draw on any of a wide range of online resources (to say nothing of those offline) in their work. It's a long list, but I take the time to summarize it here because it is critical to the second part of my working definition of fan fiction, the idea that while fan fiction *commences* from the characters and

sometimes premises of a source text, it is indebted to a wide range of other texts and sources of invention, as well:

- mailing lists, instant messaging, online chat rooms, and topic-specific discussion threads;
- the help or collaboration of a “beta reader,” an individual editor/consultant;
- *BtVS* websites that provide character biographies, episode shooting scripts and synopses, program histories, databases of dialogue and quotations, and more;
- topic-specific websites that provide information, resources, and links on Wiccan practices, vampire lore, the California higher education system, psychology, feminism, and other issues relevant to *BtVS*;⁹
- critical commentary and academic essays on any and all aspects of *BtVS* and related issues;¹⁰
- fan fiction writing sites with glossaries, links to encyclopedias and dictionaries, bibliographies of published (on and offline) work on fan fiction, and slang and other language use;¹¹
- reference books on *BtVS* slang,
- general writing resources from grammar and mechanical help to character and plot development, style and point of view, writer’s block, and reader expectations;

⁹ For example, see All Things Philosophical on BTVS, Institute of Vampirology, and *Buffy the Patriarchy Slayer*. See also Christopher Golden, Stephen R. Bisette, and Thomas E. Sniegowski, *The Monster Book*. New York: Pocket, 2000.

¹⁰ See *The Fanfic Symposium*, *Above the Law*, *Buffyology: The Academic Study of Buffy*, and *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*.

¹¹ See the *Fanfiction Glossary* and *Buffy Slangage*. See also Michael Adams, *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon*. New York: Oxford UP, USA, 2003.

- slash sites for help with writing same-sex relationships, ranging from the grammatic to the erotic; and finally
- fan fiction sites of all configurations: by program, by pairing of characters, by special interest (i.e., vampire fan fiction, lesbian fan fiction, G-rated fan fiction, etc.).

This is, again, a partial list, but it suggests the multiplicity of texts that feed into the composition of works of fan fiction and also the research fanfic writers often conduct. It also recalls Hellekson and Busse's insistence, in the last sentence of the passage quoted above, that fan fiction is "as much a function of its engagement with the source text as [of] the way stories are disseminated and the communities that surround these fannish engagements" (26). In this vital sentence, these scholars stake out their projects' difference from previous work in fan fiction, attempting a move to a *textual*, and not a sociological or communications, framework, a point I return to in later chapters.

Let me turn, then, to a very specific textual marker that is useful in understanding the third part of my definition, the idea that fan fiction is writing that explicitly identifies itself as fan fiction. Hellekson and Busse raise the question of media tie-in novels; in fact, the producers of *BtVS*, *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* and other programs pay writers to spin out additional storylines in paperback or comic series, available in the science fiction or fantasy sections of many bookstores. But these novels are the work of paid professionals, and their work is solicited and authorized by the producers. A published novelization of *BtVS*, for example, is unlikely to be considered to be fan fiction, even if the professional writer is technically a fan of the program. The work of fan fiction writers, on the other

hand, generally is accompanied by a disclaimer of any intent either to pass off other people's material as their own or to profit from their writing.

It is arguably this very disclaimer that identifies a piece of writing as fan fiction, for this is the statement that unambiguously connects the writing to a specific source text. Without its disclaimer, the excerpt from “The Laundry Diaries” that began this chapter, for example, *could* be read as original fiction, albeit one with allusions to *BtVS*. However, Trom deGrey's statement—“I don't own these characters and I'm not making any money. I'd be a lot happier if none of that were true though”—clearly connects her writing to the show through her use of “these characters.” Similarly, Katharyn Rosser notes, “I still don't own any of the copyrights or anything else associated with BTVS. All rights lie with the production company, writers etc, etc. I am making zilch from this series of stories.”¹² Disavowing any financial gain is almost universal in fan fiction story notes, and it is another way that fan fiction writers both connect to and announce their separateness from their source text or texts.¹³

It is important to note, however, that neither DeGrey nor Rosser actually denies ownership of her own source material; in each case, the specificity of the disclaimer is telling. DeGrey, by omission, retains ownership of everything *but* her characters, while Rosser retains ownership of anything not explicitly “associated with BTVS.” And Capt Murdock, whose story (in naming multiple specific characters from *BtVS*) is the most explicitly dependent on the source text of the three, takes care to delineate several sources for his work:

¹² In citing message posts from *Different Colored Pens*, I indicate the name of the author, the title of the thread in which the comment appears, and when possible the chapter title. I refer to all writers by their adopted pseudonyms.

¹³ Fan writers are diligent about using disclaimers to note that they make no profit from their work.

Disclaimer: The characters of Willow Rosenberg, Tara Maclay, Xander Harris and Buffy Summers, or the reasonable facsimiles that I employ in this story, are the property of Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy productions. The setting for the story is within the universe of *Star Trek*, created by Gene Roddenberry and owned by Paramount Pictures, Inc. No infringement of copyright is intended. The other characters are the creation of either myself or several colleagues who don't care what I do with them. In any case, I'm a firm believer in Kasden's Law. YMMV.¹⁴

In addition to the specific disavowal of copyright infringement, a few aspects of this disclaimer bear mentioning. Murdock's acknowledgment of his colleagues' ideas about characters suggests that he has collaborated, at least informally, on this project; it is not solely the work of an individual mind. In fact, note that Murdock names four distinct sources for the story—the creators of *BtVS*, the creators of *Star Trek*, his own colleagues, and himself—and that he assigns roughly equivalent syntactical weight to each of those sources; in this note, he and his colleagues are creators in the same way that Whedon and Roddenberry are. And each of those four sources is credited with feeding into the story; far from imitating or being influenced solely by a single source text, Murdock's story involves the negotiation of a range of sources. The disclaimer, then, while ostensibly serving only to protect copyright and deny financial gain, actually claims a wide range of source material.

¹⁴ In a later post, Murdock notes that “Kasdan’s law” is this: “If you steal from one source, it’s plagiarism; if you steal from ten sources, it’s research.” YMMV is an acronym for the phrase “your mileage may vary.”

1.2 DISTRIBUTION: SCOPE, COMMUNITIES, AND FANDOMS

Internet fan fiction is an immense textual enterprise. In June 2007, I found more than 950,000 individual fan fiction titles by more than 220,000 writers, drawing on 567 television programs, 381 films, and hundreds more comic books, graphic novels, anime, and role-playing games...

at a single website.¹⁵

When one imagines the enormous amount of time, work, and endless qualification that would be required to make even a tentative statement that could apply to the 950,000 titles archived at *fanfiction.net*, it makes sense that most scholars find ways to limit the body of text for which they try to be accountable. The most obvious way, it seems, is to narrow by source text, stories that would have more in common than the simple fact of their existence as fan fiction. If a researcher can't manage 1,000,000 stories, then perhaps she could deal with the handful of stories written about *All in the Family* (10), *Indiana Jones* (122), or *Lord of the Flies* (517) But what about the 1,100 stories commencing from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, or the 8,000 stories working with the collected *Star Trek* television programs and movies? And what if she is interested in the 23,000 stories dealing with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? (In fact, *BtVS* accounts for 36% of the television fan fiction archived at *fanfiction.net*, generating nearly three times as many stories as the next most popular set of programs, *Star Trek*.)

¹⁵ *Fanfiction.net* (<http://www.fanfiction.net>) is open to any individual who wishes to submit fiction, and in as few or as many sections as they wish. Writers are responsible for signing onto the site, entering their work into the appropriate categories (text, primary characters, ratings, etc.), and uploading their files so that they appear in a standard format.

The problem compounds with the recognition that *fanfiction.net*, although a particularly large website—it serves as a kind of clearinghouse for any and all kinds of fan fiction and has no vetting process—is still only one site among tens of thousands. Kristen Pullen has noted that in 1999, a Yahoo search yielded some 33,000 fan fiction websites; by 2003, the same search yielded 58,000 sites, and the numbers almost certainly have grown since then (80). (Take, for instance, those 1,100 *Xena* stories at *fanfiction.net*, and consider that at another website, one dedicated solely to *Xena* fan fiction, there are more than 3,000 stories).¹⁶

Certainly, there is overlap and duplication, with some stories being posted at multiple websites. “The Laundry Diaries,” for example, is archived not only at *Pens* but also at *Through the Looking Glass*, a website that publishes fan fiction specific to the character of Tara (one half of the Willow and Tara pair); “Equilibration” is also archived on the Buffy/Angel index at *writing.com*.¹⁷ There is such a variety of fan fiction configurations, in fact, that it is possible for a single story to appear on a dozen or more sites. For instance, “The Sidestep Chronicle” *could* appear, if its author wished, on sites accepting fanfic related to the programs *BtVS* or *Angel*; the categories of vampire fiction, alternate universes, or lesbians; the primary characters of Willow, Tara or Vamp Willow (the vampire incarnations of regular characters are often classified separately), or the pairings of Willow/Tara, Spike/Dru, or Giles/Jenny Calendar. However, it is important to

¹⁶ Sharon Cumberland has noted that in internet research, it is often difficult to verify facts, numbers, statistics, the authenticity of individuals; she suggests that any results—qualitative or quantitative—are “highly stylized constructs for which no verification exists” and that therefore extensive limitations and disclaimers about the findings of any given project are essential. In this case, for example, it is entirely possible that an individual writer uses multiple screen names at *fanfiction.net* and that therefore the total number of writers is slightly lower than it might appear. Alternately, as in the case of “The Rainbow Writers,” multiple collaborators have been known to publish under a single, joint name. I would suggest that, if anything, most of my numbers probably err on the side of underestimation.

¹⁷ Avail: <http://www.writing.com>. Accessed 16 July 2007.

note that many stories appear on only one archive; “The Sidestep Chronicle” is in fact published, at Katharyn Rosser’s request, only at *Different Colored Pens*.

These numbers do more than signal the vastness of the internet fan fiction enterprise; they also suggest that this kind of writing has inevitably become somewhat detached from the subcultures from which it arose. Although this study is concerned primarily with the fan fiction written for and circulated on the Internet, the contemporary incarnation of fan fiction is generally acknowledged to have originated in the *Star Trek* fanzines of the late 1960’s. In 1967, during the second season of *Star Trek*, two New York women published a 90-page mimeographed fanzine including a well-wishing letter from Spock actor Leonard Nimoy, a collection of editorials and articles about the program, and an original short story entitled “Star Drek.” According to Joan Marie Verba, who has carefully documented the publishing of *Star Trek* fanzines, this was the first of at least 420 *Star Trek* fanzines published over the next 20 years to be traded and/or sold at fan conventions and through the mail (1). Other television programs and movies with large or particularly active fan bases, such as the *Star Wars* movies and British television shows like *Dr. Who* and *The Professionals*, also generated fanzines and fan fiction (Jenkins); however, as with *Star Trek* publications, the circulation of these fanzines tended to be correlated with convention attendance and private subscription (Duncombe). These “fandoms” were relatively closed communities, as readers and writers were likely to know one another personally, through mutual acquaintances, or in person at conventions.

To make sense of the production of fan fiction, most of the early scholarship on fan fiction (published in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s) relies on the notion of fandoms, constructed as particular subcultures motivated by and organized around collective interest

in particular media texts. Both Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins, whose ethnographies of *Star Trek* fan culture were among the first book-length studies of television fandoms and their activities, take pains to note and reject the common perception of “Trekkies” or “Trekkers” in particular as freakish and cultish, instead arguing for a vision of *Star Trek* fans as comprising an “alternative social community” (Jenkins 2), or as fan fiction being a means by which women fans could explore the possibilities for “living outside the respective boundaries men have placed on women’s public behavior” (Bacon-Smith 3).¹⁸

But the migration of much fan fiction publication and circulation to the internet has made it increasingly difficult to maintain this notion of fan fiction as subcultural in precisely the same way. As Stephen Duncombe points out, fanzines are still being produced both on the internet and in print, and to some extent their publication history has diverged from that of fan fiction. For another, reading (if not writing) fan fiction once virtually required convention attendance, or at the very least a friend-of-a-friend who attended conventions alerting others to the existence of fanzines. Now, however, it is possible for anyone with internet access to choose to read—or to stumble across—fan fiction.¹⁹ In a sense, as Kristen Pullen suggests, the internet has “mainstreamed fandom” (84). Pullen notes that “the publishing and networking capabilities of the Internet have enabled more viewers to participate in activities usually associated with long-term, committed fandom, such as writing fan fiction, collecting images and information, and following the activities

¹⁸ Sharon Cumberland, for example, argues that “fan culture, especially fan erotic culture, still has the earmarks of a woman’s community: interest in topics such as the status of women in society, women’s ability to express desire, the blurring of stereotyped gender lines (powerful women; nurturing men), as well as enthusiastic discussion and support groups for new writers” (265). She argues for fan fiction as a “culture of inclusion” and suggests that the bonds that connect readers and writers display a “powerful sense of sisterhood” (265).

¹⁹ Stephen Duncombe argues that “The underground is not a tight, focalized, and coherent social grouping with firm boundaries; instead it is a nongeographical sprawl which must be mapped out” (539).

of those associated with their text” (80). In other words, if requisite convention attendance and/or personal acquaintance are removed from the equation, then a person is no longer required to be the equivalent of a “Trekkie” to participate in the shared reading and writing of fan fiction. Furthermore, Sara Gwenlian Jones has suggested that the ease of distribution, circulation, and access that the internet affords has actually “seduc[ed...] more of the television audience into active fandom” (168), suggesting that it is not necessarily a question of existing fan communities transferring their activities onto the internet, but rather that individuals who may not have been, or considered themselves to be, fans found their way to fan activity through the internet.

As Ken Gelder explains in *The Subcultures Reader*, there is some real tension about how “a subculture [can] claim its sociality—as well as its ‘authenticity’—if it identifies primarily through (disembodied, derivative, industrialized, massified, etc.) media forms” (513). The debate centers on the use of the word “community” to describe groups of people who interact primarily through online media. In *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (2000), Howard Rheingold suggests that the term “virtual” is enough to qualify “community” in discussions of online activity: “virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (520). David Bell, on the other hand, argues that there is a tendency to slip effortlessly between “community” and “subculture” when talking about the internet, but he insists that these two terms are quite separate and should not be used interchangeably. For Bell, the term “subculture” should be reserved for those groups of people who use computer technology in ways that “subvert in some way dominant social

norms or dominant formations *of what technology is for*" (Bell 163, italics mine). For Bell, it is computer hackers, and not media fans, who might be seen to be truly "subcultural" in an internet context.

Nevertheless, Bell admits that it is nearly impossible to avoid the use of the word "community" when discussing the internet, in part because, as I will discuss more in Chapter, 3, at least some of the text generated on websites serves community-building functions. Many critical studies of fans and fan fiction have relied on just this notion to contextualize their work, as a quick survey of titles shows: *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Hellekson and Busse); "Everybody's Gotta Love Somebody, Sometime: Online Fan Community" (Pullen); *Television, the Internet, and the Making of a Community* (Gatson and Zweerink); and "An Electronic Community of Female Fans of the *X-Files*" (Wakefield). Perhaps due to the close association of fan fiction production and reception with convention attendance, the study of fan fiction has until very recently been collapsed into the study of fan communities, generally constructed as one of a range of activities that show what fans do, how fans spend their time, and what fans are like.

This use of "communities" is critical in discussions of online fan activity, and, used to refer to specific online aggregations of fans (bulletin boards, mailing lists, forums), it intersects closely with the concept of "fandoms," which increasingly serves as a more precise description of overlapping groups assembled around common fan interests. (In *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (2005), for example, Rhiannon Bury constructs the specific online **communities** of the *David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade* and the *Militant RayK Separatists* as participating more broadly in, respectively, *X-Files* and

Due South **fandoms**.) I return to a discussion of community and fandom in Chapter 3, but for now, let me note that for my purposes, the idea of community (and specifically discourse community) serves as a useful construction for considering the strategies and habits of interaction at *Different Colored Pens*, while fandom is a useful term for understanding reader and writer expectations and textual strategies within this particular fan community.

The cross-archiving of fan fiction that I discussed earlier in this section is a helpful marker of these issues. Consider this excerpt from Capt Murdock's story notes for "Equilibration":

Warning: This story takes a while to really get going, so please be patient. For you non-Trekkers out there, I do ask that you give this story a chance. No, it does not involve anybody from TOS, TNG, DS9, Voyager or Enterprise, it just takes place in the Trek universe All new characters. . . .

Distribution: For God's sake, don't put this on a Trek board without asking me first! I'll lose all my street cred.:-))

At first glance, these two notes make a series of specific requests of readers, asking them 1) to be patient as the story unfolds, 2) to be open to the unfamiliar set of conventions that setting the story in the *Star Trek* universe entails, and 3) and to refrain from posting the story on any *Star Trek*-related website. But there is more here; Capt Murdock is in the position of negotiating multiple *fandoms* within the context of a specific *community*. In a very condensed pair of notes, he must signal to *BtVS* fans that he may not deliver the kind of story they expect, to *Star Trek* fans that they will not encounter any familiar characters, and to fans of *both* series that they will need to appreciate the story within the particular

context of this community *only* (since presumably only fans of both series would be likely to participate at *Star Trek* websites). To further complicate matters, Murdock’s note on pairing indicates that the story will deal with “W/T (not precisely the Willow and Tara that we all know and love—but close enough for government work.)” So a fourth fandom—fans of Willow and Tara as a couple—is addressed. This negotiation of multiple fandoms within one story has important consequences for the interplay of writing and reader response, and it is also an important reminder of the way that this single piece of fan fiction negotiates the complex negotiation of a huge network of online resources (recall the list of resources for *BtVS* and add even more for *Star Trek*) and a set of canons.

1.3 SPOILERS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF “CANON”

When Capt Murdock says, in his “Spoilers” note, that because Equilibration “does not take place in the Buffyverse at all, we’re safe as far as [spoilers] go...,” he is letting his readers know that nothing they read in the course of his story will give away events or revelations from any episode in any season of *BtVS*. He is not working with the “canon” of the show. In fan fiction, “canon” is used in two primary ways. First, it refers to the overall set of storylines, premises, settings, and characters offered by the source media text; in the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the canon includes anything and everything that ever happened on screen.

A hasty and partial summary for those readers unfamiliar with the program: Buffy, a high school sophomore newly arrived in the “Hellmouth” town of Sunnydale, California, is reluctant to assume the mantle of the Slayer, the one girl in each generation who is

entrusted with fighting evil, but with the help of friends Willow and Xander, and under the guidance of her Watcher, Giles, she saves the world repeatedly and gradually becomes a force that demons and vampires must reckon with. Over the course of seven seasons, a variety of secondary characters, love interests, and nemeses come and go; the show is as much about growing up as about growing powerful. Each season's narrative arc focuses on responding to increasingly dangerous threats (both demonic and psychological), and in the finale of season 5, Buffy dies protecting her friends and her "sister," Dawn, a form of energy given human form and placed under Buffy's protection. Meanwhile, Buffy's best friend, Willow, has transformed from a computer nerd with a werewolf boyfriend to an increasingly powerful witch who explores her Wiccan potential with girlfriend Tara. In season 6, Willow and friends bring a reluctant Buffy back from the dead (not realizing she was in Heaven), and Willow is gradually overcome by an addiction to the dark forces of magic; almost every relationship between and among characters is damaged or severed during this season. When, a few episodes before the season 6 finale, Tara is killed by a stray bullet meant for Buffy, Willow succumbs to black magic and nearly succeeds in ending the world in her grief. In Season 7, the core group of Buffy, Willow, Xander, Giles and Dawn must come back together to teach a group of Potential Slayers as they prepare to battle their greatest foe yet, and the season and show ends with the friends defeating the enemy but forced to leave town as Sunnydale and its Hellmouth are destroyed; lives, homes, and an eye are lost, but the friends, and their relationships, have survived.²⁰ This is, in a nutshell, *BtVS* canon.

²⁰ Again, this is an extremely brief summary of the 144 episodes of the program. For more detailed synopses and discussion, see *The Complete Buffy Episode Guide* at <http://www.buffyguide.com>. Avail: July 15, 2007.

Roberta Pearson explains that fanfic “canonicity” encompasses “the collective episodes of the original text [that] have themselves established a metaverse rich with spatial/temporal narrative settings and character possibilities: fans can, if they wish, indulge in an imaginative extension of the metaverse that conforms in spirit, if not to the letter, to the ‘canon’” (2). Pearson’s distinction between spirit and letter is critical to an understanding of the creative work that fan fiction does. After all, a piece of fan fiction that merely explained something that viewers saw on screen would amount to summary; this is the only kind of writing that technically could follow the letter of the canon. Now, because *BtVS* seasons always ended in the spring and began again in the fall, events that took place during the ensuing summers were alluded to but not shown. Therefore, a story that took place entirely within, say, the summer between seasons 4 and 5 but did not alter any of the events taking place in either of those seasons could potentially be considered to follow the spirit, if not the letter, of the show’s canon; these stories are sometimes called “fill-ins.”

At the other end of the spectrum is fan fiction that departs entirely from canon, often distinguished from canonical “Buffyverse” stories with the phrase “alternate universe,” which is an announcement to readers that they should not expect canon to be observed. Trom DeGrey’s “Laundry Diaries,” for example, also takes place entirely within an alternate universe. Similarly, Capt Murdock notes that “as this [story] does not take place in the Buffyverse at all, we’re all safe as far as that goes,” by which he means that he and his readers do not have to worry about being attentive to issues of canon: he is free to invent plots without reference to the original television series, to rework the relationships of characters to one another, and so on.

Now, here's where it gets complicated: canon and alternative universe are, in *BtVS* fan fiction practice, fairly fluid entities, as Katharyn Rosser's story notes for "The Sidestep Chronicle" demonstrate:

Spoiler Warning: Pretty limited. The story occurs in an alternate universe though reference is made to events that occur in both realities across all seasons.

Summary: A look back at Willow's fate in the immediate aftermath of the rise of The Master in S1 and how it came to be. Just setting the groundwork out for the Chronicle. Approximately 3 months after the time of the episode "The Harvest" in S1 which was the point at which the Master would have risen—as there was no slayer interference in this reality.

Because "The Sidestep Chronicle" departs immediately, in the first chapter, from the events of *BtVS* by simply erasing Buffy's presence in Sunnydale, it makes sense that Rosser would describe it as taking place "in an alternate universe." However, the season 3 episode "The Wish" actually offers precisely this narrative premise when a secondary character wished that Buffy had never come to Sunnydale. This wish opened a kind of portal into an alternate universe, the effects of which are felt in several later episodes. So the premise of Rosser's story, arguably, is entirely in keeping with the spirit of *BtVS* canon.

However, as Rosser notes, spoilers in her story are "pretty limited"; she is not giving anything away to readers who have not viewed *BtVS* past "The Wish." Spoilers and

warnings therefore serve to announce the presence or absence of canon in a story, or, more commonly, to indicate the point at which a story departs from canon.²¹

The second way that “canon” is used is as a descriptor of specific incidents, relationships, or story arcs that take place within the overall canon. For example, to refer back to Rosser, the existence of a character called “The Master” is canon, but his rise to power, which Buffy prevented on the show, is not. The transformation of Willow into a vampire during “The Wish” is canon, but any relationship between Willow-as-a-vampire and Tara is not, since Tara was not introduced as a character until the show’s fourth season. And so on.

These nuances point to the endless creative moves that are possible in any piece of fan fiction. In writing that is, by definition, based on the characters, plots, and writing of others, what in fact does “creative” mean? Yes, fan fiction writers are deriving some of their characters, some of their premises, and some of their ideas from existing work; however, they might diverge from that existing work at any point, in effect transforming the “source” text into a kind of “prompt.” Katharyn Rosser asks the question, “what if Tara came to Sunnydale instead of Buffy?” Capt. Murdock asks, “what if some characters who looked and acted a lot like Willow, Tara, Buffy, and Xander but were not *quite* these characters actually worked aboard a Starfleet ship?” Trom DeGrey asks, “what if two women whom my readers recognize as Willow and Tara meet in a launderette in the middle

²¹ The theory of alternate universes in BtVS is that they exist, separate but parallel to that of the show’s universe. This means, in theory, that AU fan fiction does not actually change or even affect BtVS canon in any way; it simply exists parallel to it.

of the night?”²² All these creative moves, enacted by individual writers in individual stories, also contribute to a larger “meta-text,” which Jane Mortimer explains productively in an online essay:

In the center we have the river of canon, aka “the show,” a broad Mississippi rolling inexorably onward, pushed by money and Hollywood expertise. Off of it, we have a thousand tributaries, a thousand “what ifs,” many of them branching off into yet further refinements of alternate reality as each writer examines what’s gone before and spins off it. . . all these possibilities are true. (3)

There are two issues to which I’d like to draw attention here. First is the idea that, as Mortimer suggests, all of the individual “what ifs” of fan fiction contribute to a larger mega-text, one that derives from but is not the same as, the canon of the show; this meta-text is sometimes referred to as “fanon.” Within an individual fandom, certain plotlines may be reinvented so many times and by so many people—or alternately may be written so persuasively by a few writers—that they take on the status of fan-produced canon. As I discuss in chapter 3, one example of this is the resurrection of Tara in post-season 6 *BtVS* fan fiction.

This is not to say, however, that any “what if,” any departure from canon is given equal weight by fan readers, and this brings me to a second issue, that of value. In an article about the difficulty in assessing creative work in online forums, Madeline Guyer notes that

²² Henry Jenkins was the first, as far as I am aware, to attempt to break down the overall work of fan fiction into meaningful categories. My use of canon and alternate universe overlap in some ways with his taxonomy; for a fuller discussion of his ten categories of fan fiction, see *Textual Poachers*

[w]e utter pronouncements like “not very good writing/painting/thinking” in comparing works that supposedly partake of the same context, an anthology, a workshop, or a classroom. It may be perfectly valid to recognize that in the same anthology, for instance, some works will be better written than others.

But what exactly establishes a context is not always easy to determine. (208)

In fan fiction, that context might include both adherence to canon—writing characters that readers will recognize—and also divergence from canon—writing stories that are unique, fresh. I suggest that it is not only through references to canon but also through fan fiction feedback—critical assessments of fan fiction itself— that readers and writers create and negotiate this context.

1.4 FEEDBACK: THE TEXTUAL WORK OF READING AND WRITING

Internet fan fiction has been called a “culture of relentless reviewing” (Chatelain), a writing sphere in which the practice of readers commenting on, critiquing, or reviewing texts is familiar and widespread. In addition to the stories published at *Different Colored Pens*—itself adding up to a massive amount of text, there is a huge scaffolding of critical response and analysis, usually referred to in fan fiction circles as feedback. (Destinta Fortunata’s *Fan Fiction Primer* defines feedback as “giving or receiving praise and constructive criticism.”) Some websites simply include the writer’s e-mail address with a piece of fan fiction so that readers may send comments privately if they choose. At Pens, writers choose whether to provide an e-mail address, as when Capt. Murdock writes “Email

me at [...]. Thanks,” and the mechanism of the board also allows private messages to be received without an e-mail address.

Different Colored Pens, like *fanfiction.net* and many other sites, also builds in ways for readers to respond publicly, so that both the writer and *other readers* can read their comments. The site’s FAQ suggests that writers indicate their feedback preferences in their story notes, as both DeGrey and Rosser have done here:

DeGrey: Feedback: Flail away!

Rosser: Constructive criticism always welcome.

The posting mechanism for each story operates as a simple table, with the introductory notes and the first installment of a story appearing in the first row and comments, ranging from simple praise to in-depth analysis to speculation about future narrative developments, appearing in successive rows. Figure 4 on page 38 excerpts a series of posts from “The Laundry Diaries”; the first row shows the end of the first vignette, and in the following rows, readers respond to the story. Because many *Pens* stories are posted in chapters or installments, reading a piece of fan fiction involves, at the very least, scrolling down through reader comments to get from one chapter to the next, so that the feedback becomes part of the reading experience. Furthermore, a story’s writer usually responds to reader comments in batches, and readers sometimes respond to or ask questions of one another.

<p>Trom DeGrey</p>	<p>Now, do you remember how this all started? How I told you that some utterly ordinary moments end up being truly extraordinary, but you don't realize it until after the fact? Well, pay attention, you just might miss it, because that's what happened next.</p> <p>She looked up at me again, and a crooked smile crept up the left side of her face, making my heart skip a beat. She stuck out her right hand and said, "Hi, my name's Tara."</p> <p>Did you see it?</p>
<p>Whisper</p>	<p>Posted: Tue Nov 30, 2004 5:48 pm Post subject: I loved it!</p> <p>Well, let me be the first to congratulate you on such a great fic! I loved it! 🙌 Seriously, at first I thought the Willow was a vamp, but then I realized that it was very unlikely later on.</p> <p>Absolutely perfect how you describe the madness of third shift, priceless really.</p> <p>The encounter between Willow, Tara and the would-be-Serial-Killer was incredibly funny and the way that Willow was ready to defend Tara was so cute!</p> <p>I can't wait to see how Willow's obsession will work out. More please? 🤖</p>
<p>babyblue</p>	<p>Posted: Tue Nov 30, 2004 6:52 pm Post subject: Re: The Laundry Diaries</p> <p>This is a lovely vignette! The writing really sparkles and it was so easy to be present in the moment with Willow. It also brought back a rush of memories about my first job after college, working the phones from 4pm to midnight. Ugh. It paid the rent, I suppose, but I didn't feel entirely human again until I found a "regular" job.</p> <p>I look forward to Tara's perspective.</p> <p>babyblue</p>
<p>EasierSaid</p>	<p>Posted: Tue Nov 30, 2004 7:07 pm Post subject: Re: The Laundry Diaries QUOTE</p> <p>🤖</p> <p>Atty! Wow... very vivid. You described the disconnect of living outside of the norm so well. Anyone who has been in a grocery store after midnight knows how creepy it is to stand on the cereal aisle, yet clearly hear a conversation from the deli twelve rows over because there's just nothing else going on (besides the piped in Christopher Cross tune on the storewide speaker, of course). You also nailed that weird comraderie amongst people who work odd hours, just spot on</p>

Figure 4. Series of posts from “The Laundry Diaries,” *Different Colored Pens*

Consider this sampling of comments from Trom DeGrey’s “The Laundry Diaries” (other comments appear between these in the actual thread; the first post discussed here is

also the second post in Figure 4). First, reader EasierSaid posts her feedback to DeGrey's first vignette:

EasierSaid to Trom DeGrey: 🍷 Atty! Wow!...very vivid. You described the disconnect of living outside of the norm so well. Anyone who has been in a grocery store after midnight knows how creepy it is to stand on the cereal aisle, yet clearly hear a conversation from the deli twelve rows over because there's just nothing else going on (besides the piped in Christopher Cross tune on the storewide speaker, of course). You also nailed that weird comraderie amongst people who work odd hours, just spot on. . . .²³

Interestingly, EasierSaid's comments locate the value of DeGrey's work not in any frame of reference deriving from *BtVS* but from her own experience. This is quite different from the feedback that Glendafoz2004 offers several posts later, feedback that implicitly addresses the canonical versions of the characters Willow and Tara:

Glendafoz2004 to Trom DeGrey: This is one of the best stories that I have had the chance to read in a long time. The way that you brought ou[r] girls together was just amazing. I like how you didn't take away from who they really were as characters. Some people take them so far away from who they were on the show that it takes away from the story. But you didn't do that. You kept them both true to who they are so I thank you for that.

I hope to be able to read more soon. It is a fantastic story. Keep it coming!!!!

Glenda's comment is suggestive of the way that many readers at *Pens* assign value to a story: for its negotiation of providing something new ("one of the best stories that I have

²³ The use of emoticons like the grinning smiley face in Easier Said's comment is very common at *Different Colored Pens*, where a range of such emoticons is available for site members to paste into their posts.

had the chance to reading a long time” and something familiar (“You kept [Willow and Tara] true to who they are.” Glenda also indirectly suggests that not all *Pens* writers are so careful.

From DeGrey’s response to Glenda does several things: she identifies her own story’s position among a set of fandoms (the Buffyverse v. Willow-and-Tara v. AUs), she thanks Glenda for noticing her intended accomplishment, and she refers Glenda to another story she suspects Glenda might like, “Neverland” by none other than EasierSaid:

From DeGrey to glendaofoz2004: You need to be reading Neverland by EasierSaid, my friend! Talk about an amazing fic! Thank you [for] taking time to stop here though. I love Aus [alternate universes]. I’m not a huge fan of the Buffyverse as a rule, but I love W & T. But AUs can be tricky, it’s easy to lose track of our girls and make them into something unrecognizable.

I’m so glad you think I’ve succeeded here. Thanks again for reading!

Rather than reading these individual comments separately, DeGrey seems to be reading them as interconnected, and it could be that her praise of EasierSaid’s writing here also places more value on EasierSaid’s comment above. If Glenda does read “Neverland” and enjoys it, she may be more likely to read EasierSaid’s comments in this and other threads.

From DeGrey’s comment also embeds a kind of reflection on her own writing process; she acknowledges the fact that this kind of writing is “tricky.” As I discuss in Chapters 4, the feedback here—even more so than the disclaimer or the other story notes—makes visible the delicate work of creative negotiation with which DeGrey is faced in a way that recalls, for me, David Bartholomae’s construction of the work of the student writer in “Inventing the University.” The student, Bartholomae writes, has to find

some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand. He must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is “learned.” (61)

To analogize Bartholomae’s language, the “trickiness” of DeGrey’s accomplishment lies in the fact that she has to find a middle ground between her own “personal history” and that of her readers (as in *EasierSaid*’s reference to her own experience) and “the requirements of convention,” in this case the necessity of making Willow and Tara familiar to her readers. And she must do it whether or not she is sure it will work, hoping that her readers will find her attempt successful.

In this way, the canon with which DeGrey is working—a canon that matters—is not only the canon of *BtVS*, although certainly her readers are reading for her careful negotiation of that fictional universe. But DeGrey is also working with a canon of writing and feedback, a set of conventions about how to read and respond to others’ words, how to understand the projects that writers take up individually and collectively, how to figure the relationships not only between characters but among readers and writers.

1.5 PAIRINGS AND RATINGS: FAN FICTION RELATIONSHIPS

The ‘ship is a cornerstone of fan fiction. Fans of a particular character pairing are referred to as “shippers,” an abbreviation that calls to mind both “relationship” and “worship.” To be a ‘shipper is to focus one’s attention on a particular pairing of characters (and

sometimes, like Bartleby, to prefer not to write or read about other possible pairings for either character); *Different Colored Pens* is explicitly a site for Willow/Tara ‘shippers. Much of the literature about fan fiction deals with the ‘ship in terms of slash, an issue I take up in Chapters 3 and 4. And this is a way of suggesting that much fan fiction involves a romantic or sexual component, although there is nothing inherent in the act of writing about characters from a pre-existing fictional universe that would seem to require this focus. But as I hope previous sections have made clear, “fan fiction” is really an umbrella term for an enormous range of writing that is usually divided and subdivided and then subdivided again in order to make it manageable. A reader or writer, even one who is already sold on the complexities and pleasures of fan fiction, is probably unlikely to be catholic in her reading material. Instead, she is more likely to focus on the fan writing of just a few shows, or even more specifically of just a few relationships within those shows. (Perhaps, in addition to accounting for individual preferences, this is because watching television takes time, and reading fan fiction takes even more time; most readers simply don’t have the time to sustain intense interest in a wide range of fan writing, and so they specialize.)

In the fan fiction universe, *slash* refers, quite literally, to the slash between the names of two characters who are paired in a romantic and/or sexual relationship, i.e. Kirk/Spock. The broader definition of *slash* is somewhat contested, but it generally refers to the subset of homoerotic fan fiction, usually fan fiction that takes two characters from a television show and writes them into a homosexual relationship with one another. Some critics argue that slash is exclusively about male-male relationships, and considering that modern internet fan fiction has its roots in amateur *Star Trek* fanzines, this makes a certain

amount of sense. However, in recent years, the subjects of fan fiction have diversified, and stories written about female-female pairings abound.

Interestingly, most fan fiction, whether slash or “gen” (for “general,” usually meaning heterosexual), is archived and indexed according to pairing; the index of an archive site will generally include a list of pairings—for example Willow/Tara, Willow/Oz, Willow/Buffy, Willow/Giles—each of which links to a list of stories. In truth, the romance aspect of fan fiction is so ubiquitous that stories that do *not* feature particular pairings of characters tend to announce this fact. For example, the Willowy Goodness Awards, a peer-based competition for fan fiction written about the character Willow from the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, has a separate category labeled “Willow only.”

At this point, it is important to mention that in both gen and slash fiction, most stories are rated for violence, language, and adult content according to the same basic principles that govern film and television ratings. NC-17 stories are not uncommon; the truth is that quite a lot of fan fiction includes quite a lot of explicit sexual content. This is a provocative issue, and one that a number of scholars have taken up in compelling ways; the uses of fan fiction to present erotic fantasy, to experiment with gender politics, and in the case of slash fiction to provide depictions of gay and lesbian sex that are hard to come by in mainstream American film and television are significant cultural expressions that should not be dismissed. However, other critics are doing this work well, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I want to set explicit considerations of sex and sexuality aside. It is not that they are not significant; but as I hope this chapter has made clear, work on fan fiction is just beginning to scratch the surface of a deep and complex textual system. And in fact sex is only one element of fan fiction; only one chapter of 103 in Rosser’s “Sidestep

Chronicle” includes a graphic sex scene, and many thousands of fan fiction stories, rated R or below, are less concerned with writing sex than with exploring relationships.

For my purposes in this dissertation, fan fiction relationships are significant, and not only relationships between characters and among canonical and alternate universe events, although these are important. More broadly, fan fiction and the feedback that responds to it create meaning through relationships: of writer and reader to their source text or texts, of writer and reader to canon, of writer and reader to one another. Acknowledging writing relationships is necessary for an understanding of the nuanced textual work of fan fiction.

1.6 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: THE WORK OF COMPOSITION STUDIES

A final element of most fan fiction story notes at *Different Colored Pens* is the acknowledgment, the note in which a writer thanks her beta reader and the other readers and writers who contributed in some way to the writing. “The Sidestep Chronicle” includes a lengthy acknowledgment, and in fact Rosser includes a new acknowledgment for each of her 103 chapters; in later chapters, she sometimes thanks an individual reader whose feedback she has found particularly insightful. The acknowledgment for her first chapter reads as follows:

Rosser: Thanks to: Those that urged the writing of this chronicle based upon only the teasers that I ran in The Beginnings Cycle. I hope that this does not disappoint. Xita, who at a crucial low point in writing this told me what I needed to here—that a fic including Vamp Willow could be on topic (hey Zahir did it to Tara!) Louise—that one who is my always—once more and

Kerry who has done so much for this fic. She wrote some little snippets, and half a part. She has also endured hours of chat about this thing of mine which resulted in much of what is good in it. I wanted to get this going before you had to vanish dearie, hope you like. Also to Jo who stepped into the beta reading harness at short notice and handled the first few parts in record time. My errors are my own, their genius is theirs.

It is a simple note, but it is indicative of the thoughtfulness with which fan fiction writers at *Different Colored Pens* give credit to their collaborators, their co-writers, their beta readers, even their friends and loved ones. While still taking responsibility for her work, Rosser acknowledges not only specific writing- and editing-related tasks but also conversation, encouragement, urging, and the genius of colleagues. Any teacher of writing would, I suspect, be thrilled to read a paper with such a precise and generous acknowledgment.²⁴

In this first chapter, I have spent a great amount of space in introducing, describing, contextualizing, and explaining a small corner of the enormous internet fan fiction world, and necessarily so, since my readers may be unfamiliar with the conventions and practices of fan fiction readers and writers. But I now want to suggest that, in the chapters that follow, what might be of particular interest to compositionists are the ways in which these conventions and practices are so appealing to teachers of writing.

I have been teaching composition courses myself since 1995, and I am used to having to convince my first-year students that a writing class is worth their energy and investment. I suspect that, like me, other writing instructors are accustomed to finding out

²⁴ Fan fiction writers almost always include their acknowledgments at the beginning, and not the end, of their work, a move that I recognize as a convention of published academic work.

ways to convince our students of the merit of our classes. When the study of writing is required, as it is in first-year composition courses, it is not always an easy sell; students can be reluctant to participate in critical exchanges, to take on the difficult work of challenging their reading and revising their writing. We are accustomed to spending a lot of time and energy to find ways to engage them. My study of fan fiction practices and my immersion in the habits of a particular fan fiction community, however, has introduced me to a discursive space in which large groups of readers and writers take on this work willingly and engage in it with pleasure and commitment.

Late in the process of writing this dissertation, I came across a book that resonates powerfully with my work in the amateur writing that characterizes fan fiction. Joseph Harris' *Rewriting: How To Do Things With Texts* (2006) is a textbook for writing students that reads effortlessly, conversationally, but that is one of the most nuanced and thoughtful introductions to the work of critical writing I have encountered. Harris is well aware of the stigma that students often attach to expository writing, and his approach is in part to energize their work and to treat them as the intellectuals that they are. "[W]hat intellectuals have to say," Harris writes, "is bound up inextricably with the books we are reading, the movies we are watching, the music we are listening to, and the ideas of the people we are talking with. Our creativity thus has roots in the work of others—in response, reuse, and rewriting" (2). This is a powerful representation of academic writing, and it is an apt description of fan writing, which, while quite different in occasion and product, is no less dedicated to a creativity based in engagement with texts of all sorts. It is an account of writing that, like fan writing itself, is deeply committed to acknowledging that writing and reading are critical, engaging, and intertextual practices.

I end this chapter with a final acknowledgment: in 2001, a colleague introduced me to *Different Colored Pens*, the fan fiction forum of *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe*. I had begun work on a dissertation that attempted a history of student writing, but a glimpse into the rich textual culture of this website and its community of writers—who produced fan fiction based on characters from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and responded in writing to each other’s work—was enough to capture my attention.

At first, I saw the site as a diversion from my academic work, and after lurking for several months, I registered as a member of the site so that I could respond to the stories I was reading; eventually I wrote two pieces of fan fiction myself. I mention this here in part to acknowledge that, as Tulipp, I participated at *Different Colored Pens* actively for some time before deciding that the reading and writing happening at the site were more immediately compelling than the topic I had had in mind. While many of the readers and writers whose work I discuss had been site members long before I arrived on the scene, it is possible that, as a person whose academic training and personal inclinations predisposed me to be interested in conventions of reading and writing, I helped to shape some of the discourse I discuss in this dissertation. However, the presence of a cadre of active members, many of whom predated me by years and many of whom wrote about their investments in reading and writing without my intervention, leads me to suspect that this is not the case.

Many studies of fan communities and fan fiction begin, as I begin, with an acknowledgment of the tensions of reading as both fan and academic; I am similarly aware of the tensions in reading as both writer and writing instructor. After ten years of teaching writing, I am aware of the potential of my own involvement in the amateur writing I read;

this is, in part, the work of teaching writing. It may be the case that because academics have specialized vocabulary, evolved discourse, and schooled frames of reference, we influence the communities in which we participate, but, as I discuss at more length in Chapter 3, such interventions are the inevitable product of any discourse community. I have been reminded through studying fan fiction and its feedback that individual writers are contributing to a larger project, one that is not unduly controlled by any one person. Instead, it is a collaborative project, a set of texts to which hundreds, sometimes thousands of readers and writers contribute.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to a couple of larger projects in composition studies. First, my work here speaks to the evolving discourse on methodologies for reading internet texts. While critical ethnography and textual analysis are both necessary tools for examining internet sites, they are critical lenses that have been shaped by work with print texts and oral interactions. Second, my work speaks to issues collaborative learning and writing and contributes to the ongoing literature on peer writing groups and theories of collaborative invention.

2.0 METAPHOR AS CANON: THE WORK OF TEXTUAL POACHING

Oh, great Henry Jenkins, always have I been thy faithful textual-poaching servant and never once suffered a character to act outside the boundaries of canon, forgive me mine fanon-inspired sins and make of me a pure-hearted critique-crazed killjoy slashfic superstar.

—“Sergeant Howie” in “The Wicker Fan”²⁵

Fanfiction works as a place to critique canon, a place to mourn the losses and redress the injustices and hurt canon inflicts on us, a place to celebrate the joys canon gives us, and a place to present multiple readings of canon in response to other fans: a place where bitter argument, which in academic circles would probably swiftly degenerate into name-calling...can be displaced into the coexistence of diverse stories.

—Deva, “Philosophy of Fanfiction,” *Barbelith* Webzine

On the day that the third installment of the (more recent) *Star Wars* movie trilogy opened in Washington, D.C., the National Public Radio show *Talk of the Nation* aired a segment about the phenomenon of *Star Wars* fans and the possibility that, with the series coming to

²⁵ This excerpt comes from a fan play based on the film *The Wicker Man*.

an end, fans might have to search for another outlet for their fandom.²⁶ Host Frank Stasio talked about a particularly public manifestation of fan activity: when a film that is part of a series with a cult following—like *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*—comes to theaters, fans wait in line for hours or even days ahead of time, often appearing in costumes as characters from the film.

Here’s how Stasio introduced his first guest:

And what is it about a series like *Star Wars* that generates this kind of fanatical fan that would stand, sit, and sleep in line for hundreds of hours? For the answer, we present Exhibit A, Nicholas Johnson.

Stasio then interviewed Johnson, a fan who had stood in line for 336 hours to wait for the opening of *The Revenge of the Sith*, asking him a series of questions: how long had he planned to stand in line?, how had he managed the actual standing?, had he taken breaks?, and what did he plan to do now that the object of his attention—the second *Star Wars* trilogy—had come to an end. He asked Johnson, “Does it occur to you ever that you want a part in the process?” and “has it ever occurred to you to think to yourself, ‘am I going too far?’” Most of these questions, interestingly, asked for simple declarative statements that provided information about Johnson’s past and future; the final two questions were phrased as “yes/no” questions.

But to inquire into the potential *meanings* of Johnson’s life and work as a fan, or as Stasio put it, “to explain why someone would stand in line,” Stasio turned to Belmont University Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies Amy Sturgis, who writes about *Star Wars* and teaches a class on J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The verbal italics in

²⁶ “The End of ‘Star Wars,’ But Not Its Fans,” *Talk of the Nation*. May 19, 2005. Accessed: www.npr.org.

Stasio's question attached to the word "would," as in "Professor Sturgis, why *would* someone stand in line for 336 hours?" But those italics could just as well have attached to the word "why." And, in fact, this was the one basic question that Stasio had *not* asked Johnson himself. In the context of this interview, this move made sense; Nicholas Johnson's role on *Talk of the Nation* was not to be an individual capable of accounting critically for his own practices; rather, his role was to be "Exhibit A," an object of study requiring explanation by a qualified academic expert.

This radio segment functioned for me as a kind of synecdoche for much of the academic and public media treatment of the individuals often referred to as "cult media fans." Stasio, following in the well-worn footsteps of interviewers and researchers before him, asked Nicholas Johnson to account for almost every aspect of his own behaviors as a fan of *Star Wars*: the what, the when, the who, the where. *But not the why*. For that, Stasio, like his predecessors, turned to an academic, a specialist in the study of fans and their practices.

Stasio's turn to Professor Sturgis for analysis was an authorizing move that would confer a sense of legitimacy to the listening audience, and it was an important acknowledgment of the critical lenses through which fans have been and continue to be considered. These are, of course, standard moves not only in the kind of culture of letters to which *Talk of the Nation* belongs, but also in academic research in general; it is methodologically and theoretically responsible to acknowledge that individuals see things through particular and learned critical lenses. At the same time, Stasio's construction of Nicholas Johnson as an exhibit to be read involves two prevailing assumptions that have circulated in studies of fans: first, that fans are unable to articulate for themselves or to

others what their practices mean, and second, that a primary object of such inquiries is finding out who fans are, what motivates them, why they do what they do.

The first of these assumptions tends to manifest in a tension between fan criticism and scholarly criticism that surfaces in many studies of fans and fan practices. In its most extreme version, as in a sociological/communications study of *X-Files* fans, Christina Scodari and Jenna Felder construct fans as “human subjects” and their writing as “data” to be observed and interpreted. Scodari and Felder suggest that, in submitting fan activities to critical analysis, academics who also are fans, and who regard their own fan activities with fondness, tend to assign those activities the exaggerated qualities of community, oppositionality, creativity, and thoughtful reflection. Further, they suggest that academics project onto fans a greater degree of critical acumen and self-awareness than they actually possess.

Whether there is an element of truth in Scodari and Felder’s skepticism, most studies adopt a more tempered approach, taking up the tension between fan and scholarly criticism as a necessary facet of the ethnographic approach that so infuses work on fans. In fact, many scholars begin their projects by acknowledging their own positions as fans of the texts they are discussing (as, in fact, I did in Chapter 1); this precedent was established in each of the pair of ethnographic studies of *Star Trek* fan communities published in 1992: Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* and Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Both writers, and perhaps especially Jenkins, resist the idea that “particular knowledge and traditions of [a fan] community” do not themselves partake of “theories of popular culture” or other critical insights (5). Jenkins writes that

As a fan, I feel that most previous academic accounts of fan culture are sensationalistic and foster misunderstandings about this subculture. . . . As an academic, I am dismayed by general theories of television spectatorship that gave little attention to the specificity and complexity of the practices I experience as a fan At this moment in the development of media studies, there is a great deal we as academics can learn about fan culture and perhaps even more we can learn *from* fan culture. (7-8)

Jenkins marks out “fan” and “academic” as modes within a single subject, and his articulation of the relative positioning of academic and fan has to some degree shaped the work that has come after it.

Subsequent scholarship has continued to engage this tension, taking Jenkins’ cue in not necessarily assuming that the academic approach is of a higher order or value than the fan approach (if such unilateral entities as “academic approach” and “fan approach” can even be said to exist). Gwyn Symonds, in an online article entitled “Musings on Methodology,” suggests that even when fans are acknowledged to have a “critical response,” that response is assumed to be both more general and less insightful than an academic response to the same basic thing. Symonds notes of her own fan and academic practices that

It is true that when I post on an internet list I am not often writing as I would in an academic context. For one, I do not bother with specialized jargon, I am probably less concerned with conventions related to the academic disciplines I write in and, most importantly, I do not hold back the emotion embodied in my response to the text. . . . In truth, in an academic paper, I do

not want to separate my fandom from my academic textual analysis and, to do so, to subdue the fan response and couch it in an academic response, devoid of that abandonment, takes vigilance. (para. 2)

For Symonds, then, the problem goes both ways: it is not just that an academic interpretation of fans would privilege its own discourse and downplay its pleasure, but also that an academic might perhaps, in moving into fan mode, outside her usual academic register by lowering her expectations or simplifying her language out of the perception that fans might not understand her usual ways of talking or thinking.

The fact that scholars continue to grapple with the intersections of fan and scholar is an indication of an ongoing anxiety with issues of “authenticity.” Cheryl Harris, for example, notes in her introduction to *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity* that “in the discussion around fandom, the authentic voices of fans themselves are rarely heard” (5). There seems to be a concern that academic lenses have obscured the “authentic” voices of fans, and that somehow writers can gain access to those voices if they ask the right questions. Perhaps it is an attempt to address this lack that leads to questions about who fans are, as when Kristen Pullen asks, “How do you know a fan when you see one, on the World Wide Web or in the world?” (81), or when Roger C. Aden suggests that a primary goal of his work in *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages* is to explore “why we are fans and what we get out of being fans” (1).

These questions and their attendant anxieties are powerful, but as I hope became clear in Chapter 1, they are not precisely my questions. I refer to them here in part because they are hard to avoid when nearly everyone writing about fans and fan practices asks some

version of them. More importantly for me, these are questions that seem to keep critical attention focused on fans as people in the world and as members of certain kinds of subcultural groups. In such constructions, the set of texts, readings, and writings that comprise fan fiction are a vehicle through which “fandom becomes visible” (Consalvo 8), not texts worthy of consideration as texts in their own right. In other words, fan fiction serves to document fandom and further, to document the activities of fans vis à vis a source text.

I find evidence for this assertion in the fact that so many scholars find ways to name the *fans* themselves, as opposed to the *work* that they do. A variety of metaphors has surfaced in recent years to capture the nuances of the media fan who is engaged in specific creative acts. Karen Hellekson sees the fan writer as a minstrel, re-telling familiar stories for the entertainment of a crowd. Kurt Lancaster understands fans to be performers, taking on the personas of “fans” in order to engage in specific kinds of creative activity. And others abound: fan as steward (Davis), fan as pilgrim (Aden), fan as apprentice (Borah), fan as cyber-slayer (Consalvo). None is so powerful or so persistent, however, as the one that Henry Jenkins offered in 1992: fans as textual poachers.

In this chapter, I discuss the prevailing understanding of fans as textual poachers, considering its tacit acceptance in a range of scholarly treatments and its circulation among fan fiction websites and suggesting that in both literatures, this construction has taken on the status of canon, a widely accepted authoritative text itself. I then suggest that metaphoric constructions of writing and writers both make possible and obscure understandings of the complex textual negotiation of this kind of source-based writing, which in fan fiction often happens through specific intersections of canon and alternate

universe. Using multiple readings of a fan fiction excerpt, I propose that the canon of textual poaching would itself benefit from reinvigoration and juxtaposition with critical alternate universes. In particular, the idea of fan fiction as critical writing provides a way to appreciate differently its textual negotiation.

2.1 POACHERS AND POACHING

From full-scale fan community ethnography to brief blog entry, there is almost no place in the literature on media fandom that one can go and not find that Henry Jenkins has been there first. Since the publication of *Textual Poachers*, his groundbreaking 1992 ethnography on the cultural activities of *Star Trek* fans, Jenkins has been cited nearly universally as the authoritative voice on fan writing and art. He is the academic who gets interviewed for newspaper and magazine articles, he is the expert whose work has resonated with other scholars and who is cited in dissertations and journals, and he is the advocate embraced by fans and fan fiction writers on the internet. How many academics can claim, after all, that the cover art of their books has been printed on t-shirts?

Jenkins' premise, adapted from Michel de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, is that media fans are poachers, "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (23). This concept—fans are textual poachers—has been so influential, so successful, in determining the vocabulary and frames of reference of a generation of fan scholars that any new consideration of media fans and their work must engage with it.

Jenkins' chapter on fans as readers and writers, "Scribbling in the Margins," begins with a careful picture of a scene of such appropriation and rereading, and it is worth recapping here. Four *Quantum Leap* fans meet in a living room to work together; they have typewriters and laptops, notes and photographs of screen images, letters from readers of a fanzine. Jenkins comments that

what is most striking about this scene is the ease and fluidity with which these fans move from watching a television program to engaging in alternative forms of cultural production. . . . Almost as striking is how writing becomes a social activity for these fans, functioning simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a source of collective identity (part of what it means to them to be a "fan." (154)

Jenkins goes on to distinguish the characteristics of this scene from what he calls the "the passivity and alienation" of Michel de Certeau's original essay "Reading as Poaching." De Certeau constructs writing as an activity in time and space, one that can be documented and kept and that achieves a kind of agency, "resist[ing] time by the establishment of a place and multipl[ying] its production through the expansionism of reproduction" (174). Reading, on the other hand, "takes no measures against the erosion of time..., it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly" (174). De Certeau's sense of reading as poaching resolves in his notion that readers are travelers, nomads and poachers who pass through the "private hunting reserve[s]" of texts as through physical territory, taking what they need for sustenance but unable to put down roots or provide their own stock. (Although "the text has meaning only through its readers" (170), it does not follow for de Certeau that readers make meaning without access to texts.)

De Certeau does allow for the creative potential of reading, but his conclusion in “Reading as Poaching” is fairly gloomy. Although a reader is able to recombine fragments of texts in ways that may not have been intended, splicing together plural meanings, he is in some sense always under the thrall of the “media[, which] extend their power over his imagination, that is, over everything he lets emerge from himself into the nets of the text—his fears, his dreams” (176). The reader is ultimately a receiver, not a creator.

Jenkins’ critique of this position is fundamental to his own revision of reading as poaching:

De Certeau is wrong to deny the possibility of readers “writing in the margins” of the television text, a practice occurring with remarkable frequency in the fan community. Indeed, we have already identified a number of ways fan practices blur the distinction between reading and writing. . . . The ongoing process of fan rereading results in a progressive elaboration of the series “universe” through inferences and speculations that push well beyond its explicit information; the fans’ meta-text, whether perpetuated through gossip or embodied within written criticism, already constitutes a form of rewriting. (155)

Jenkins uses his participation in fan communities (as he has noted in his blog, he writes fan fiction himself under a pseudonym) and his ethnographic work with several fandoms to shore up evidence against de Certeau’s claims. He argues quite persuasively that fans who engage in speculation, criticism, and fictionalization are not only active readers but indeed writers, whose “scribbling in the margins” constitutes an explicit counter position to de

Certeau's claims. Jenkins' reinvention of the term "textual poachers" is his deliberate attempt to recuperate this metaphor as a strategy for active engagement with media texts.

In a 1996 interview, Henry Jenkins said that he suspected that the "power of poaching as a metaphor was that it spoke to, said what needed to be said, to both [fans and academics] in a term that could be shared with both groups but meant something different in the two spaces" (*Enterprise Zones*). It is, as he apparently intended, a deliberately simple, user-friendly concept but one that also invites or enables critical rigor:

The poaching metaphor is tremendously convenient because it had resonance within the academy, particularly within a leftist academy that wants to identify things as guerilla semiotics, underground, resistant, and so forth, and because once it was fully understood, it had resonance in the fan community which also wanted to see itself in those terms and who could link the metaphor, "poaching," to Robin Hood. . . . It was an image they were comfortable with by and large. (para. 32)

Academics have tended to accept Jenkins' definitional authority for an image of fans as well-intentioned transgressors. Sara Gwenlian Jones writes that, in fact, "it has become something of an orthodoxy for scholars to elevate television fans to the status of modern-day Robin Hoods, folk heroes busily snatching back 'our' popular cultural texts from the greedy global conglomerates who claim to own them" (163).

This orthodoxy, I suggest, has extended to Jenkins' metaphor of "textual poaching," a construction of fans' creative work that has been widely accepted, often to the exclusion of other critical lenses, although even in the early 1990's, Jenkins was not alone in exploring the creative and critical potential of media fandom. Like Jenkins, Camille Bacon-

Smith published an ethnography of *Star Trek* fans in 1992; that same year also saw the publication of the first compilation of critical essays specifically devoted to the study of media fan cultures. The year before, Constance Penley had published an article that, like Jenkins' books, invoked the same Michel de Certeau text to discuss the connections among writing, reading, and technology in *Star Trek* slash fanzines.²⁷ And for some time previous, scholars in cultural theory, media studies, and literary criticism—Raymond Williams, John Fiske, and Janice Radway, to name an important few—had been anticipating academic work that looked more closely at the active and creative role of people who had tended to be characterized as passive consumers.

To be sure, the literature contributing to a study of that active and creative role has a rich tradition, and Henry Jenkins is only one of a number of writers whose insights have constructed a foundation on which scholarship on fan fiction itself can build. It is perhaps curious, then, that Jenkins' voice has been so powerfully dominant in the ongoing discussion of fan creativity, that he is often given primary, or even sole, credit for inventing a vision of television fans as a creative and active community of audience members to compete with the stereotypical construction of science fiction fans as obsessive freaks with too much time on their hands.

It is not necessarily that Jenkins was offering something significantly different from what other scholars were writing at the time; little of what his colleagues were publishing in the early 1990's contests, or even really competes, with his view. It is his construction, however—fans are textual poachers—that has remained central in the academic and fan-

²⁷ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*; Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*; Constance Penley, "Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology" in *Technoculture*, Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, eds.

based idiom, and it is Jenkins' work that has emerged as ubiquitous and definitive. A Google internet search in June 2006 yielded 549 hits for Camille Bacon-Smith and 556 hits for Constance Penley; the search for Henry Jenkins yielded 243,000. A narrower search for "Henry Jenkins" *and* "textual poachers," requiring that both phrases had to be present *as phrases*, yielded 10,700 hits, almost ten times as many as all references to Bacon-Smith and Penley combined. I am not suggesting that Penley's and Bacon-Smith's contributions have been erased either on the internet or in academic scholarship; on the contrary, their names often appear in bibliographies (although this is the case far less often in non-academic reference lists), and their arguments are regularly cited.

At the same time, Jenkins is often given a kind of intellectual first billing. Judith Tabron's discussion of the position of *BtVS* characters Willow and Tara in media fandom, for example, labels Bacon-Smith as an ethnographer whose work "reveal[ed] a huge subculture of enthusiastic media consumers with their own customs and history," but it is Jenkins who, she argues, offered(s) a sense of "the ways in which those fans repurposed and recycled the materials they consumed for their own cultural purposes, demonstrating that they were about as far from mindless in their consumption of media materials as they could possibly be" (Tabron 2). Bacon-Smith may have "revealed" something, but the theoretical weight, the discovery and analysis of a meaningful framework, is awarded to Jenkins.

Similarly, consider the different positioning of Jenkins and Constance Penley in Christine Scodari and Jenna L. Felder's article on *X-Files* fan fiction. Penley—whose work is arguably equally relevant—is cited once, while Jenkins is cited no fewer than eleven times. Perhaps more to the point, the authors refer to Penley's work only parenthetically,

while they attribute to Jenkins a kind of definitional authority, writing that “fanfic is a form of what Jenkins (1992), borrowing from de Certeau (1984), calls ‘textual poaching’” (246).

In her dissertation on an *X-Files* fan community, Kelly Anne Berg Nellis turns to Jenkins to define “‘active fans’ as those who ‘poach’ texts or construct their social and cultural identities by using particular pieces of the television text” (7). Similarly, in her dissertation on media audiences, Grace Macor writes that the fan communities she studies have “distinct poaching strategies [that] share characteristics defined by audience participation and community involvement” (4); not only does Jenkins’ work make an early appearance here, but it is also presented as transparent, as a descriptive label rather than an interpretive device. As of May 2006, in fact, I’d located 12 dissertations that were primarily about or significantly concerned with media fans; eleven of them mention Jenkins no later than page 12, and seven of them, like Macor’s, get to Jenkins by page four.²⁸ Jenkins’ work, then, seems to serve a kind of gate-keeping function for people writing about fan fiction, a kind of legitimizing shorthand that accepts the premise of textual poaching as a given.²⁹ If, as Berg Nellis notes on the first page of her dissertation, Jenkins has until very recently stood out as rare in a field that has been lacking in substantive work about the “daily interpretive practices that surround a television program” (10), then he deserves credit for showing that “fan engagement often reflects a complex struggle rather than an uncomplicated fascination” with media texts (4).

²⁸ The one dissertation that doesn’t mention Jenkins by page 12 never mentions him at all, and in the context of the Jenkins-saturated literature, the omission in this one case is more startling than suggestive.

²⁹ For instance, in Lincoln Geraghty’s article in *Refractory*, the opening two words of which are “Henry Jenkins”—as in “Henry Jenkins (1988, 1992) uses Michel de Certeau’s (1984) term ‘textual poaching’ to describe how fans rewrite Star Trek TV shows and movies”—accepts this premise as given.

In fact, fan engagement with the concept of textual poaching is widespread, and it is easy to see its appeal to fan writers. Jenkins writes that “fan fiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk,” and this is a sentence that affords fan writers a sense of cultural redress. A brief consideration of the circulation of this particular sentence, as a representation of the critical discourse about fans is useful to show how the producers of fan sites seem to sign on to this particular way of framing their work.

The sentence appears as an epigraph on at least 42 fan fiction websites and directories (as of May 2006) on everything from anime to Jane Austen to *Star Wars* (see Figure 5). Admittedly, this selection of 42 websites represents only a fraction of internet offerings, but recall that in this instance, I am referring only to the quite specific use of one sentence from one book, a sentence that, in a linguistic analysis of *Buffy* fan fiction, Katrina Blasingame writes “has become a rallying cry for fanfiction” (para 9). And it is the only academic epigraph that I have been able to find on *any* fan fiction website.

The way this particular epigraph is deployed on some of these sites is worth considering; in the website pictured in Figure 5, for example, the sentence, with its identification of Jenkins as an academic expert at a major research university, is visually set apart with white space and serves as an introduction to the definition of fan fiction that appears below. The first full paragraph below the epigraph reads as a condensed paraphrase of part of Jenkins’ introduction to *Textual Poachers*. Site owner Greenwoman notes that she herself wrote fan fiction long before she knew what it was but gives Henry Jenkins the credit for naming her and her work.

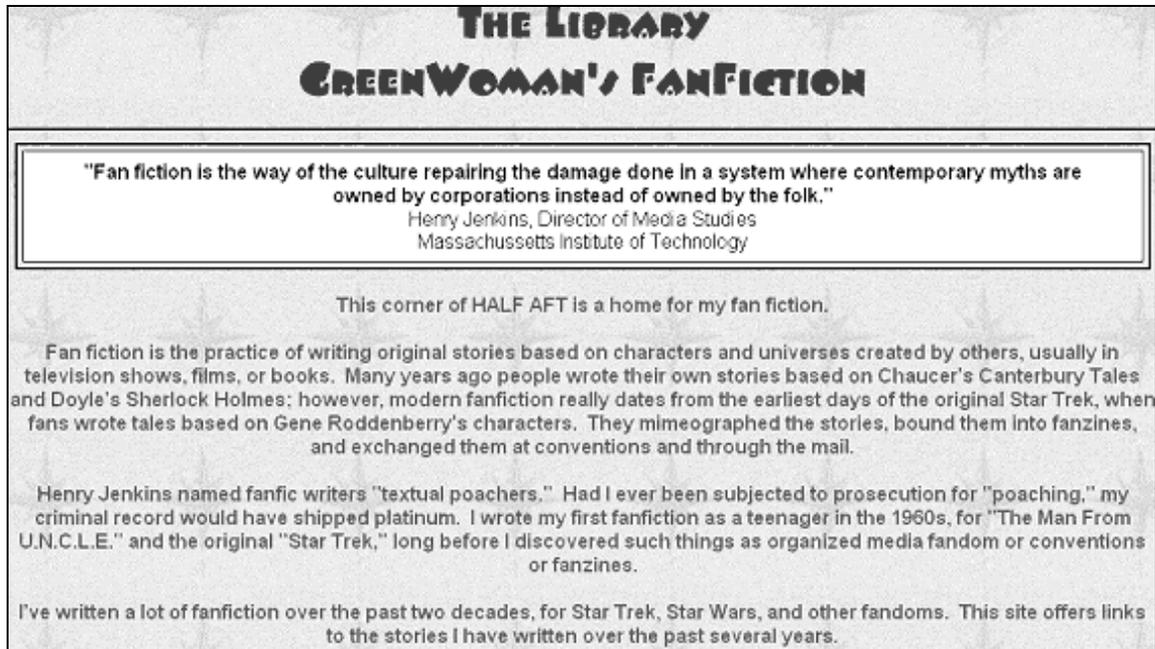


Figure 5. Screenshot from *Greenwoman's Fanfiction* website with Jenkins epigraph ³⁰

Like *Greenwoman*, other website creators seem to see Jenkins not only as a necessary reference but, more fundamentally, as an authorizing source text, one that legitimizes and even defines fan fiction in the first place. A Janeway/Seven fan fiction FAQ (for the program *Star Trek: Voyager*) provides definitions for three basic "what is" questions: what is fan fiction?, what is slash?, and what is *textual poaching*? (The terms are constructed as interrelated). Likewise, an *X-Men* fan fiction site claims, as the first of a list of six things the reader "needs to know," that "This [the fan fiction on the site] is textual poaching."

Ashera, the author of a "glossary and fan fiction introduction" for *Hercules* and *Xena* fan fiction, notes that her website "is very much a 'work in progress' ([she's] still

³⁰ See <http://www.squidge.org/~halfaft/>. Accessed 15 July 2007.

waiting for [her] copy of *Textual Poachers* in the mail).” This instance in particular speaks to the power of Jenkins’ work in (some) fan circles; the implied “because,” as in “this glossary is a work in progress [because] I have not yet read *Textual Poachers*,” is revelatory. The idea here seems to be that *Textual Poachers* is needed to authorize or complete this introduction to fan fiction, that in fact Ashera herself understands the book to be not only part of her own education as a fan fiction reader or writer but also a necessary source for any publication offering information about fan fiction.

Consider a second website image that quotes Jenkins, this time without identifying him as an academic or explicitly calling attention to the context of authority of his work. At TheForce.net (See Figure 6), the quotation from *Textual Poachers* appears immediately *above* the A-Z “comprehensive guide” for *Star Wars* fan fiction and immediately *below* the suggestion that this list (and presumably this book or at least this sentence) is “all you need to know to be a savvy fanfic surfer.”

In these websites, the epigraph frames the fan fiction content in powerful ways, and a number of other websites follow suit, listing Jenkins as a resource that readers can use to learn more about fan fiction. A “primer on slash” appearing in *Apocrypha*, a zine for fans of the police program *Law and Order*, lists Jenkins as one of four resources for further reading about slash fiction. The other three resources are fan-written and internet-published. A fan fiction “Writer’s Resources” page lists 18 items: eleven are reference guides (including dictionaries, thesauruses, quotation collections, and html instructions); three are grammar and stylistic guides (including Strunk and White); and the remaining four are *TVWriter.com*, Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*, Joseph Campbell’s



Figure 6. Screenshot from The Force.net with Jenkins epigraph³¹

Hero with a Thousand Faces, and, of course, *Textual Poachers*. And the FAQ section of an *Angel* and *Buffy* fan fiction site includes this note: “To learn more about fanfic in the media fandom world, I highly recommend Textual Poachers, a sociological text by Henry Jenkins which examines the creation and growth of fanfic and zines, and goes into great detail about the various genres of the medium, and contains interviews with authors, editors and publishers.” These uses of Jenkins-as-resource are intriguing; unlike most of the other sources listed on these websites, *Textual Poachers* is not a guide to writing; it does not offer advice to fan fiction writers, and it does not purport to be a reference of any kind. It is a sociological study, as the quotation above indicates, and yet it is often included in lists of “must-reads” for fledgling fan fiction writers.

In part, this selection of websites serves as a reminder that although Jenkins originally conducted a large part of his ethnographic research with *Star Trek* fans, his work

³¹ See <http://fanfic.theforce.net/>. Accessed 15 July 2007.

has been embraced by—in fact understood to be a necessary authority in—a variety of fandoms. More importantly, whether it is Henry Jenkins himself, a quotation from his book, or the metaphor of textual poaching that is invoked, the sense of fan fiction writing and reading as a necessary corrective cultural act is widespread. In some of these sites, “fan fiction” and “textual poaching” are all but collapsed, interchangeable labels for the same set of activities; at the very least, “textual poaching” is constructed as a basic, at times necessary descriptor for fan fiction.³²

As I see it, this collapsing of metaphor and description is a problem. The specific use of textual poaching as a description of or metaphor for what fans do has become a given, has established itself not just in the critical vocabulary for fan fiction but as a kind of theoretical placeholder.³³ To offer a brief final example (one that is either cautionary or prophetic, depending on the vantage point), the Southern Oregon University website includes a glossary of major theoretical terms; in this list of concepts that most academics would recognize as firmly, unquestionably established—terms including *agency*, *camp*, *discourse*, *essentialism*, and *subject*—the phrase *textual poaching* appears without explanation. Jenkins is cited, but again, the phrase is listed not as a *reading* of fan activity

³² It is important to recognize that in the original development of the term, “textual poaching” is not specific to fan fiction. The specific quotation that so many websites position in a central way does refer to fan fiction, but in Jenkins’ work, “textual poaching” actually encompasses a whole set of activities including fan fiction: critiquing programs with other fans, making art, compiling videos, and so on

³³ So, for example, Mark Dery can write in his online column that the zine *Science Friction* is “a textbook example of textual poaching—a sort of guerilla semiotics in which consumers-turned-producers perversely rework popular fictions” (para 2). Notice here that “guerilla semiotics” is used as a kind of metaphor for textual poaching, in itself an indication of the transformation of “textual poaching” from metaphor to description, perhaps even cliché.

but as a *label*, a description. His metaphor has taken hold in powerful ways; academics and fans alike have reached a kind of closure: fans *are* textual poachers.³⁴

In part, this is an inevitable, even a desirable, situation. The success and survival of a powerful critical metaphor is part and parcel of the way academic writing—in fact, any kind of source-based writing—works: in beginning a project on, say, the internet writing of television fans, a writer starts from and quotes those who have begun that work themselves. A writer adopts, for a time at least, the ways of thinking and the turns of phrase that those previous authors have provided. Particularly in the case of objects of study that are not fully defined or culturally licensed, like internet fan fiction, such metaphors make the inquiry itself more tangible. However, a powerful defining metaphor—in this case, the metaphor of fans as poachers—can run the risk of becoming such a fixed part of a particular lexical landscape that eventually it can seem to restrict what it is possible to know about the thing it figuratively describes. In other words, not only can the metaphor encourage certain connotations and meanings while forestalling others, but it can, more dangerously, cease to appear as a metaphor. It becomes canon.

Now, to borrow from the conventions of fan fiction production, we could reasonably expect that if textual poaching is canon, then a range of other constructions—I’ll call them alternate critical universes—would serve as readings, revisions, transformations, springboards from the original critical canon, much in the way I talked about source-based academic writing in the previous paragraph. And this is more or less the current state of affairs in fan fiction scholarship when it assumes that textual poaching is a given. But there

³⁴As Christine Hine notes in *Virtual Ethnographies*, “‘closure’ is often used to denote the point at which concepts cease to be problematic. In studies of the social shaping of technologies, closure has acquired a specific usage to describe the point at which there has been general agreement on what the technology is and what it is for” (150).

are two problems with this state of affairs. First, it awards pride of place to the idea of textual poaching, which is always assumed to be the baseline from which other ideas vary; it is probably too late to change this, since Henry Jenkins has been writing about fans and their work for almost 20 years. Second, and more important, if textual poaching is canon, then other writers must take care to keep it alive and well in their own work. In fan fiction based on *BtVS*, Willow might become a vampire, a nuclear physicist, a Starfleet officer; she might live in medieval Europe or on 25th century Mars. But she will always be herself; this is one of the most important assessments of fan fiction value. Similarly, if Jenkins' version of fans is canon, then those fans may write novels or haiku, on *Star Trek* or *60 Minutes*, in a friend's living room or on the internet....but they will always be poachers.

For this reason, I find it compelling to go back to Constance Penley's work on fans, published in the same year as *Textual Poachers* and, as I mentioned earlier, drawing on the same de Certeau work but with quite different conclusions.³⁵ Penley does not mention poaching anywhere in her article, but she does take care to present and reject the idea of fans as "parasites" although it is unclear whether she is responding to a particular argument or making a rhetorical gesture. "Parasites often injure their hosts," she writes, "but slash fandom in no way seeks to harm or destroy the world of *Star Trek*." "Rather, the fans want only to *use* the system imposed by the other, a practice that, as de Certeau describes it, 'redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference'" (140). This redistribution of space is what Penley calls "Brownian motion," and the differences from poaching are significant. Penley's fans do not take something from a private cultural preserve; instead, they

³⁵ Penley's article actually address slash writing specifically, but the difference is negligible in this context.

reimagine the preserve itself. For Penley, most importantly, fan writing is not about guerilla action, borrowing from a system, or taking the goods that belong to others; instead it is “a way of thinking” (139).

2.2 READING FAN FICTION CRITICALLY

Penley’s language is compelling here, and importantly, it shows that it is entirely possible to conceive of fan fiction practices in terms that do not align with the dominant construction of textual poaching. The juxtaposition of the two frames of reference begs to be explored; in this discussion, I am most interested in understanding how Penley’s “way of thinking” might shed light on different aspects of fan writing than does “textual poaching.” One reason I find the common use of poaching-as-label troubling is that the label serves to *describe* rather than to *read* fan writing. “Textual poaching” may remain a useful description for fan writing in general, but it does not offer—at least it has not been shown to offer—specific insight into the textual relationships of fan writing.

In *Motives for Metaphor: Literacy, Curriculum, and the Teaching of English*, James E. Seitz reminds his readers that unlike simile,

metaphor is a trope of *equivalence*. Metaphor does not, as even the most reductive handbooks notice, say that this is *like* that; it says that this *is* that. . . . By *equating* one thing with another, metaphor performs at once the most radical and the most common of rhetorical gestures, one that completely overlooks “keeping things in their proper places.” Readers of metaphor are thus asked not simply to discern resemblances between this and that; they are

asked to enter a fictional world in which the distinction between this and that no longer obtains. (7)

I find Seitz' language here useful for understanding some of the complexities of the metaphor of textual poaching. This metaphor relies on a straightforward equivalence of poacher with fan: a poacher trespasses on someone else's land in order to get game; a viewer encroaches on the creative enterprise of someone else's television show in order to get creative material. The "fictional world" this establishes is one in which acts of television viewing and consequent creativity violate both physical space and economic arrangements, since according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to poach is "to encroach or trespass (on the lands or rights of another) in order to possess oneself unlawfully or unfairly of something, esp. in order to steal game; hence, to take game or fish illegally, or by unsportsmanlike devices." In the poaching relationship, the boundaries of the space understood to be violated by the act of poaching remain fixed and permanent, while any activity of the poachers is ephemeral and ineffectual beyond the material reduction of stock.

The rhetorical gesture of the poaching metaphor is powerful in its refusal, to borrow Seitz' phrase, to keep things in their proper places, and it is perhaps in discussions of intellectual property and potential copyright violation that textual poaching works best, since intellectual property is the only property that can really be violated in acts of poaching. But without the overarching premise that a piece of fan fiction *is* a violation of intellectual property, the metaphor requires some stretching: for example, a viewer does not *literally* encroach on creative territory, since she is likely to watch the text in question in a private space. What if a fan embraces the idea that she is participating in an act of

borrowing with collective storytelling potential but refuses to identify with an act of (potential) copyright violation?³⁶

This is precisely how fan fiction works: it recognizes a large portion of an original canon combined but takes exception; as Constance Penley suggests, it reimagines a space. This fan, if she archives her work at any of the websites discussed in the previous section, may see herself as a poacher, but she may simultaneously reject an intellectual property framework and its overtones of illegality or at the very least impropriety. For this person, the writing of fan fiction may not involve a transgression of any but the most virtual of boundaries, that of the “end” of an imaginative storyline on television and the “beginning” of an imaginative storyline on paper (or on screen). In other words—again, to borrow Seitz’ language—she may appreciate the distinctions that a canon allows while choosing to reframe them in *a fictional world other than the one she is offered*.

Now, let me turn to the alternative to problems of metaphor that Seitz proposes (it is one that underlies his project of reading central metaphors in the curricular work of composition courses as well as in English studies more generally): “[T]eachers and students can *read* metaphor dialogically by keeping difference in mind even as they acknowledge equivalence; instead of merely identifying with the fiction conjured by the metaphor, they can resist the pull of identification in order to extend their ‘conversation’ with the metaphor they have been asked to believe” (7). What would a “conversation” with the metaphor of textual poaching look like?

³⁶ Susan Clerc claims that “perhaps the most typical expression of fannish analysis is speculation about what will happen or should happen next based on intense scrutiny of episodes” (64), and this seems to be true of the process of writing fan fiction, as well.

Consider this passage from Capt Murdock's Star Trek-*BtVS* crossover story "Equilibration." This excerpt occurs in the prologue, which is written from the third person limited perspective of Commanding Officer Captain Francisco Cumberland. While on her first solo mission, Lt. Willow Rosenberg³⁷ has encountered an anomaly in time that ultimately will transport her a century into the future and make it possible for her to meet Lt. Tara Maclay.

His mind tried to balance the safety of his crew and his faith in their ability to do their jobs and take care of themselves. "Shuttlepod, report status," he commanded over the channel.

"Nominal, captain. I've, uh, just finished my initial...maneuver, if you can call it that. Gravimetric stresses well within tolerances. I'm preparing to make the second pass now. I want to try a particle-trajectory analysis, sir."

Typically, Rosenberg had her "eager young space cadet" voice on, which Cumberland had always found cute. All it did now was worry the hell out of him, that she would be too busy playing Junior Scientist to watch her back.

Then again, isn't that what I'm here for? Cumberland wondered.

Over at the tactical station, Buffy Summers had had enough. "Willow," she said, keying her intercom to the ship-to-ship frequency, "never mind that stuff, just get your butt back to the ship!"

"Buffy, I'm fine. Really. You know me. I'm not Danger Gal."(Prologue, 1)

At this point, even a reader unfamiliar with the Buffyverse will likely pick up on the most obvious of the layered canonical references in this passage: the names Buffy and Willow

³⁷ Capt. Murdock uses this spelling in "Equilibration," rather than the official spelling of "Rosenberg."

come directly from *BtVS* (it is unclear whether Murdock intentionally changes the spelling of Willow's last name in his story). But Murdock could be seen as poaching much more than names here. First, the labeling of Willow as "eager young space cadet" is a fairly straightforward canonical reading of Willow's character in *BtVS*; she is, as the series progresses, an eager young computer geek, an eager young lover, an eager young college student, an eager young witch.

Slightly less apparent is the use of Captain Cumberland to revise another major character from *BtVS*, Giles Rupert the Watcher. Over the course of the series, Giles' role evolves from protecting only Buffy to serving as a guide and mentor for the whole group, and in later seasons, he takes particular care to intervene in and oversee Willow's developing magical abilities. Here, Cumberland explicitly reflects on his responsibility to watch over Willow, a move that underscores his presence as a revision of Giles. Similarly, Buffy Summers' character here is readable as a loosely translated version of her *BtVS* figure: never one to follow the intricacies of Willow's scientific mind, she wants to skip the explanations and get back to business.

A third layer—and signaled to a novice reader by its use of capital letters—is the phrase "Danger Gal," which paraphrases a line spoken in multiple episodes of *BtVS*, as when Buffy announces that she has "to be secret-identity gal again" ("The Freshman," S4), when Willow complains to Tara, "You've been spell gal night and day lately" ("Family," S5), or when Tara apologizes to Willow by saying she'd been "snippy gal" ("Triangle, S5).³⁸ This approximation of dialogue is an important moment because it is the one place in

³⁸ See the Buffyverse Dialogue Database at <http://vrya.net/bdb/>, accessed July 11, 2007. In her detailed examination of linguistic play and revision in *BtVS* fan fiction, Katrina Blasingame argues that "it

this passage where concrete language is revised. Arguably, references to commonplace readings of character habits and traits are matters of interpretation: after all, Murdock's writing of Buffy and even more so of Captain Cumberland reflects his particular interpretation of these characters, but the use of language is an explicit act of textual borrowing. It is plainly a moment of poaching.

If I were to extend the passage quoted above in either direction, I could continue to read "Equilibration" for its extensive poaching. In the paragraph immediately before the passage begins, Cumberland engages in classic Giles reflection, reviewing textbook knowledge that might bear on the danger at hand. In the paragraph immediately following, Buffy realizes that she has broken the rules by speaking out of turn, and she and Cumberland must negotiate their relationships, also a classic *BtVS* moment. There is an argument to be made as well that the story overall, in its use of chapters alternating among three limited viewpoints (those of Cumberland, Willow, and Tara), is borrowing the *BtVS* structure of zooming in on different character focal points in different scenes. Recall that I am speaking here only to the poaching of *BtVS* and not of *Star Trek*, the story's other source. References to tactical stations, maneuvers, ship frequencies, and the like are no doubt drawn from that fictional universe, and although Murdock includes no actual characters from any *Star Trek* series, it is entirely possible that a reader more versed than I in *Star Trek* could perform a similar reading of poaching through that lens.

Reading this excerpt for textual poaching's equivalence, then, it would seem that the passage serves as a material trace of an essentially fleeting relationship; it documents an act of poaching, both poaching considered as *reading* or interpretation and poaching

is...difficult to show the evolution of fan language in fanfiction when few scholars have looked at actual fan language rather than concentrating on ethnographic studies of fan interaction" (para. 3).

considered as *writing*, in very specific ways. And reading for equivalence—for the ways that poaching works here—also seems to confirm the owner-poacher relationship inherent in the poaching metaphor. My reading constructs the relationship between *BtVS* and this passage as one of origin and borrowed material, of source and a kind of quotation. To read this passage for its poaching equivalence is, on some level at least, to reaffirm the ownership of the television show’s creative team over their material and to set up the story as a supplement, a reading of the text, what Mia Consalvo calls “supplementary materials in relation to the primary text of interest” (68).

Certainly, the fact that some of the references, readings, and paraphrases are most meaningful to the most experienced viewers of *BtVS* suggests that this is a reading that makes sense. However, other possibilities exist, as even a brief reading for difference indicates. Consider again the passage:

His mind tried to balance the safety of his crew and his faith in their ability to do their jobs and take care of themselves. “Shuttlepod, report status,” he commanded over the channel.

“Nominal, captain. I’ve, uh, just finished my initial...maneuver, if you can call it that. Gravimetric stresses well within tolerances. I’m preparing to make the second pass now. I want to try a particle-trajectory analysis, sir.”

Typically, Rosenberg had her “eager young space cadet” voice on, which Cumberland had always found cute. All it did now was worry the hell out of him, that she would be too busy playing Junior Scientist to watch her back.

Then again, isn't that what I'm here for? Cumberland wondered.

Over at the tactical station, Buffy Summers had had enough. “Willow,” she said, keying her intercom to the ship-to-ship frequency, “never mind that stuff, just get your butt back to the ship!”

“Buffy, I’m fine. Really. You know me. I’m not Danger Gal.”(Prologue, 1)

First, recall my observation in Chapter 1 that Capt Murdock’s story notes clearly indicate that he does not expect his *Different Colored Pens* readers to be familiar with the conventions of the *Star Trek* universe. In resituating the recognizable characters of Buffy and Willow in an unknown setting with a set of alien references— tactical stations, maneuvers, ship frequencies—Murdock in a sense levels the playing field for all the members of his audience. Readers unfamiliar with the *BtVS* canon are not asked here to recall plot points from that series or, more generally, to be required to draw on their working knowledge of the show. Instead, all readers are asked to engage in an unfamiliar fictional universe.

Second, Murdock’s story notes are firm in their assertion that the Willow we see here (and the Tara we encounter in the next chapter) are “not precisely the [characters] that we all know and love,” which is to say that although we may think we recognize some of their attributes from our viewing of *BtVS*, we are in a very real sense reading about two new characters, recognizable perhaps as types rather than individuals, apart from the coincidence of their names. Murdock’s deliberate spelling change of Willow’s last name throughout the story (he changes the second “e” in Rosenberg to a “u”) is a subtle but effective reminder of this fact. One way the text bears out its difference from *BtVS* is in its consistent assigning of unfamiliar speech patterns to the characters. In direct contrast to Willow’s famous “babble” on screen, her dialogue here is clipped and functional, as in

“gravimetric stresses well within tolerances.” Similarly, although the Buffy of the television series is highly intelligent, she is rarely shown to work anything more technical than a cell phone (she is “disguised” in one episode with a clipboard and a pair of glasses); here, however, she keys her intercom with ease.

Third, the presence of the new character Captain Cumberland shifts the balance of the passage, as he does not seem to function as an equivalent of any major *BtVS* male character. He is clearly not Giles Rupert, who over the course of the series actually loses his rank as Buffy’s watcher and becomes more an older friend than a mentor, and whose vocabulary does not include words like “cute” or “hell.” He is as clearly not Xander Harris, whose role as buddy is not reprised in this passage, or Angel or Spike or Riley or Jonathan or Warren, all regular male characters on the program. Because the writer of the story also goes by Captain, Cumberland is possibly, in fan fiction parlance, a “Mary Sue,” an idealized version of the author written into the story. From a *BtVS* standpoint, whoever Cumberland is, the military framework here colors his interactions with his subordinates beyond recognition.

I have said that a reader unfamiliar with *BtVS* is given access to this story, but it is still true that these differences are perhaps more meaningful when read *as* differences against the original series. Nonetheless, it is *not* poaching when a potential poacher sees a hare on a hunting preserve and then deliberately goes home to find a tortoise. How then do we read the consistent contrariness of this text. Let me propose a few possibilities, represented in two alternate critical universes that I think are useful in framing the work that Capt. Murdock is doing in productive ways.

Alternate Universe 1: This passage suggests that fan fiction is well understood as an act of research writing and that Murdock is using the strategies of paraphrase, quotation, allusion, and invention to create an essentially new text. By building in all the necessary information a reader needs to understand the characters—*this Willow is an adept if novice lieutenant, this Buffy is an experienced tactical officer*—Murdock displays a keen awareness of an audience that needs such cues to develop relationships with his material. As good research writers do, he puts everything into his own words, indicates a near-quotation with the appropriate punctuation marks, and generally takes care to protect the integrity of his use of source material: there is no hint of accidental plagiarism or even of “patchwriting” here.³⁹ Furthermore, this passage displays Murdock’s understanding of the need to write himself into his text; this is no facile summary of other people’s ideas. He is building an argument, indebted but not limited to the resources that have helped him to work through his reading, and he has something to say.

Alternate Universe 2: This passage suggests that fan fiction might be understood as a response to an implied prompt. Any text raises as many questions as it proposes answers, and *BtVS*, which hovers just off the horizon of this story, is no exception. Imagine some possible questions: do the entities “Willow” and “Buffy” remain meaningful concepts when resituated in an unfamiliar context? How does an idiosyncratic reading of a particular text provide the foundation for a new argument or iteration? What are the possibilities for conceptual growth when the resources of two separate textual entities—in this case *BtVS* and *Star Trek*—are combined in a new way? How can I push my reading further by

³⁹ “Patchwriting” is a term Rebecca Howard uses in *Standing in the Shadows of Giants* (1995) to refer to the practice of weaving language and ideas from several sources together, an act which she suggests is often misread by teachers as plagiarism.

juxtaposing my own idea with someone else's established idea? Some of Murdock's accomplishment here lies in the fact that he builds at least one possible prompt into his response; we can see the trace of this when new character Captain Cumberland asks himself, "*isn't that what I'm here for?*" This sentence shows a level of metacommentary that is essential to this response.

It will probably be clear that these alternate universes are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in that they both propose a necessary relationship between fan fiction and a source text or texts. However, I hope it is clear that they intersect uneasily with the idea of textual poaching. The relationship that these alternate universes propose instead is one that looks more like what Joseph Harris calls "the interplay of ideas [that] defines academic writing" (1). As I go on to discuss in Chapter 3, a fan fiction writer at *Different Colored Pens* must achieve a fine balance between old text and new spin; like Capt Murdock in "Equilibration," he must innovate against a familiar canon, and the context of academic writing provides language and conceptual terms that make sense here.

I am not the first to consider fan fiction for the ways it critiques, analyzes, or deconstructs its "source" texts;" this idea is taken up in a brief fanzine essay by critic Deva, who suggests that the notion of fan fiction "as a concept and practice can be central to one of the most important political/cultural/aesthetic problems of our time: *is it possible to create anything new?*" (para. 5). In "The Philosophy of Fan Fiction," Deva makes a strong case for a view of fan fiction not only as creative writing but as critical argument. In suggesting that an academic paper about homoerotic subtext in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is not so different from a fan fiction rendering of, say, Kirk and Spock as lovers,

Deva positions these two texts in a shared spectrum in which writing obtains its meaning by working with, resisting, and transforming texts that have come before:

Fanfiction works as a place to critique canon, a place to mourn the losses and redress the injustices and hurt canon inflicts on us, a place to celebrate the joys canon gives us, and a place to present multiple readings of canon in response to other fans: a place where bitter argument, which in academic circles would probably swiftly degenerate into name-calling...can be displaced into the coexistence of diverse stories. (para. 10)

What strikes me about Deva's language here is that, like Constance Penley, he seems to argue for a kind of critical stance that goes far beyond the borrowing of Jenkins' critical paradigm. Deva's multiple readings set aside a hierarchical relationship between source and derivative text; rather, media texts, fan fiction, and critical argument alike coexist as "diverse stories." At the same time, canon plays an important role in Deva's view of fan writing; there *is*, after all, a canon (of critical discourse as well as of television and film) that cannot be dismissed as a point of inspiration for other work.

Deva's framework does away with—or at least temporarily suspends—anxieties about plagiarism and intellectual property issues that, in the context of fan fiction, are most often articulated as worries about copyright violation. This is certainly a valid concern, and I would refer interested readers to the work of Susan J. Clerc and Sara Gwenllian Jones, each of whom address issues of copyright and intellectual property in compelling ways.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Susan J. Clerc, *Who Owns Our Culture?: The Battle Over the Internet, Copyright, Media Fandom, and Everyday Uses of the Cultural Commons*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State U, 2002. See also Sara Gwenllian Jones, "Web Wars: Resistance, Online Fandom and Studio Censorship." In *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, The Industry and Fans*. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, eds. London: BFI, 2003. 163-77.

For my purposes here, however, a move away from the framework of textual poaching requires a move away —again, perhaps temporary—from such concerns. Discussions of copyright in fan fiction often keep attention focused on the relationship between fan fiction and its “source” media text; I focus in this dissertation more on the relationship between fan fiction and the feedback that responds to it.

Dark Magic Willow, a *Pens* writer, suggests that “one of the unique problems of fan fiction is fitting your work within someone else's source material—their setting, history, and characters. Of course, this problem isn't just an obstacle; it's also partly the reason for writing fan fiction” (*Pens*, “Writing Discussion”). In this statement, Dark Magic Willow reverses the usual version of the relationship in a productive way. Instead of constructing fan fiction as writing “within someone else’s source material” as an inevitable result of the choice to do more with, say, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, DMW suggests that what might propel a writer into fan fiction in the first place is a writing challenge: working within someone else’s parameters. Just as important, he writes that working with source material is one of the problems of fan fiction and that it’s partly the reason to write. In other words, fan fiction is about more than the retelling of a television program or movie; and the challenges of fan fiction are about more than textual poaching. Rather, as fan reader Scout notes, “most of us are critical thinkers at heart. I think that’s one of the reasons we’ve gravitated toward this [site]” (*Pens*, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction”). In the next pair of chapters, I look closely at *Different Colored Pens* in order to name and discuss the work of critical thinking to which Scout refers and the challenges that Dark Magic Willow suggests are themselves a powerful motivator for the reading and writing of fan fiction.

3.0 READING AND WRITING AT *DIFFERENT COLORED PENS*

The supportive feedback community of Pens was essential for inspiring me to write and for helping me continue to write.”

—Dark Magic Willow, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction,” *Pens*

As the preponderance of ethnographic studies of internet communities suggests, there is a certain ease in reading the internet as a real space where people meet and talk, but a website like *Different Colored Pens* is a useful reminder that, in addition, “virtual communities constitute an interesting leap into the aesthetic sphere of existence” (Dreyfus 104). Websites with bulletin board functions and associated chat rooms are, to be sure, readable as transcriptions of oral dialogues, but they are also textual spaces where reading and writing are the vehicles through which meetings and discussions happen; more forcefully put, as this chapter suggests, reading and writing are the goals of those meetings and discussions. Inevitably, then, there is a meta-textual level at work at a website like *Pens*, which is a textual archive in (at least) two important senses. First, it is an archive *about* text, an archive of material that considers, celebrates, and criticizes a set of texts that themselves work with the “source” or “prompt” text of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Second, it is an archive *of* text, a site at which every interaction or utterance is a textual interaction or utterance, produced by varied and nuanced instances of reading and writing.

Different Colored Pens provides a wide range of such interactions and utterances, from the presumably carefully crafted official documents that frame the site (for example the Frequently Asked Questions [FAQ] document) to the apparently spontaneous bursts of response and counter-response that take place over minutes or even seconds, as indicated by their date and time tags. I can imagine a fascinating study of this range, one that undertook to differentiate among levels of formality, amount of time between posts, and so on in order to make arguments about the way that internet writing does and does not mediate between “oral” and “written” discourse.

However, in the absence of such differentiations, which are not the goal of my work here, I rely on James Porter’s suggestion that all internet discourse can be understood as “internetworked writing,” a term referring to “computer-based electronic writing that makes synchronous or asynchronous links to remote participants or databases” (2). The value for me in this construction lies partly in its methodological streamlining; it makes possible a reading of a set of texts that includes both crafted critical analyses and impromptu responses without requiring either constant qualification or the construction of textual hierarchies: e.g., *this* post, because it is marked as having been edited, is clearly more constructed and looks more like writing than *that* post, which contains two typos, was produced in 60 seconds and looks more like transcribed speech. But more to the point, this construction allows for the understanding of the whole set of texts at this online archive as writing, and the whole set of people who have contributed to it as writers.⁴¹

⁴¹ It is worth recalling that, as Walter Gibson has cautioned, “Web pages change daily, sometimes even momentarily” (10); the set of texts at *Different Colored Pens* is subject always to revision: posts can be edited by their original writers, deleted by the site’s moderators, taken up or quoted in new posts, etc.

This is not to say that there are not meaningful distinctions among these texts, and distinctions that bear on this project. One of these is the fact that some posts and discussion threads at *Different Colored Pens* could be considered to be primary texts, while others are considered to be secondary. For example, Katharyn Rosser's "Sidestep Chronicle" is comprised of Rosser's original fan fiction, readers' feedback, and Rosser's responses to that feedback, while Dark Magic Willow's "Writing Discussion" includes a series of reflections and discussions *about* the work of reading and feedback. At a slightly further remove, "Reading and Writing Fan Fiction" is a sequence of texts that developed in response to a series of questions I posed at this website about the work that readers and writers there understand themselves to be doing.⁴² One way of differentiating among texts at this website, then, would be to label Rosser's story thread as "primary" and the "Writing Discussion" and "Reading and Writing Fan Fiction" as "secondary," since it is in the meta-threads that site members are reflecting on and discussing the work of reading and writing they are doing in the story threads.

This formulation raises its own problems. In *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills suggests that a challenge in studying fans is the tendency among some scholars to take fans' claims about their own practices at face value; in his work on fan ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, Hills advocates caution in reading fans' statements about their practices as transparent, and this is a caution to bear in mind. However, in studying an entirely textual environment, I am not sure that it is possible, in any relevant way, to separate out reflective practices themselves from attempts to account for these critical practices when the form that both sets of texts take is the same. As will become clear in my reading of *Different*

⁴² This thread was not a formal questionnaire, nor was it intended to produce authoritative "results" of any kind.

Colored Pens throughout this chapter, I am not as interested in asserting the ability of this online community to represent itself accurately as in suggesting that the work of fan fiction—as it is taken up at this site—is accomplished in multiple modes, both in site members’ writing practices and in their reflections on those practices. In other words, it’s not that there are works of fiction on this website and then, separately, works of critical inquiry; it’s that these sets of texts, read together, intersect in important ways and, in fact, do versions of the same work.

The concept of “discourse community” as it has evolved in composition studies and applied linguistics is a useful lever for this kind of reading. In its most simple form, it a discourse community is “a group of people who share language-using practices” (222) that, as Patricia Bizzell notes, are highly conventionalized in two ways: social interactions are highly conventionalized, and “canonical knowledge regulates the world views of group members, how they interpret experience” (222). Within such structures, as James Porter suggests, a writer is “part of a discourse tradition, a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning” (35) As this chapter shows, the production of such meaning is inscribed in many of the hundreds of thousands of posts that writers have made to this site. If, as Porter goes on to suggest, a discourse community “is a textual system with stated and unstated conventions, a vital history, mechanisms for wielding power, institutional hierarchies, vested interests, and so on,” then here, finally, is where the sets of distinctions I have outlined above are most important. Both in the case of more speech-like and more writing-like texts and in the case of “primary” and “secondary” texts, a particularly meaningful assessment lies in

understanding the ways in which individual texts can be defined, as Bizzell suggests they must be, in terms of the community's conventions.⁴³

In fact, *Different Colored Pens* is striking in its moderators' expectations that all readers and writers who participate will adhere to a highly specific set of interpretive conventions: some of these have to do with preferred interpretations of the characters of Willow and Tara and more broadly *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, some with how registered members interact textually with one another, some with the parameters of the writing that is produced and published there. My aim in this chapter is not to argue *whether* this website constitutes a discourse community (this is work that has been done, and done well, with other websites),⁴⁴ but rather to use the term to highlight my discussion of the interpretive conventions framing the work that readers and writers do at this site. In this chapter, I investigate the *Different Colored Pens* website and look closely at some of its most basic conventions of reading and writing; this is a discourse community that advocates reading and writing fan fiction for pleasure but encourages criticism and sees no real tension in this position. It is difficult to imagine a member of this community saying, for instance, "don't read so much into it; it's just fan fiction." As will become clear in the following sections, *Pens* is quite restrictive in scope but also intensely encouraging and supportive in nature, and this combination—a rigid set of rules for reading and writing paired with an expectation of positive encouragement and praise—points to some important tensions that characterize the nature of reading and writing for members of this particular website. I go

⁴³ Discourse communities are not, as Bartholomae, Harris, and Porter have each pointed out, stable or unified groups; rather, they are discontinuous and at times fraught with tension and argument, best identified not through a consensus of opinion but rather through what Porter calls their forums, the mechanisms through which members communicate.

⁴⁴ See Bury, Gatson and Zweerink, and Lancaster. This is also an argument that is made in numerous articles published in *Slayage: The Online Journal of Buffy Studies*. Avail: <http://www.slayageonline.com>

on in Chapter 4 to consider the pedagogy of this kind of reading and writing, the ways in which site members are engaged in a process of learning to write and teaching one another to write.

3.1 FORM AND FUNCTION AT *DIFFERENT COLORED PENS*

The [*Pens*] environment is a wonderful place to workshop, where writers can take advantage of a readymade, captive audience.

--Patches, "The Art of Leaving Feedback," *Pens*

Different Colored Pens is the fan fiction forum of a larger website, *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe*. While a few fan fiction sites (in the introduction, I mentioned *fanfiction.net* as an example) accept fan fiction responding to just about anything, many more limit their offerings to a specific text or set of texts, configured in any number of ways: a specific text (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*); a set of texts with a common link (Joss Whedon's television programs, the *Star Trek* omnibus, or Marvel Comics); a sexual identity (lesbian characters from a variety of programs), a wished-for or revised sexual identity (female characters from a variety of programs written into lesbian relationships); and probably most commonly, the preferences of the website owner. *Different Colored Pens* represents even more selectivity than any of these configurations, accepting only fan fiction written primarily about a single pair of characters from a single show: Willow and Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. (As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Pens* is a "shipper" site,

which means that it is organized around discussions and creative work about a particular relationship, or ‘ship.)

As the FAQ notes, *The Kitten, the Witches, and the Bad Wardrobe* was created in the summer of 2000 when several members broke off from the Yahoo Willtara mailing list. An homage to C.S. Lewis’ novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the name was inspired by a season 4 dream sequence and refers to Tara’s pet cat, Willow and Tara themselves, and “basically everything Willow and Tara have ever worn.” (Similarly, the name *Different Colored Pens* is taken from a comment Willow makes about her use of highlighters to study for exams in the season 5 episode “Triangle.”) The site transformed several times as it changed hosts, moving from Yahoo to Novogate in 2000, to EZBoards in 2002, and finally to its own domain in 2005. In its current incarnation, the site actually has 13 separate message boards, each of which is dedicated to a specific kind of topic, from general chat about site members’ daily lives to fan fiction writing and response.⁴⁵ Figure 7 shows the website’s general index, with the two largest message boards highlighted; the numbers in the “Topics” and “Posts” columns offer a sense of the size of each forum, referring respectively to the total number of topic threads and total number of messages.

Magic in Two, for example, is a forum for posting and receiving feedback on videos, artwork, and so on, while *The Kitten*, as Figure 7 indicates, is dedicated to “GLBT...issues as well as topics that don’t fit in the other forums.”

⁴⁵ As of July 2007, the site can be found at <http://www.thekittenboard.com/board>.

Announcements		Topics	Posts	Last Post
	Welcome, Help & News Come introduce yourself , test an avatar or sig, ask for help, etc.	0	1665	Sat Jun 16, 2007 8:43 pm littlewicca
Willow and Tara - Truly and Forever				
	Witches and Vixens Anything about Willow & Tara, Alyson Hannigan and Amber Benson.	49	24828	Sat Jun 16, 2007 11:51 pm taralicious
	Different Colored Pens Willow and Tara live happy together in a place untouched by Mutant Enemy. This is a forum for Willow and Tara Fan Fiction (i.e. fan fiction, top 10s, etc...) Please read the content advisories on individual stories, read at your own discretion.	35	78661	Sun Jun 17, 2007 3:55 am Katharyn
	Beta Pens Bringing the W/T fic beta process to the entire Kitten community. This forum is for our fic authors to make their works-in-progress available for community beta-ing, from the initial ideas stage to the draft stage. This forum has threads useful for both the writer and the beta reader. (May contain spoilers for fics already on Pens!)	3	678	Thu Jun 07, 2007 7:27 am DaddyCatALSO
	Magic in Two This is the forum to post your creative W/T and A/A works. You can post wallpapers, videos, skins, etc. Fiction is NOT to be posted here.	43	7097	Sun Jun 17, 2007 3:00 am SJ
The Kitten				
	The Kitten The place for kittens to discuss GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) issues as well as topics that don't fit in the other forums. (Some topics are off-topic in every forum on the board. Please read the FAQs.)	88	69452	Sun Jun 17, 2007 9:17 am JujuDeRoussie
	Genuine Molded Plastic Salem Witch Trials, koala bears, SpongeBob: what's on TV and at the movies!	20	26036	Sun Jun 17, 2007 8:32 am Ben Varkentine
	The Inward Eye Post your original creative efforts here. Fan art IS allowed in this forum. Absolutely no fanfic!	49	7871	Fri Jun 15, 2007 7:05 pm diamondforever
	Polls Post any poll, Willow and Tara, Alyson, Amber or OT polls.	5	2019	Sat Jun 16, 2007 1:09 pm ellbogen

Figure 7. General index for *The Kitten*, *the Witches*, and *the Bad Wardrobe*

There is quite a lot of variety in the kinds of topics taken up in these forums, as this sampling of topics will suggest: coming out, politics, book and movie recommendations, dialogue association games (a game in which each post quotes a piece of dialogue that begins with the last word from the dialogue in the previous post), the post-*BtVS* careers of the actresses who played Willow and Tara, and so on. As I go on to discuss in the next section, even the relative open, thoughtful, and playful nature of the *Kitten* board does not mean that anything goes; certain kinds of conversation are designated “off topic” and prohibited. As a ‘shipper site, for example, the *Kitten* does not encourage prolonged conversations about other relationships on *BtVS*, nor does it allow topics “questioning W/T’s relationship, lack of chemistry or depth, etc. . . .” (*Kitten* FAQ). As with many websites, the moderators are likely to delete “flames,” intervene in particularly argumentative or potentially hurtful exchanges, and ban certain users who violate the minimal expectations for conduct. In this sense, the site’s moderators are clear about what should happen when members write. Interestingly, they also have clear expectations for how members should *read*, as well. Quoted below are a few of the required reading strategies at the site:

- We encourage lurking. It is a good way of finding out if you fit into the community. [. . .] Before jumping into a thread, try to read the entire thread. The first post in each important thread will have crucial information about what the thread is about....
- Before starting new threads, check to see if you can post it in an existing thread. If you have a random question, it could go in the "Ask Any Question"

thread that most forums have....

- Avoid quoting entire posts immediately above yours. It's repetitive....

(*Kitten* FAQ)

This is a suggestive partial list: individuals must first register as members in order to be able to contribute even the briefest of comments, and they are asked to read thoroughly before posting. Asking site members to familiarize themselves with the conventions of the overall site as lurkers before ever posting is a way of engaging implicit agreement that an individual will “fit into the community” and adhere, at least for the most part, to its guidelines. Advising members to make sure that any new threads they might open do not already exist is a way of asking members to read broadly on the site, to be familiar with the overall set of topics at any given time, to be familiar not only with the canon of *BtVS* but also with the canon of this website. This broad reading is meant to be supplemented with in-depth reading; asking site members to read entire threads before adding to them is a way of encouraging them to read thoroughly. The apparently simple caution against quotation announces itself as a strategy to avoid repetition, but it is also a subtle way of ensuring that the thorough reading of threads will happen; if entire posts cannot be quoted, it is much more difficult for a casual reader to pick up on the thread of a discussion without having done her homework. She will have to have read previous posts to participate meaningfully in the thread.

All of this contextual information applies to *Different Colored Pens*, which, as Figure 7 indicates, is the most active of the forums, with 835 topic threads and 78,661 messages and counting; the website claims that this single forum is “the most active w/t fiction site on the web.” In addition to the stories and discussions available in this forum,

the *Pens* archive contains an additional 877 threads with a total of more than 58,000 messages. Any of the site's more than 2,000 registered members may contribute to any of these threads or start new ones; while anyone might search for or happen upon the site and therefore read its contents, a reader must register as a member, provide an e-mail address, get a screen name, and log into the site in order to contribute to or start a new topic thread.⁴⁶

Within *Pens* and the other forums, each topic thread appears as an entry in a table index and, when clicked on, opens into a sub-page that includes a story (or screenplay, set of stories, poetry, or discussion) and a sequence of responses. Members can move easily among threads by clicking on hyperlinks or returning to the index, but each thread is also distinct. A thread is made up of posts; the first post is the first installment of a story, and subsequent posts are added by readers and the writer. Each thread thus generates a set of responses specific to the original topic. Figure 8 shows part of the first of 17 pages of the *Pens* index.

Individual browsers can tailor the settings of index pages so that certain topic threads always appear at the top of the list; the default setting, however, is that a few threads are designated “sticky” and remain at the top of the first page at all times, and all other threads appear in reverse chronological order, so that the thread that contains the most recent post, as indicated in the “last post” column, is first.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ As of July 2007, there were more than 2,000 registered members at The Kitten; before the site moved to its own domain in 2005 (thus requiring that members re-register), the Ezboards version had more than 4,000 registered members.

⁴⁷ The Update thread provides a place for writers to post announcements about their recent work and the Recommendations thread a place for readers to post reviews of completed stories.

Topics	Rep lies	Author	Views	Last Post
Announcement: Issues - Pens Open - Beta Pens open, too! [Goto page: 1 ... 3, 4, 5]	138	xita	14493	Sun May 20, 2007 9:20 pm bytrsuite →
Sticky: Update Thread [Goto page: 1 ... 48, 49, 50]	147 1	xita	146174	Sun Jun 17, 2007 10:39 pm EmeraldArcher →
Sticky: Looking for a Willow & Tara Fic Thread [Goto page: 1 ... 25, 26, 27]	786	xita	67118	Thu Jun 14, 2007 6:44 pm Willow Watcher →
Sticky: Pens Recommendation Thread	27	maudmac	13369	Fri Jun 08, 2007 6:27 am umgaynow →
A Bet [Goto page: 1, 2, 3, 4]	99	amberholic	10149	Mon Jun 18, 2007 8:09 am kimmy_s →
Never No More	6	EmeraldArcher	242	Mon Jun 18, 2007 7:14 am diamondforever →
The Right Decision [Goto page: 1 ... 21, 22, 23]	661	kindagay	102805	Mon Jun 18, 2007 4:38 am Zamps1975 →
Only One [Goto page: 1, 2]	53	Justified12	4993	Mon Jun 18, 2007 3:09 am Lifty →
(AU): Written In The Stars - 'Does age matter?' [Goto page: 1 ... 10, 11, 12]	333	ambercissism	52397	Mon Jun 18, 2007 12:47 am willowbaby05 →
RC 2018: >>NEW STORY<< Update 15/6/07 [Goto page: 1 ... 18, 19, 20]	598	Sheridan	89535	Sun Jun 17, 2007 11:27 pm Animism →
Working It Out [Goto page: 1, 2]	34	JustSkipt	3496	Sun Jun 17, 2007 5:23 pm woahnellie →
„What Dreams may Come” [Goto page: 1, 2]	30	Dax	1838	Sun Jun 17, 2007 2:59 pm EmeraldArcher →
Fic: - The Sidestep Chronicle & Second Chronicle [Goto page: 1 ... 111, 112, 113]	336 6	Katharyn	301070	Sun Jun 17, 2007 1:08 pm Tigerkid14 →
[Short Fic Part 2/3] Seizure Of Heart	17	JuiuDeRoussie	926	Sun Jun 17, 2007 12:37 pm Dax →
New Fic: Darkness Falls [Goto page: 1 ... 56, 57, 58]	172 3	KrisBo5	163291	Sun Jun 17, 2007 12:30 pm KrisBo5 →

Figure 8. Excerpt of *Different Colored Pens* index

Thus, the story “A Bet” appears first in Figure 8 because Kimmy S posted a response at 8:09 a.m. on Monday, July 18, 2007 (which is the time I copied the index), but

if Emerald Archer posted a new chapter of “Never No More” at 8:10, that story would be “bumped” to the top of the listing. This structure implicitly rewards the most popular texts by keeping them at the top of the screen where readers are most likely to see them; Katharyn Rosser’s “Sidestep Chronicle,” for example, has appeared at the top of the page at least 3,336 times since being started in March 2002. These stories may be more likely to be opened; however, this does not necessarily mean that they receive more responses.

Consider the two columns of numbers. “Replies” indicates the actual number of message posts that appear in the thread; these include posts by the thread’s author as well as by any messages that contain feedback. “Views” indicates the number of times any part of the thread has been opened by any browser. Comparing these two columns of numbers suggests that the number of posts in any given thread usually hovers around 1% of the total number of views, a percentage that seems to be fairly consistent across stories in this forum.

Although the first content-specific cell in each row features the title of the thread, notice too that the structure of the index gives roughly equivalent weight to information about authorship and readership. Two of the five columns are devoted to title and author of the post; two are devoted to tallying responses and views; and the final column, which lists the name of the most recent respondent and the time and date of that response, can include both the author of the thread and her reader. Stories are therefore framed by both their authorship and their readership. And since, as I mentioned above, readers are expected to be familiar with the contents of an entire thread before posting, their responses can be considered to carry some weight; posting a response is in effect a claim that a reader has read not only the story she is responding to but, critically, all the feedback, as well. Of

course, there is no way to know for sure how many readers actually follow the *Pens* guidelines to the letter, but in theory, each feedback post would be written in response to the story and also to the other feedback that has preceded it. And in terms of the index represented in Figure 8, this means that a new reader would be expected to read not only Emerald Archer's story "Never No More" but also diamondforever's response to it; diamondforever, as the most recent commentator, is awarded a kind of temporary defining readership.

So far, my description of the site has been moving from general to specific; Figure 8 is essentially a sub-page of Figure 7. I would now like to get even more specific, looking at the sub-page that opens when a browser clicks on a single thread from the index screen shown in Figure 8. Figure 9 contains an image of the first post of Antigone Unbound's story "On Second Thought"; I take some space here to discuss this particular post because it compresses a great deal of information about some of the most important *Pens* conventions in a very short space.

This post shows a number of *Pens* conventions at work. In the left-hand column, Antigone's name appears along with her posting level and the total number of messages she has posted at the website overall. As Figure 9 shows, Antigone is quite new to posting messages at *Pens*; having posted only 19 times, she is at member level 2, "Floating Rose" (like all 32 level labels, this phrase refers to W/T-specific dialogue and iconic moments from *BtVS*.) She is in fact much newer than many of her readers, including Sheila WT (level 4, "Extra Flamey," 215 posts); VampNo12 (level 10, "Troll Hammer," 1287 posts); and Mollyig (level 15, "Apple Sauce & Tuna," 2253 posts). Antigone announces that this is

<p>Antigone Unbound</p> <p>2. Floating Rose</p> <p>Posts: 19 (10/22/02 8:29 pm)</p> <p>Reply</p>	<p>On Second Thought</p> <p>By Antigone Unbound</p> <p><i>Hey Kittens... This is my first fic posting. There's definitely angst, but you have my word that I'll take better care of Willow and Tara than did certain individuals who shall remain nameless.</i></p> <p>Summary: Way the heck back in S4, Willow makes a difficult choice. Disclaimer: Joss and ME own these characters, as well as my newfound but heart-felt antipathy Rating: NC-17 Spoilers: Up to the end of "New Moon Rising" Distribution: Knock yerself out; just give credit and disclaimer, please Feedback: Oh, yeah...Just send me a private e-mail</p> <p>Part I</p> <p>I did the right thing. Yep, that thing I did was the right thing, cuz I'm a right-thing-doin'-kinda gal. Maybe if she just kept chanting that to herself it would become her theme song, thereby drowning out the Greek (or was it Sapphic?) chorus in her head.</p> <p>She had been speechless when Oz reappeared at Giles' house. She had listened to him talk all night, never broaching the most important subject. She had stood dumbly in front of Tara, watching those fathomless blue eyes summon up yet more courage and compassion as she reached out and stroked away Willow's tears. And then, finally, she had acted. She had chosen. She had gone to Tara's room after that surreal day and given her the extra-flamey candle and told her that she was giving Oz another chance.</p> <p>Would it have been easier if Tara had cried? Or shouted, or done anything besides look at her with that understanding and that resignation? As she watched Tara brace for the news, body huddling in on itself slightly as if trying to ward off a blow, the incongruous conviction slid into her mind: Tara never, ever got the Christmas gift she really wanted. She never asked for it, she probably never even thought too long about how much she'd like it, that's how convinced she is that the very best things aren't for her. And here she was again, nodding as if it had been a foregone conclusion that Willow would pick Oz, that she wouldn't get what she most wanted because Tara Maclay wasn't one of the people that life smiled on, wasn't one of the people that life took much notice of at all. And it made Willow cry even more, standing in that dimly-lit room that had harbored so many hours of such closeness that it made her throat ache to think of them.</p>
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Figure 9. Excerpt from first post of Antigone Unbound's "On Second Thought," *Pens*

her first story and, as is typical of new writers at Pens, affirms her good intentions: "you have my word that I'll take better care of Willow and Tara than did certain individuals who shall remain nameless." The note also shows Antigone's keen awareness of and desire to

write for her audience, assuring her prospective readers that she will give them the kind of story they expect and want, a common gesture not only in the opening post of a new writer but throughout story threads. Critically, this note also marks a certain shift in the overall tone at *Different Colored Pens* and *The Kitten* more generally after Tara's death at the end of season six, a collective sense of disappointment with and even anger toward the program and its creator (hence Antigone noting, in her disclaimer, her "newfound but heart-felt antipathy") and an accompanying sense of vindication or redress that has important consequences for reading and writing at the site.

3.2 "SEEING RED," WRITING DESIRE

When I write w/t I have to follow the genre's rules—I have to write dialogue, plotlines and characterizations that are close enough to Joss Whedon's originals that you could imagine them happening on the show. Very strict rules, very clear on what can and cannot be. That's the whole point, that's the fun and the thrill and the challenge and the whatnot.

—Mrs. Vertigo, "Reading and Writing Fan Fiction," *Pens*

As I have noted, *Different Colored Pens* is typical of a 'shipper site in its restriction of the fan fiction it accepts to a focus on a single relationship, but its required specificity goes much further. From its inception, the site limited its writers' focus to Willow and Tara, whose on-screen relationship meant that their relationship was canon. After Tara's character was killed at the end of the sixth season and a new romantic interest, Kennedy,

was introduced for Willow early in the seventh and final season, the site maintained its focus on Willow and Tara, whose three-year relationship on *BtVS* continued, as a website catchphrase says, “untouched by Mutant Enemy” (the *BtVS* production company). But also, for the first time in its history, the site’s moderators removed the possibility of writing about a specific character, as this note from the FAQ states:

All fics should focus on W/T for a majority of the fic. Angst is very welcome but the end result should be the continuation of the W/T couple, which logically means Willow and Tara are alive and together in the end. Any creative effort featuring Willow or Tara with any other character in any romantic/sexual situation is Off Topic and does not belong on the board. Characters are to be fictional, this means no celebrities or actual people. Post “Seeing Red” events can be incorporated in fic, but no Kennedy, not ever, not for good or bad.

The rules captured here are important and binding at *Pens*. The site moderators enforce the requirement that all stories posted show Willow and Tara either in a committed, love relationship or on the way to it, however many roadblocks are thrown up in their way, by pulling stories that do not meet these criteria and by encouraging stories that do with feedback. Happy—or at least hopeful—endings are required. (This rule also applies to posted discussions; a comment that expressed a reader’s preference for either Willow or Tara with another person would likely be deleted, as well.)⁴⁸ “Seeing Red,” the episode in which Tara was shot through a window by a stray bullet meant for Buffy, effectively marks

⁴⁸ Most of the people who have published their work at *Pens* accept these rules with good grace and a sense of occasion. Many of them have posted their stories at other sites, as well, and some of them also write about other pairings, but they generally do not refer to that work at this site.

the closing of the *BtVS* canon at this website, even though the program continued for 24 more episodes. In other words, the website moderators essentially asked all members to agree that for them, *BtVS* ended with “Seeing Red.” Any stories that worked with elements from Season 7 had to do so with no reference to Kennedy (Willow’s Season 7 love interest), thus rendering them non-canonical.

In the months following Tara’s death on screen, emotions at the website (as documented in message posts) ran high, and the text generated as members wrote of their profound sense of loss, their anger at the *BtVS* producers, their indignation at the perceived media treatment of lesbian characters in general, and their vitriol about the plot of the show’s seventh season could fill a book. Tara was not the only recurring character to have died on the show, and Willow not the only survivor to experience deep grief, but Tara’s death seemed to open the floodgates to unhappy viewer retrospection. Although Willow and Tara’s relationship had been a fact of the show for parts of three seasons, and they had been shown kissing and sleeping together in pajamas, the episode “Seeing Red” depicted them as clearly naked under the sheets for the first time on screen, and *Pens* fans felt that it was no coincidence that Tara was shot through the heart, and Willow driven to a kind of black magic madness, in that same episode. Site members discussed other injustices of the show in the light of this juxtaposition: what about the fact that Amber Benson was the only actor who played a major love interest of any of the show’s stars and was never included in the credits except as a guest star? What about the fact that her character was given no funeral, and her name was not so much as mentioned for the first several episodes of the next season? Within days, essays on “the lesbian cliché” were circulating on *The Kitten*, making the argument that the show’s producers were collaborators in an ongoing media

undermining of lesbian relationships, with lesbian sex explicitly connected to death or depravity, a theme that had (first) been explored in Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* (1928). After all, writers maintained, Willow and Tara's relationship was one of the first of its kind, and they were mourning the loss not just of a beloved character but of the experience of seeing their own relationships represented on broadcast television.⁴⁹

But site members also acknowledged that their participation at *Pens* and *The Kitten* was perhaps even more important in the wake of their disillusionment with the turns that *BtVS* had taken. "The recent events on BtVS," writes Ruby,

with Tara dying senselessly and Willow seeking insane homicidal vengeance, were offensive on every level: emotionally, politically, narratively. The show's writers had created such layered, lovingly developed characters in W/T that the S6 finale felt simplistic and slapped-together. It was bad storytelling, pure and simple, and it violated the show's own internal logic (no guns, respect for life, women refusing to be victims, cliché-busting, etc.). That's why well-written W/T fanfic is more important than ever. We, the viewers, have an intensely cathartic relationship with these characters, and we watched them be annihilated with no resolution, reason, or closure. It makes sense that we provide these things for ourselves. It makes even more sense that we refuse to let it happen at all, and keep telling their story in a thousand different permutations. (Ruby, "Reading")

Ruby raises some critical issues here that I do not have the space to discuss in depth, although I believe that the consequences of Tara's death and the response to the perceived

⁴⁹ Within a few months, in fact, the moderators created a separate board for any and all discussion of Season 7, open only to members who applied specially, so as to quarantine it from the rest of the site.

lesbian cliché for *Pens* fan fiction bear real scrutiny. I quote her at length here because I think she touches on some of the profound effects that this development had on the nature of reading and writing at *Pens*.

This passage suggests the intense engagement that members of this website have with their subject matter and with the work they see themselves as doing. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, other critics have suggested that fans write fan fiction, in part, to redress cultural wrongs, but notice that in this passage, Ruby is also claiming a narrative or expository wrong; she argues that at least the end of season 6 of *BtVS* was “bad storytelling” that “violated the show’s own internal logic” and argues that therefore “well-written W/T fanfic is more important than ever.” Ruby’s comment that fans of W/T must “keep telling their story in a thousand different permutations” in order to “provide...for [them]selves” suggests that the ongoing production of fan fiction is in part an attempt to supply—and produce—good writing and good reading experiences.

But reading and writing quality stories also became more difficult after “Seeing Red.” Members were already constrained in their writing by highly specific requirements about their plots and characters: although their heroines were permitted back stories in which they had other romantic or sexual relationships, neither could ever be shown so much as kissing another person. The narrative drive of every story had to involve in some way a state of or a progression toward a romantic relationship. Stories about grief abounded, but with very few exceptions (and these were early on, before the moderators really got serious about enforcing the requirement that Willow and Tara be “alive and together in the end,”) writers had to find creative ways to bring Tara back from the dead, to rewrite “Seeing Red” with a different outcome, or to take earlier moments in the series as

their points of departure. If, as *Pens* writer darkmagicwillow writes, “one of the unique problems of fan fiction is fitting your work within someone else’s source material—their setting, history, and characters” (“Reading”), then the additional prohibitions instituted after Tara’s death compounded this problem even more. As I discussed in previous chapters, the work of fan fiction inherently involves the nuanced intersections of canon and alternate universe; when the canon of the source program no longer matches up with the canon of a community of writers, those intersections become more difficult to negotiate.

It is not only the writers of stories who were affected by this; readers were also bound in their responses and discussions to maintain the creative fiction that “Seeing Red” ended the official program and Kennedy did not exist, and the tendency that already existed among all members to assume that Willow and Tara were the “one true pairing” (in fanfic glossaries, OTP) became even more pronounced. Assumptions underlying feedback became even more stabilized, and moderators tended to enforce guidelines with less room for exception. This meant that in some cases, readers had the rhetorical challenge of couching their personal reactions to stories they read in a positive framework; a reader might not agree with a particular interpretation of Willow and Tara’s characters, but she was only free to express this dissatisfaction if it in no way included criticism of the basic characters themselves or of their relationship.

The site’s collective response to *BtVS* season 6 also meant that writers and readers were able (perhaps even likely) to filter stories through the lens of “Seeing Red,” even if those stories sidestepped Tara’s death altogether by returning to the relatively happier times (it was still *BtVS*, so no one was ever *truly* happy for long) of earlier seasons. “On Second Thought,” the story excerpted in Figure 9, rewrites the beginning of Willow and

Tara's relationship at a moment in the fourth season near the beginning of their romantic relationship; in the passage that prompted the exchange below, Tara is missing and presumed in danger. Several readers commented that this passage evoked for them a sense of loss directly tied to "Seeing Red."

SlayerSydney:

"Panic shot through her like flares, threatening to burn through any vestige of security and hope. How would she live without Tara? How would she ever move, eat, laugh, breathe again, knowing that she did so alone? Why would she want to?" [quotation from "On Second Thought"]

This last quote had made me cry when I initially read it. . . . knowing how Season Six ended, I imagine these exact thoughts running through Willow's mind.

Sydney is attributing to a younger version of Willow, who has only days before consummated her relationship with Tara, the grief felt by the Willow of "Seeing Red," losing her lover of more than two years. In her response to Sydney, Antigone suggests that this was intentional:

AntigoneUnbound:

Glad I (and other Kittens) could help ease the loss a little bit, but isn't it sad they were taken away in the first place? I love your reference to Season Six—that's the most succinctly apt description I've encountered. Yeah, I was thinking about that too, when I wrote the scene of Willow's panic at the thought of losing Tara. Thanks a lot for writing; you've been a kind and supportive Kitten.

In addition to suggesting that both women see this story as salve on a burn, this response indicates that Antigone, although fairly new to posting at *Pens*, has in a sense already read and written her way into the community. She clearly sees her role as writer as connected to other writers at the site and shares the tribute with them, although Sydney praised her alone.

A significant moment in Antigone's response here is that she thanks Sydney not for *reading* her work but for *writing* to her about it; she receives Sydney's act of writing as kindness and support. This kind of exchange is common in story threads at *Pens*; perhaps because, as I mentioned earlier, a minority of readers actually write and post their feedback to stories, their responses tend to be received with gratitude and taken seriously. In taking the step of becoming a reader who responds, Sydney is virtually assured of a response herself, of having her own writing taken up and considered. In this way, feedback—notice that she quotes the story in her response—is an important text in its own right.

As I move on in the next section (and Chapter 4) to a more sustained exploration of critical response at *Pens*, I want to reiterate that although romantic desire underlies much of the writing at *Pens*—simply put, desire to read about Willow and Tara's desire for each other—I hope it is becoming clear that desire at this website is nuanced and complex, caught up in profound expressions of loss, injustice, yearning for stories that matter, and most importantly for this study, desire to write and to be read.

3.3 CRITICAL PROJECTS AT *DIFFERENT COLORED PENS*

Fanfic can be a private experience, but it can also give one access to a community of readers and writers who are generous with support and enthusiasm. It's a good way for a writer to find an audience, and a unique way for a reader to offer interactive feedback.

—Ruby, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction,” *Pens*

At the beginning of this chapter, I talked briefly about the notion of discourse community as a useful lens for a consideration of fan fiction, and I want to return to that idea now. Patricia Bizzell has suggested that although “discourse community” is used fairly generically in composition studies to refer to all sorts of groups of people, it is crucial that “entering a discourse community means signing on for the project” (226), and that the project is specifically interpretive. Bizzell borrows six criteria of discourse communities that John Swales suggests in his applied linguistics work on this topic; she very slightly adapts of the criteria for composition studies as follows. A discourse community must have

1. a shared project;
2. a “discursive ‘forum’ accessible to all participants”;
3. group members who use the forum to carry out the project “by providing information and feedback”;
4. discourse and generic conventions;
5. increasingly specialized discourse in line with those conventions; and

6. a “‘critical mass’ of experts at any given time” who are able to introduce new members to the shared project and conventions of the community.
(225-6)⁵⁰

Without going into minute detail about the ways in which *Different Colored Pens* meets each of these criteria, let me note that I hope it is clear that the work of this chapter has involved, in part, naming and describing many of the conventions and habits that this list summarizes. I include the list here because it is a helpful reminder that the most important aspect of a discourse community is its shared goal or project: every other criteria works, to a great extent, in the service of that project.

One way to read the desire of *Pens* site members to write and be read, then, is to understand it as an impulse behind a project of collaborative reading and writing. As I have suggested in the preceding sections, *Pens* readers and writers are quite invested in revising, reinventing, and transforming the canon of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; but they can also be considered to be working, quite explicitly, with a set of ideas about what good writing is, how it should be read, what its goals are, and how it might be accomplished; these ideas are most visible in documented feedback and critical exchanges at this site.

In general, internet fan fiction has been called a “culture of relentless reviewing” (Chatelain), a writing sphere in which the practice of readers commenting on, critiquing, or reviewing fan fiction is familiar and widespread. And while it may be difficult to generalize about commenting practices across the internet, feedback seems to be a basic element of internet fan fiction, one that many fan fiction sites invite and some encourage. Mechanisms for feedback can be as simple as the provision of an author’s e-mail address so

⁵⁰ Bizzell’s list is her paraphrase of John Swales’ original criteria in *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

that individual readers can send a message to an author, but feedback often involves more than a private interaction between a writer and a reader. Like *Different Colored Pens*, a number of sites provide feedback mechanisms by which readers can publicly post their comments on a story for the author and other readers to read.

Julianne Chatelain has identified seven characteristics of feedback at Harry Potter fan fiction sites that are useful for my purposes, especially because her brief work is one of the only studies to direct attention specifically to the conventions of fan fiction response:

- the labeling and sorting of fiction in various ways;
- the use of instant review mechanisms to invite reader feedback;
- the fact that only a small percentage of readers actually offer feedback;
- the premium authors place on feedback;
- the “short and sweet” quality of most reviews, although “some reviews are extremely detailed reading reactions, and a few offer academic-style literary analyses”;
- the relatively equivalent importance of readers and writers; and
- the public circulation of ideas about what a good review entails. (para. 3)

This list provides a good starting place; recently, more fanfic sites have begun to introduce not only forums in which readers can post feedback for recent stories but also review pages, in which selective (or selected) readers are encouraged to post longer review-like recommendations for other readers. Chatelain does not overly celebrate fanfic feedback; in fact, while noting that feedback serves an important function in encouraging writers and readers to discuss texts, she concludes that “the presence of easy mechanisms for reader

feedback on a part-work basis doesn't in itself foster a culture where critical essays thrive" (para.6).

What "critical" means at any given fan fiction site, however, depends on the way the term is used and defined by a particular group of people. Lucy Gillam, one of over a hundred columnists at the website *Fanfic Symposium*, writes that although she started advocating for a "Fan Fiction Critics Association" as a joke, she quickly realized that it was a serious and in fact necessary undertaking. Gillam counters what she sees as a resistance among some fans to critical work, suggesting that the idea of criticism as a negative enterprise needs to be revised:

Critical inquiry is the act of bringing a given perspective (often a perspective chosen in advance) to something with the idea of gaining a new understanding of it. . . . I want to stress that critical inquiry does *not* mean just pointing out the bad. It is true that we often write about the things that bother us but we just as often write about things that we think are pretty darned neat. The point of critical inquiry is not to limit, to prescribe, to direct, or to change, but to *understand*." (para. 5)

This notion of critical inquiry as understanding makes possible a broader spectrum of fan fiction response than Chatelain's poles of "short and sweet" v. "academic-style literary." And while Chatelain's assessment may be accurate for the Harry Potter fan fiction she studies, at the range of websites I have examined, the work that individual reader feedback accomplishes is generally framed by a larger critical scaffolding that includes columns like those at *Fanfic Symposium*, recommendation threads and websites, and the widespread use

of beta readers, a term adapted from the information technology term beta tester, whose job it is to review software for bugs before its commercial release (Butler-Stark).⁵¹

The work of a beta reader is ostensibly to “preview a story and provide critical and constructive feedback,” and at *Pens*, many writers acknowledge the help of a beta reader in their story notes. The assistance that beta readers provide is largely invisible, since by definition this work is accomplished off screen and before a story is published or between chapters. Readers, at least at *Pens*, are unlikely to make any kind of explicit suggestion in their feedback, let alone to offer grammatical or mechanical corrections, and in the rare case that this occurs, the reader usually couches the suggestion in encouraging terms. Moreover, suggestions are most likely to appear in feedback for new writers who have asked for them specifically. As I have mentioned, most writers do ask for general feedback, but occasionally the request is more specific. Red Ishtar, for example, invites “pointers” in the story notes for “The Chorus Spell,” adding that she is “not very good in English” and asking for mistakes to be corrected. The following sequence of posts follows her first chapter:

RedIshtar: Soooo how it was? Should I bother to write more? 🤔

Kindagay: Okay, you’ve got me all intrigued, please continue 🤔

Maccoda: I really like the concept, the Second Generation of [Scoobies].

Please get yourself a beta reader to help with your grammar and punctuation,

⁵¹ Susan Clerc has suggested that “with the rise of ‘publishing’ online, stories no longer receive the proofreading and constructive feedback supplied by zine editors. This has led to long, cross-fandom discussions about writing as a craft and the value of critiques” (65). I find this an important acknowledgment of the fact that the place where explicit discussions of editing and mechanical concerns are most likely to happen—in the beta reading exchange—is usually not visible to site browsers.

that will make it easier on your readers. I, for one, would like to see where you take this.

Marilda: Write more? Definitely. This was an intriguing start. There were a couple of minor errors that I'm sure could be caught by a beta.

I'd be willing to do that for you if you'd like. Either way, fascinating start. I look forward to reading more.

RedIshtar: Hey kittens!

Thanks for the support and yes, I'm in need of a beta. What can I say? I'm used to write just small compositions in English, I can read pretty well, but writing is another thing. 🙄

I will try to write some more later, I'm really glad you liked my Scoobies New Generation. I can say that the original Scoobies are in for a few surprises. 🤖

Marilda, I would like very much if you could be my beta, God knows I need help with this. 🙄

What I find most telling in this exchange is the blushing emoticon (🙄) that Red Ishtar inserts at the end of her second comment, as if acknowledging that not to be grammatically skillful (even though there are indications that English is not her first language) is something to be ashamed of in this particular context. And although both Maccoda and Marilda take her at her word, noting that they see room for improvement and recommending that she find a beta reader to help her with her writing (a role for which Marilda volunteers), neither actually makes specific suggestions in her posts. There seems

to be tacit acceptance that the story thread itself is not the place for this work.⁵² In fact, even the suggestion that an author get a beta reader is a unique occurrence for both Maccoda and Marilda, in whose comments on approximately 15 and 30 stories, respectively, no suggestion whatsoever appears. Without exception, both readers' comments to other authors are enthusiastic and appreciative. For the most part, unless a (usually new) writer explicitly invites grammatical, mechanical, or editorial intervention, none is made. If Marilda and Maccoda are in some sense the "experts" Patricia Bizzell mentions in her criteria for discourse communities, then it is useful to note that their comments here, which are consistently gentle and encouraging, model that kind of response for Red Ishtar, a novice in this community.

It is perhaps not surprising that at a website that demands a certain amount of conformity of expression, readers would tend to address one another's work with encouragement rather than with harsh criticism. Anne Ruggles Gere, to whom I return in Chapter 4, has suggested that "one of the attributes most frequently credited to writing groups is a positive attitude" (123). But this positive attitude takes a variety of forms, and would be useful at this point to look closely at how readers and writers at *Different Colored Pens* use encouragement in the context of a specific discussion.

Trom DeGrey's "Laundry Diaries" provides a good case study of the role feedback plays in encouraging writers in their work. When she opened this story thread, DeGrey was a first-time author but an established respondent at *Pens*; she had posted feedback on a range of stories and was familiar as a reader to many of her own respondents. Her pair of

⁵² Unfortunately, Red Ishtar has not updated the story in the 3 ½ years since posting the first chapter. She went on write the first chapter of another story in February 2004; Marilda did not post any feedback, and there was no acknowledgment of a beta reader, although the story seems more polished in terms of sentence-level correctness.

vignettes approaches the same event from first Willow's, then Tara's, point of view: while in a 24-hour laundrette in the middle of the night, the two women, who have been assessing each other's laundry habits for weeks, finally meet officially after a shy and overeager police officer observes what they have not been able to admit out loud, that they are interested in one another. The vignettes function largely as character studies, taking the familiar characters of Willow and Tara and placing them in an alternate universe in which readers see them act and react in new ways.

In her story notes, Trom DeGrey invites readers to "flail away" in their feedback, but as Figures 10 and 11 indicate, respondents to "The Laundry Diaries" praise the story without exception. Twenty of the 40 readers use a version of the word "love" in their comments, and all of the others use at least one positive word in their feedback: e.g., nice, good, great, amazing, adorable, delightful, stunning, absorbing, wonderful, well-written. Figures 10 and 11 show excerpts of all the feedback posts, which I have organized according to the categories of assessment and anticipation. The "assessment" column includes statements that indicate a reader's general appraisal of the story, and the "anticipation" column includes statements in which readers express their desire to see more of the story; boldfacing of key words in both columns is intended to make it easier to see at a glance the prominence of both positive assessing words and words or phrases that indicate a reader is looking forward to reading more.

Respondents seem to take seriously their role in encouraging writers to keep writing. In the case of "The Laundry Diaries," 21 of the 40 posted responses, as shown in the third column in Figures 10a and 10b, anticipate further developments to the story or encourage the author to keep writing, even though DeGrey says in her story notes that she

has already made decisions about the scope of the story: two vignettes and no more. There is an understandable shift in the language of these posts between the first and second parts; eleven of the first 15 posts, which respond to the first vignette, note that the readers are looking forward to reading more of the story, *which they already know they will see*.

	Reader	Assessment	Anticipation
1	Whisper	Well, let me be the first to congratulate you on such a great fic! I loved it!	I can't wait to see how Willow's obsession will work out. More please?
2	Babyblue	Lovely writing really sparkles	I look forward to Tara's perspective.
3	EasierSaid	Loved Willow's quiet, frantic fascination with Tara.	So looking forward to Tara's POV.
4	Ange04	I love this!	Can't wait to read tara's pov. Keep up the good work
5	Wimpy0729	Totally loved Willow's POV, so engaging.	Can't wait for the next one, and I would really love to see more after that. . . .
6	The Rose24	Great start.	
7	Meretricious	Love her sense of betrayal there.	Looking forward to part 2.
8	Silentinformer	Great, very funny and touching.	
9	Singgirl	That was absolutely adorable!	I wouldn't mind a continuation of this story. Just a suggestion.
10	BigGayBear	Seriously great	I'll agree with the not minding a continuation of this story
11	Sassette	I loved the setup / Adorable, well-written..	
12	Glendaof0z2004	Amazing, one of the best stories that I have...read in a long time.	I hope to be able to read more soon.
13	Pipsberg	Love the instant chemistry which you make us feel so well. Great job.	Hopefully, you will keep this thread going and give us some more.
14	MissKittysBall O Yarn	I so totally love this! I love your writing style!!	If I had a million dollars I would soooo give it to you if you'd just ... continue!
15	Behindhereyes	Really liked seeing the world through Willow's eyes / Beautifully written.	

Figure 10. Quoted excerpts of all feedback for part 1 of Trom DeGrey's "Laundry Diaries"

	Reader	Assessment	Encouragement
16	Silentinforme	It was wonderful.	Can't wait to see more soon. . . .
17	The Rose24	I love Tara's POV as well. / Lovely	
18	Meretricious	This was so absorbing / you have a wonderful take on both their characters	After this of course I'll gladly read wherever else your muse takes you.
19	EasierSaid	You managed to do that [different POVs] very well. / Great job.	Looking forward to reading future stories from you.
20	Tarawhipped	Love your writing style	I hope you continue with this story.
21	Tempest Duer	I also like the follow-up.	
22	Sassette	This was so nice / I love how mentally spastic Willow is in the first piece /	
23	JustSkipt	Well done / I love their explanations of their parallel lives / Very well done	
24	Miss Kittys Ball O Yarn	That was totally amazing.	I can't wait for your next short story.
25	Artemis	Absolutely adorable / written with definite flair and sparkle	Could I host this on Looking Glass, please?
26	Behindhereyes	Both parts are really excellent / Loved Tara's POV	
27	Dazed and Confused83	Can I just say I'm absolutely LOVING this so far!	Can't wait to find out what happens next.
28	Babyblue	I'd love to see this series of vignettes continue.	I'd love to see this series of vignettes continue
29	Washi	I adored this. / It was great	
30	Pipsberg	Great job again / You outdid yourself with this one.	
31	VixenyTarasHot	I loved the ending the most	I hope to read more from you soon!
32	Wimpy0729	That was just amazingly well written, both parts.	
33	BFR from Paris	Very nice, very funny, very sweet	
34	Tigrscorpio	How delightful this was to read / well written and entertaining story	I'm eagerly awaiting more.
35	Russ	I love the way they surreptitiously check each other out	I hope we'll see more of your writings.
36	the hero factor	What a great story.	
37	darkmagicwillow	Very nice.	
38	Ressick	I love these vignettes!	
39	Candleshoe	Stunning.	
40	Halo	I simply love it.	

Figure 11. Quoted excerpts of all feedback for part 2 of Trom DeGrey's "Laundry Diaries"

After the second vignette, at least five of the 25 posts look forward to reading something else that Trom DeGrey might write, and five more suggest that they would like to see more of this particular story (posts 16 and 34, at least, are readable either way). The readers are using their own posts to encourage DeGrey in her work. Trom DeGrey, in turn, encourages her readers to keep posting feedback by responding individually to every feedback post; she also thanks every reader each time he or she posts.

In many ways, this set of feedback responses is typical in both its generosity and its range. While all 40 posts include positive assessments of “The Laundry Diaries,” they vary in degree, in focal point, and in approach. Some posts offer an overall assessment: “That was absolutely adorable” (9); “What a great story” (36). Others focus on a particular aspect of plot or character: “Loved Willow’s quiet frantic fascination with Tara” (3); “I love the way they surreptitiously check each other out” (35). And several speak to the writing, saying that it is “well-written” or “amazingly written” (11, 15, 32, 34) or admiring style (14, 20), a quality such as “sparkling” writing (2, 15) or humor (8, 33).

While the posts are all generally positive, the degree of praise varies. Miss Kitty’s Ball O Yarn (24) writes, “I don’t think I’ve ever read anything so well written in my life! (the great novels included),” but she does not elaborate on this superlative appraisal. On the other hand, Just Skip It (23) writes that the story is “well done,” adding, “I must say that I like the Tara vignette better than the Willow one just because it’s so funny.” Just Skip It’s post is representative of an important trend in the feedback to this story. While superlative praise (like that of Miss Kitty) is allowed to speak for itself to some extent, any statement that might be read as “critical” tends to be explained, qualified, or softened. So Just Skip It is careful to note that although she likes the second vignette better than the

first, it is “*just because* it’s so funny” (italics mine). Similarly, Washi (29) says that “it’s sad that we don’t even get an epilogue” but follows this immediately with “But it was great.” Ange04 (4) comes closest, in my reading, to negative criticism, asking how the character of the police officer could “see the chemistry within a couple of seconds while these girls have been washing clothes ‘together’ for weeks and still need a xena shirt for a clue.” There is an implied suggestion here that this aspect of the story is not quite believable, but again, Ange04 wraps this criticism in praise; the two sentences before this statement are “i love this! this is soooo sweet. love the ‘serial killer’ cop,” and the two sentences after are “can’t wait to read tara’s pov. keep up the good work.”

Interestingly, Trom DeGrey’s response to Ange04 takes up only these framing sentences and *not* the potential criticism. She writes, “Glad you liked Baxton. He actually was the reason these weren’t posted sooner. He went through rewrite after rewrite till Shanden [her beta reader] made a suggestion and it helped me find my way with him. Thanks so much for reading.” In fact, DeGrey’s response to each of these criticisms reads it as positive. To Washi, she writes, “Glad you enjoyed it,” and to Just Skip It, she writes, “Thanks so much! I preferred Tara’s too, but just because I let myself write that one more.” (And notice that in her response to Just Skip It, DeGrey adopts the turn of phrase “just because” that her reader used first.)

Even a post that is not “critical” but simply less superlative in its praise takes a qualifying approach; the “very nice” of Dark Magic Willow’s post (37) stands out amid all the “loves” and “amazings”; however, Dark Magic Willow follows this initial assessment with an apology for having taken so long to read the vignettes and then adds that he “love[s] how much [DeGrey was] able to do with so few words”; it is almost as if the

pressure to love the story gets the better of him in spite of his attempt at matter-of-factness. And it is *here* that DeGrey seems to find criticism and respond to it:

DMW: So good to see your name pop up here. Thanks for taking time I know you don't exactly have to read. I love the Laundry Game and wanted to see what would go through each of their heads as they played it too. The lack of dialog was a total fluke and panicked me a bit when I realized I had done it, but I think it was one of those instances where first person was the best way to do things. Thanks again!

Whereas DeGrey did not respond to the implied criticism in Just Skip It's and Washi's posts or did not read it as criticism, she appears to read Dark Magic Willow's comment about doing so much "with so few words" as a possible criticism of "lack of dialog," but here, too, she reframes it right away as a positive, as "the best way to do things."

There is a tendency in this thread, then, to use positive framing terms, but this is not to say that DeGrey and her readers are invested only in reading for (or to) praise, as the above paragraphs might suggest. Indeed, a number of posts analyze or offer a close reading of a specific moment in the text, sometimes quoting language from the story. Of Willow's vignette, Easier Said (3) writes that "you give us so few clues about Tara, just enough of a peek to understand a bit why Willow would be freaking out and fantasizing." Of the pair of stories, Dazed and Confused (27) notes that "the characters are retelling their stories directly to the readers in a very casual manner," and Russ (35) comments that it is "interesting how the two women see the decisive moment so differently."

It is possible that in addition to feedback that explicitly praises a story, comments like these are what people have in mind when they suggest that fan fiction criticism is

generally positive and encouraging, and indeed, although Easier Said, Dazed and Confused, and Russ are all essentially summarizing an element of DeGrey's story, itself a neutral kind of response, they all frame their summaries in positive terms.

As my reading of "The Laundry Diaries" feedback suggests, Lucy Gillam's understanding of critical inquiry at *Fanfic Symposium* is quite apt in this fan fiction context. Aside from the framing limitations of canon and the prohibitions established by the site's moderators, as discussed in previous sections, most of the "criticism" in this thread does not seek "to limit, to prescribe, to direct, or to change." It seeks to encourage, to anticipate, to support, to cheer on. As I discuss in the next chapter, this is particularly important in an online forum in which feedback is hoped for, even expected, and delivered....but by no means universal. And this fact suggests that what underlies the general praise in feedback is not only honest admiration but also a sense that criticism that goes beyond "great update" can be quite difficult to write.

4.0 “THE ART OF LEAVING FEEDBACK”: ENCOURAGING RESPONSE AT *DIFFERENT COLORED PENS*

In my view, feedback is the coin you pay for the stories you like. It encourages folk to write more and gives you a chance to express your opinion. . . . It can help improve your writing—depending on the feedback you get. I think the more you write—and the more you get opinions on your writing—in beta reading and in feedback—the better writer you become.

—Forrister, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction,” *Pens*

I’ve found that ninety nine point nine percent of the time, people understand that many writers here are learning. It’s all a learning process.

—Raspberry Hat, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction,” *Pens*

I mentioned in the previous chapter that feedback at *Different Colored Pens* tends to be positive, supportive, encouraging, but although this may already meet the expectations of some readers, it is worth discussing in more depth how this encouraging feedback functions and exploring how it serves more nuanced critical purposes. At *Pens*, feedback is posted in story threads and exists alongside dedicated critical discussion threads in which site members consider the nature and role of their creative and critical work; these critical

threads in particular are useful markers of what Joseph Harris in *Rewriting* refers to as the writing that frames the “visible traces of other texts” (2). Harris advocates in his book for student writers that they “take a stance toward the work of others that, while generous and fair, is also playful, questioning, and assertive” (2). Critical threads at *Pens* are meaningful articulations of the ways in which encouragement as a general mode of interaction creates a space in which site members can engage in just such play, questioning, and assertion without fear of being shut down by overt hostility or negative criticism.

As I suggested in Chapter 3, *Different Colored Pens* functions as a discourse community with a shared project. It also makes sense to read the site in the context of the long and rich tradition of amateur writing groups, which Anne Ruggles Gere notes began to have a presence in the United States in the mid-19th century. The impulse for people to create their own occasions for writing and learning outside academic institutions, Gere says, goes back much further, but she suggests that formal structures for such groups gained momentum in the latter part of the 19th century.⁵³ In *Writing Groups: History, Theory, Implications*, Gere argues that “writing groups reduce the distance between writer and reader” (66) both physically, by bringing readers and writers into proximity and conversation, and conceptually, by helping people to learn that “knowledge is something they can help create rather than something to be received whole from someone else” (69). Gere suggests that some of the most prominent features of writing groups are their joint negotiation of standards for reading and writing; their attention to the relationships among

⁵³ See Anne Ruggles Gere, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, Implications*. Also, see Theodora Penny Martin’s work on women’s study clubs of the 19th century. Martin writes that these groups specifically helped women to provide educational opportunities for themselves outside academic institutions, but as formal educational opportunities became more available in the early 20th century, these groups tended to transform into largely social organizations.

writer, context, and dialogue; their use of metalanguage; and their tendency to provide an encouraging atmosphere for their members: “one of the attributes most frequently credited to writing groups is a positive attitude” (123).

Candace Spigelman, working in the same tradition (although she does not necessarily distinguish between academic and non-academic writing groups), argues that while online writing groups clearly operate in many of the same ways as “traditional writing groups,” they “raise new and interesting questions” about the work that such groups, comprised of people who may never have met and who may not have more than a fleeting interest in one another’s work. “Without face-to-face contact, can confidence in members be developed and sustained? Will writers trust each other? Will readers have sufficient commitment to provide invested responses?” (16). I suggest in this chapter that the answers to all three of these question is “yes,” provided we understand that at *Different Colored Pens*, site members elicit “sufficient commitment” and facilitate “invested response” while remaining, overall, supportive and encouraging.⁵⁴

In this chapter, I discuss three ways that site members at *Pens* use fan fiction feedback to encourage one another to improve as readers and writers. First, encouragement serves to invite and promote writing by sometimes reluctant members. Second, it reinforces the site as a safe space in which members can develop response strategies without resorting to the negatively tinged criticism they associate with school and, in particular, with writing

⁵⁴ Because *Pens* has so many registered site members and so many story threads, it makes sense to think of individual threads, rather than the site overall, as documenting the interactions of writing groups. It is in individual threads like “The Laundry Diaries” that site members sign on, literally, to discuss reading and writing. Within these threads, a writer offers her work, readers respond to it, the writer comments on the feedback, and conversations about all aspects of the writing develop. Many readers, of course, are reading multiple stories, and some are participating actively in multiple story threads (for example, five readers of “The Laundry Diaries” also publish feedback in “Equilibration”).

instruction. And third, it allows more experienced readers and writers to foster the learning of those with less experience. In a sense, these three facets of encouragement form a circuit, a feedback loop: less experienced or hesitant writers are invited to do a certain kind of critical work. Those writers are shown—and learn—ways to do that work safely and productively. As they learn, they join the group of more experienced writers who actively foster newer writers, and so on.

While many fan fiction sites include mechanisms for feedback, *Different Colored Pens* is exceptional in that it documents several years worth of critical exchange and response, and in the conclusion to this chapter, I return to *Pens*' role as archive. It is by now obvious that all of the processes discussed in this chapter take place in writing, but it is important to remind readers that what is being documented here is not only the contributions of individual fans but the collaborative enterprise of a group of readers and writers. In fact, feedback at this site becomes a powerful and necessary part of the texts to which it responds, and critical respondents become co-authors, in a sense, of narratives of critical reading and writing.

4.1 INVITING FEEDBACK

In a critical thread entitled “The Art of Leaving Feedback,” 23 other site members discuss their perspectives on what good feedback entails, why writers want to receive it, and why readers might be reluctant to give it in spite of the expectation at *Pens* that they do so. In the thread's opening post, Garner offers four suggestions for leaving feedback in the hopes that she can help readers who aren't sure what to say in response to a story:

1. Don't ever get personal.
2. Remember your opinion is valid.
3. Criticism is OK, but it should be constructive.
4. Be specific.

Other suggestions follow: to attempt balanced feedback and to encourage the author to “keep on writing and improve, so we have more cool stories to read.” Her goal, she writes, is to provide some basic categories of response so that readers can be “more effective in their feedback”: plot, character, tone, atmosphere, pacing, transitions, dialogue, narrative, description, verb tenses, content, continuity, grammar/spelling, and point of view. This move on Garner's part is noteworthy, especially since, as I mentioned above, she points out that she is not an English teacher; her goal here, she says, is not to provide a new set of rules that will overwhelm readers but quite the opposite: to take a little of the guesswork out of the difficult project of writing a critical response.

Several readers respond to this initial post; Dark Wiccan thanks Garner for explaining the “goldmine” that is feedback; Sassette notes that Garner's list is useful not just for readers but for writers to keep in mind, and Just Skip It echoes Dark Wiccan's phrase in her comment that thoughtful feedback is “like gold” to her. She also notes that she has “frequently added or clarified points...or even changed the direction of the story” based on feedback. Capt. Murdock adds a suggestion that a respondent can choose a single sentence and mention it as a way to be specific, and critically, he also says that he tries “to leave something more than the standard ‘Love your story, keep up the good work.’” Garner's reply to this initial set of posts is worth noting; she says that “it seems like posting this wasn't as bad an idea as I feared. I didn't want to be too pretentious or pretend

like I have all the answers or anything.” Given the enthusiastic response with which her initial post met, Garner’s relief might seem a bit surprising here; however, as the thread develops, some differences of opinion do develop that seem to warrant her initial hesitation, although not for the reason she indicates here. Instead, the thread seems to hit on a central tension at *Pens* between writers who crave feedback and readers who are not sure they are up to the challenge.

In fact, approximately 85% of writers include in their story notes explicit requests for feedback. The requests themselves (prefaced by the heading “Feedback:”) vary widely, as this sampling indicates:

- All appreciated, especially advice and constructive criticism. (Chronic)
- Good God! Yes, please. (JoMarch)
- Naturally. This is my first W/T fic but not my first fanfic ever, so go on, I can take it! *smile* (Indygo)
- Would it help it if I offered to bear your children? Yes, please, (so please be kind. However, please be constructive. "That sux" I cannot cope with (not that any of the Kittens talk like that...). "That sux cos you're, like, totally missing the point" is better. (Alliette)
- Please. Bouquets and brickbats welcome (Jixer)
- YES PLEASE! I am a feedback junkie! Please feed my addiction. (bluwillowwitch)

Although some writers simply include the phrase “yes, please” or provide an e-mail address so that readers can send private messages, enthusiastic invitations to respond, and descriptions like “feedback junkie” or “feedback whore” are common.

However, as I noted briefly in the previous chapter, actual feedback posts comprise a small percentage—generally one per cent or less—of the total number of views of a given story thread, and it is impossible to know with any certainty how the responses correlate to the views. Trom DeGrey’s “Laundry Diaries,” for example, has been viewed 6,990 times, and 40 people, including DeGrey herself, have contributed to the thread’s messages. It is likely that many of those people have opened the thread multiple times—to check for new installments, to read the author’s response to their feedback, even to read other people’s responses. But it is extremely *unlikely* that each of those 40 people has opened the thread 174 times (especially since DeGrey was clear from the outset that there would be only two chapters), and so we can safely assume that there is an unknown number of readers—somewhere between 1 and perhaps 3,000—who never post a response.

Some writers at *Different Colored Pens* find this situation dispiriting. Urn of Osiris, for example, comments that “[authors] spend a lot of time creating these stories and I don’t think it is too much to ask that a reader make some kind of comment about what they’ve just read. [...] It is very discouraging to see 500 people have read an update but only 4 people reply about it. Feedback is fuel to a writer” (“Art”). Most writers at *Pens* seem to want or even need this “fuel”; they are motivated to write, at least in part, not only by knowing that as many as thousands of people are reading but by seeing those people respond *in writing* to their work.

What author’s requests for feedback—and Urn of Osiris’s statement about feeling discouraged by a lack of feedback—do not take into account is the fact that writing feedback can be challenging. It is not always as simple as typing “I loved it,” and in fact sometimes what seems like easy enthusiasm is the product of a struggle to produce a

worthwhile response. In fact, the powerful desire of *Pens* writers for feedback competes with the complex negotiations of readers, many of whom struggle with the task of combining positive response with meaningful criticism. As Noho writes, there is “an art to leaving feedback, and some of us have no art. It’s very intimidating to read some of the wonderful feed and realize that you are incapable. . . . For a gifted writer the notion of being unable to express oneself may be unbelievable, yet we are not all gifted” (“Art”).

A crucial role that encouraging feedback plays in story threads is to invite unknown readers to respond in writing. Watson, in the passage quoted above, talks about feeling encouraged to continue a story by the simple posting of comments in her thread (the metaphor of readers stopping by is compelling). But I suggest that the encouragement is also functioning to encourage readers to respond critically to the stories they read. In a thread entitled “Having Doubts,” Sarejester notes trying to work against the feeling that “someone is going to jump from my computer and slap me round the head for even attempting to write.” The other nine respondents in this thread discuss the effort and commitment that are required not only to write but to post that writing for others to read. We might assume that at this online site, where most members use screen names and many do not ever identify themselves by their first names, anonymity would mitigate writing anxiety, but as Patches notes in “Art,” this is not necessarily the case. “I never realized how far out on a ‘limb’ a writer goes when he or she offers something for public consumption,” Patches writes. “Even in the anonymous world of cyberspace, there’s still a sense of trepidation as one[’]s finger hovers over the send button.”

Many *Pens* members seem aware of this trepidation and take care to address it in their posts. In the “Research Thread,” for example, the first post notes that “this thread is a

safe place to ask questions you may have as you work on your fic, and also for you to answer the questions others ask.” The use of the word “safe” is important here, connected as it is to the apparently simple task of committing questions and answers to writing. Similarly, in “Having Doubts,” Raspberry Hat, who opens the thread, reminds participants to “give thought to how [they] respond” to other people’s concerns, noting the thread is meant as a place for support and encouragement (even though, as I have suggested, the entire site largely functions in this way).

I now turn to a sample series of excerpts from “The Art of Leaving Feedback,” in which several site members discuss this issue, partly in response to Irene73’s comment that she sometimes stays silent because she can’t really think of what to say. In this exchange, Garner and GayNow position themselves as more experienced responders who are helping newer members Noho and UhHuh to negotiate response.⁵⁵

Garner: Sometimes a simple “I really loved this story[;] It gave me a smile,” is the best. It lets the author know you did read it and that you took the time to comment, no matter how simple. Leaving SOME feedback, no matter how short, is probably better than none. So Irene73, don’t worry about leaving just a few words or what have you. Yes we like longer thoughts, but any are good too.

Noho: I don’t think it’s a good idea to criticize those of us who delurk to leave a simple one line “Thank you. I love it”, because then we just won’t ever say anything at all.

⁵⁵ These responses are quoted excerpts from longer messages. The full text is available at <http://www.thekittenboard.com/board/viewtopic.php?t=3094&start=0&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=>.

GayNow: Oh, I don't think anyone has been intending to criticize at all. In fact, I've noticed a number of folks on this thread say that the simple "great update" or "I love this fic" comments are appreciated just as much as the longer replies. Let me tell you about one thing that really helped me as a reader and supplier of feedback—I stopped thinking about it. Yep. It was that simple.

In the first part of this exchange, Noho resists the idea of compulsory feedback, even though Garner is using a qualifying statement to say that even a small amount of feedback "is probably better than none." Noho, who is replying not only to Garner but to previous posters like Urn of Osiris, reinforces the idea that even the simple act of delurking—registering at the site in order to participate—is an act that demands a certain amount of respect. GayNow's comment, in addition to offering Noho a strategy for responding (e.g., stop thinking about it), also very subtly models careful reading here. She registers her gentle disagreement with Noho and provides, as evidence, her careful reading of multiple threads.

In addition, Noho and GayNow both specifically discuss gratitude; Noho mentions her wish to thank the writer of a story, and GayNow suggests that story writers are similarly grateful to their readers. In the next set of posts, Auburn takes this up:

Auburn: I don't expect big essays in feedback, I like getting feedback that says "that was good" or a shower smiley....one person who has left feedback to every story I've written has simply said "good update"...granted you can't really respond to that (and someone actually got upset when I didn't) but I'm

grateful anyway, because some people are genuinely too shy or busy to leave anything more.”

UhHuh: This thread is both good and bad. . . . It makes some people, like me, not want to leave feedback because I might think that what I’ve left is not good enough. . . . I am not a writer, so I know it’s different for those of you who are.

GayNow: So, what it comes down to is this. Respond the way YOU feel comfortable. 🤔<---This little guy is just as appreciated as a 5 page deconstruction of plot and characterization.⁵⁶ Because you're letting someone know that you were touched in SOME way. Find your own comfort zone and let yourself have fun. That's what this is about.

Here again, two of the three posts touch on the importance of appreciation in a feedback exchange; when a reader has gone to the trouble of registering and posting a response—however simple—that is not only publicly visible but also permanently archived, that reader can reasonably expect some recognition of her critical act. And, as I noted in my discussion of “The Laundry Diaries,” many writers do in fact thank their readers; most writers acknowledge every feedback post they receive in some way.

Garner has the last word on this particular discussion, and her choice of language is significant: “[T]his isn’t English class, we are all basically friends, and there is no right answer. . . .” (“Art”). This statement articulates one possible reason that writers and readers at *Pens* need to be encouraged in the first place: they see criticism as negative or hostile, and they associate this negativity with writing instruction.

⁵⁶ On screen, this emoticon jumps up and down and is generally used to signal readerly excitement.

4.2 TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Garner's comment brings me to the second major function of encouragement at *Pens*, that it provides an alternative to associations, often negative, with critical writing practices learned in school. Language circulates at the site that explicitly casts classroom learning and English teachers in a negative light, one to be avoided whenever possible. For example, Wizpup, who serves as a beta reader for Katharyn Rosser's "Sidestep Chronicle," comments that although she appreciates reading feedback on this and other stories, she is at times uncomfortable when "a reader decides to offer critical analysis of the writer in the middle of the thread." She writes that she sees the value of "helpful, private, constructive criticism" when carried out in private, but concludes that "just occasionally, [she's] felt like [she] was watching someone get told off by the teacher in the middle of class" ("Reading").

Not all site members, of course, agree with Wizpup's preference that criticism take place in private, off screen, but she gives voice here to a larger ambivalence at the site about what "critical analysis" is. If the feedback she herself posts is any indication, then what she does *not* mean is breaking a text down into its parts. Consider this pair of feedback post excerpts; Wizpup wrote the first in response to a chapter of "The Sidestep Chronicle" and the second in response to "Endless" by Mike of the Nancy Tribe:

To **Katharyn**: One of the things I love about this story is the way in which, despite the distance from canon, you have chosen to add familiar storylines into the mix. It would never have occurred to me to think about what had happened to the Initiative. But having read this part, it all makes perfect sense. Of course the government would still have an interest ... and with the

Master having risen in Sunnydale, the town would stick out like a sore thumb to anyone who was looking at the death/murder rates.⁵⁷

To **Mike of the Nancy Tribe**: I agree with the comments made by so many others about the effect of the first person narrative, it brought a real sense of intimacy to the tale - sucking me right in to the unfolding events. That is a real gift, to make the reader care about the events, and the characters, even original ones like John.

In the first response, Wizpup offers analysis of Rosser's work with canon, focusing on the effects of a specific choice to incorporate a storyline from *BtVS* season 4 into her story; in the second, she speaks to a particular stylistic device, the use of first person. In both cases—and by now readers will not find this surprising—she frames these moments of analysis in praise, but it is important to note that she is not taking issue with what we might recognize as analysis. In other words, it is not that Wizpup does not want critical engagement or intellectual analysis to be part of her reading experience; her real concern is with people being “told off by the teacher in the middle of class.”

Wizpup is not alone in her aversion to “teacherly” scolding; even when they disagree with a particular writer's choices, most *Pens* members studiously avoid seeming teacherly or, significantly, addressing topics that they see as the province of the English (i.e., writing) classroom. Again, it will probably not surprise my readers to find that topics that read as teacherly in the writing discourse at this site often include grammar, mechanics, and other editing concerns. I noted in Chapter 3 that readers generally will offer

⁵⁷ In season 4 *BtVS*, the Initiative was a secret government agency that experimented on and neutralized vampires and demons. I don't mean that euphemistically; for example, the Initiative put a microchip in Spike's brain that prevented him from hurting any human.

editing advice only when asked, and it is usually only new writers who ask. Even in a critical discussion thread like “The Art of Leaving Feedback,” however, when no particular story or writer is under scrutiny, writers almost universally situate their comments on grammar and mechanics in a classroom context, effectively bracketing these concerns from the rest of their work.

In this thread, for example, Garner, who begins by suggesting a number of categories of feedback that might help readers in formulating their responses (I discuss this more fully in the next section), introduces verb tenses as “a big one that a lot of authors really blow” and suggests that passive voice, in particular, should be avoided. This apparently simple piece of advice sparks a debate over what actually constitutes passive voice, and the language that respondents use is telling, as this series of excerpted posts shows (all italics are mine):

Sassette: In the “tenses” section, you mentioned passive voice. For those who don’t really remember passive voice from *English class*...passive voice is when the subject of the sentence does not perform the action. [. . .]

Now that the English lesson for the day is out of the way, I have to respectfully disagree with Garner’s assertion that passive voice should not be used. *Passive voice should definitely not be used in, say, an English paper (English teachers seriously hate it)*, but when writing fiction it is a stylistic choice that can serve a very definite and important purpose. Here is an example: “The door opened.”

JustSkipIt: Now to respectfully disagree with both Garner and Sassette there is no universal rule against the use of passive voice in writing. . . . “The

door opened” is not actually passive voice. A general rule for recognizing passive voice is that the sentence contains a form of the verb to be. . . .

Sassette: Oh, geeze – yes you’re right.

Garner: I have had avoid passive *drummed into my head in college* and tend to parrot that back, *unfortunately*.

Still Waters T: I’ve gotten so used to seeing authors write with mixed tenses like this—that I was starting to get confused about *whether I had missed something in my English Grammar classes* lol.

Umgaynow: I must disagree on the passive voice thing...unless it is a very bad story, *a story is NOT a term paper* and therefore the same rules do not apply...

Note that five of the six respondents here specifically connect passive voice and rules for its use to writing instruction: college, English classes, term papers. Just Skip It is the one exception, although her use of the word “rule” could be read as a reference to school, as well. The narrative of this brief exchange is particularly interesting; although early on Sassette attempts to close down her own references to schooled grammar, noting that “the English lesson for the day is out of the way,” the other readers maintain a close connection between their discussion of passive voice and their own experience with rules and school. And although several of the participants finally concur on an acceptable example of passive voice, Umgaynow’s final comment renders the consensus irrelevant, not because it is not

potentially useful but because it comes from school, and the writing at this site is *not* school writing.⁵⁸

If there is a shared wish not to replicate school structures at *Pens*, there are also no doubt a wide variety of possible reasons, and these reasons surely do not all come down to negative experiences; after all, a number of *Pens* participants' responses throughout the site suggest that they are still school, college, or graduate students or work as teachers or professors. Garner, for example notes that "I am not an English teacher, though I have graded more than my share of exams and term papers"; Antigone Unbound and Xita have also written about their work as teachers, and Vamp No. 12 writes about her experience writing briefs in law school. *Pens*, however, is decidedly *not* school, and even those members who by all accounts are committed to their academic work and its practices seem to set those structures aside, at least temporarily, when participating at the site. One reason for this might be, as Garner suggests in "Art," that "one of the problems with critiquing written work is that often English classes ruin the process by making one overly self-conscious, making the process of thinking about what one does unpleasant, or putting too much pressure on us to 'get it.'"

Like the writing groups that Anne Ruggles Gere discusses in her work, then, this set of people seem to wish to differentiate themselves from institutional or academic structures. Similarly, in her brief study of an online *Lord of the Rings* fan fiction site, *Henneth-Annūn*, Kristie Lee Brobeck observes that while writers at this site are deeply

⁵⁸ Interestingly, there is one thread at a relatively new forum called *Beta Pens* in which academic experience is constructed as a credential and not as a setback or annoyance; in the "One on One Authors/Beta Readers" thread, which functions as a resource site both for writers looking for beta readers and for readers to offer their services, a number of participants identify themselves as high school seniors, college students, or college graduates as a measure of their experience or expertise.

invested in improving their own writing and helping others to do the same, the site is emphatically not “an educational institution” (10).⁵⁹ At *Henneth-Annūn*, all stories are reviewed by a nine-member panel of readers before being published, and Brobeck suggests that this peer-review process increases individual writers’ desire to revise their work. She concludes that because all writers at this site wish to improve their writing in order to get published, they place a premium on editing and critical suggestions. Also, she argues that the fact that all writers must go through the same vetting process creates a sense of friendly rivalry, with both the newer and the more experienced writers competing for critical response.⁶⁰

This is not the case at *Pens*, which encourages beta reading but requires no formal review of stories (or critical responses) before they are posted. In fact, my study of *Pens* suggests that rather than competition, a sense of camaraderie—all writers are in this project together—contributes to the collaborative learning environment. There may be a certain aversion to recreating academic structures and using language reminiscent of schooling, but site members are committed to learning and to helping one another learn.

In a thread entitled “Initial Ideas,” Raspberry Hat provides a place for writers who are interested in developing stories to share their ideas and get feedback from readers during the writing process itself. Without using any language that readers would associate with formal schooling, Raspberry Hat nevertheless constructs her opening post as a kind of assignment, asking that any contributors to this thread be familiar with *Pens* guidelines. She offers specific bulleted instructions:

⁵⁹ Available: <http://www.henneth-annun.net>. Accessed July 15, 2007.

⁶⁰ Pullen finds that approximately one-third of site members “hoped to have an active dialogue with other writers” (5) but also that site members are ambivalent about what they hope to gain from such exchanges.

- Give your post a meaningful title that people can respond to and will be able to distinguish from other ideas.
- Even though your idea may not be fully thought of, do try to explain things as best you can. Think about what assumptions you're making. Give people as much to ponder as you can manage. If you are overly terse people might not be able to see your vision and fully respond to it. Try putting yourself in another reader's shoes and see if your idea description tells everything they need to know to respond.

I find these statements compelling as a kind of implicit assignment. Raspberry Hat is quite directive, using instructive sentences that provide a to-do list for participants. Although writing instructors might recognize in these statements some of the same things they ask their students to do in essays, what is notable about Raspberry Hat's instructions is that she provides a specific reader-oriented reason for each one. In composing this list, Raspberry Hat is asking her readers to be attentive to their audience. They should use good titles so that their readers can make distinctions and formulate responses; they should explain thoroughly so that people can grasp their "vision." And as a final test, people should read their own writing from other readers' perspectives. In the previous discussion of passive voice, readers eventually dismissed the necessity of conforming to a particular grammatical structure not because it didn't contribute to their writing but because it was a rule; but in this thread, Raspberry Hat avoids the semblance of rules altogether, and it is worth noting that none of the subsequent posts in this thread mention school, English teachers, or rules at all.

Instead, respondents seem to take care to qualify their ideas as subjective, as Maudmac does here in beginning to offer ideas to a writer, Still Waters T, who has asked for input on a new story:

I'm only offering my personal opinions and I have no idea what your strengths and weaknesses are, beyond what you've told us, so anything I say might not really apply to you at all. And you might get further opinions from others and find that there's no agreement.. So please take anything I say with a grain of salt. That might be one of the most difficult aspects of using...Pens—sorting through contradictory opinions. (“Initial Ideas”)

It would be an oversimplification to consider this only an instance of the tentative language that Anne Ruggles Gere says is typical in amateur writing groups. True, Maudmac uses the word “might” three times in this passage, and she qualifies her suggestions in several ways, noting that they may not apply, that they are only “personal opinions,” that they may not agree with the ideas of other readers, that she might be contributing to Still Water’s difficulty in writing. However, Maudmac goes on to locate this set of qualifications very specifically in an essential aspect of writing process: “that’s just part of the challenge of being a writer.” Similarly, Raspberry Hat asks Still Waters T to remember that writing ultimately comes down to “hard work, tenacity, and belief”; she acknowledges that Still Waters T may choose not to take any of the suggestions offered to her; “the fact that [she’s] considered those issues may be enough.”

Maudmac’s statement here points to a pattern at *Pens* of assuming that an individual writer or critic, for the most part, can be trusted to make good decisions about her work, and this assumption seems to guide the relatively non-invasive nature of most feedback and

discussions about feedback. Sassette, for example, writing in the “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction” thread, comments that “fanfic writers have a very wide range of basic writing skill, and it’s wonderful to see how a writer grows and develops. They’ll just get better the more they write, and it’s a real kick to watch.” But “seeing” and “watching” do not mean that *Pens* members take a completely hands-off approach. Sassette goes on to say that “the fact that they’re also fans means that they’re very accessible and approachable, and I’ve never heard of a writer who didn’t want to talk about their story—and in that respect, it’s easy to just e-mail an author and ask them things. This kind of interaction can really add to the feel that the reader is somehow a part of the story.” Candace Spigelman, whose work I return to later in this chapter, notes that in the context of peer writing groups, “it does seem ‘natural’ that readers defer to the writer’s intentions and wishes” but that “in principle readers have the freedom to suspend this authoritative distance” (99). In fact, *Pens* readers find subtle and not-so-subtle ways to direct, lead, and shape the work of writers and critics at this site, both by circulating a set of values about what good writing and good feedback entail, and by celebrating the work of expert readers and writers who are held up as models for others to learn from and follow.

4.3 FOSTERING IMPROVEMENT

Recall that, as discussed in Chapter 3, both Patricia Bizzell and John Swales note that a standard criterion of a discourse community is that it has a “critical mass of experts” who work to inculcate their expertise in novice members. Similarly, a number of critics discuss the role of expert fans in fan communities; Camille Bacon-Smith’s early ethnography of a

Star Trek fan community observed that more experienced fans actively mentor new fans into appropriate standards of behavior; more recently, John Tulloch has suggested that more “senior” fans “have discursive power in establishing the ‘informed’ exegesis for their [group] of fans” (150).⁶¹

Now, the work that “experts” do and the expertise that they have are closely linked, and as will be clear already (from the work of previous chapters), a great deal of that expertise has to do with a writer’s negotiations of canon; the expectation is that writers will attend to the intricacies of their canonical texts while still being inventive. In “The Laundry Diaries” story thread, for instance, Sassette contributes to the relatively short and sweet feedback posts a 954-word response, excerpted below, which comments on Trom DeGrey’s plot, characterization, use of language, and relationship to the source text of *BtVS*:⁶²

Tara, also, is a great fit for a third-shifter, for so many obvious reasons. Now, the DJ thing at first glance is counter-intuitive for what we know about Tara, but looking deeper and it’s great! What we know about our canon Tara is that she’s deeply caring, bright, creative, and shy. . . . A great deal of Tara’s canon character stems from spending most of her life believing she’s a demon, and her mother’s death. That’s one of the reasons why she’s such a fun character to write AU, because you have to peel back these layers to get at her core and work from there. . . . This AU...tones down the shyness—but keeps it present—and reconciles these two conflicting motivations with a job that lets her interact with people but maintain her anonymity.

⁶¹ Henry Jenkins has also discussed the work of more experienced fans in introducing newer fans to the conventions of a community.

⁶² Responses in “The Laundry Diaries” average 77 words; the shortest is four words (“Stunning. Absolutely frickin’ stunning”), and the longest is Sassette’s.

In this passage, Sassette makes a move that is common in feedback at *Pens*, commenting on the way that a particular writer has interpreted or revised the familiar characters of Willow and Tara in a new context, and her response here is useful in showing how specific the expectation for canonical interpretation can be. As Sassette notes, three seasons of *BtVS* offered relatively little information about Tara as a character in her own right (as opposed to her role as Willow’s girlfriend), and DeGrey’s challenge is to respect the set boundaries of her character while placing her in entirely new situations.

Equally important about Sassette’s comment at this point in my discussion is the way Sassette implicitly frames her response as authoritative. Her language throughout is confident and assertive; she uses declarative sentences in her feedback: e.g. Tara is a great fit, that’s one of the reasons, and so on. Sassette’s use of “we” also positions her as an authority in matters of canon: “what we know about our canon Tara is that she’s deeply caring, bright, creative, and shy.” And referring to her own writing—“she’s such a fun character to write”—allows Sassette to support her claims here. Her comment has weight not only because she knows canon and is comfortable making nuanced observations but because she is herself a writer.

In fact, Sassette is the author of a series of vignettes, 49 written over a period of four years, and her presence in this story thread is one of expert; certainly, Trom DeGrey receives her as such in her reply:

Sassette—I have a confession to make. I squealed when I saw your name in this thread. Yes, squealed, and that is so not me. Then I emailed EasierSaid and said, “Holy shit! The QUEEN of vignettes just left me feedback!” I am so glad you enjoyed my personal challenge to myself here. I’ve always loved

reading your vignettes, but I always thought myself completely incapable of writing anything under 200 pages. [. . .] Thank you so much for reading, I'm still giddy!

DeGrey's enthusiasm here is typical of the reception that *Pens* participants often give to "star" writers, and what is especially important to note here is that she receives Sassette's feedback as exceptional *because* Sassette is "the queen of vignettes." DeGrey may in fact find Sassette's response useful and insightful, but note that she does not say that here (and this is her complete response).

But as Sassette herself acknowledges in other places, it is not only fiction writers who are credited with particular writing skill or talent at *Pens*; if there are star authors, there are also star critics, site members whose feedback is known and celebrated for its insight, its craft, its interpretative quality. Near the beginning of "The Art of Leaving Feedback," Sassette notes that "all the replies on this thread so far are writers" and suggests that readers get into the mix. Each of the two site members who most immediately respond to Sassette names herself as a non-expert in her post, as these excerpts indicate:

Still Waters T: I don't have much to say here since I'm no expert on leaving feedback, I try my best though. When I have the time I can use a good long while to try to tell the author what I liked and why. And I, like probably most people here, like fics that are written as grammatically correct as possible, but I'm not very good at saying whatever I didn't really like if there was anything I didn't like.

Grimlock72: As a non-writer I try to at least tell the writer (who has spent considerable time writing this story after all) what I liked, while sneakily mixing in some remarks about stuff I didn't like.

Still Waters T's claim to be "no expert" and Grimlock's identification as a "non-writer" are suggestive here of a certain tension at *Pens* regarding the role of reading and response. What's interesting here is that these two writers are demurring for two different reasons; Still Waters T (recall that this is the new writer who was being offered advice in the "Initial Ideas" thread) claims that she is not a *feedback* expert, whereas Grimlock merely claims that she is a "non-writer." This would suggest that Grimlock, at least, understands feedback to be *not* writing, but in this particular thread, other readers immediately take issue with her construction.

JustSkipIt: I'm thrilled to see Grimmy comment in this thread. I'd have to rank Grimmy in the top 1 or 2 feedbackers on the forum (from my stories that is). One piece of advice to people wondering how to write feedback: look at Grimmy's average comments. Incredibly insightful and detailed. You can always count on her...to tell you what she likes but very definitely what she DOES NOT. I so appreciate that as a writer.

In this post, Just Skip It explicitly constructs Grimlock's work as a model for other critical responses; readers who seem less sure of their abilities as critical writers—like Still Waters T—are encouraged to write more "insightful and detailed" commentary by studying the work of their peers. (Figure 12 shows a sample of Grimlock's feedback in Rosser's "Sidestep Chronicle.") In this way, they are encouraged to write themselves into active positions as writers and readers at this site.

The feedback post depicted in Figure 12 is typical of Grimlock's responses in other threads, both in its length and detail and in its combination of positive response with skepticism, however implicit. In this post, for example, Grimlock suggests that she is not quite on board with Rosser's representation of character ("If you wrote anyone wrong regarding this point it's Tara"), but she elaborates on and contextualizes her response in a way that avoids any appearance of being overly critical, which, as I have suggested, other readers would be unlikely to receive well.

Although, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, more experienced critical respondents go out of their way to reassure newer site members that they appreciate even the simplest of feedback, they also hold up writers like Grimlock as models from which newer writers can learn and, as in JustSkipIt's post above, explicitly suggest that such models ought to be emulated. At the same time, experienced writers at the site maintain overall positive atmosphere and remind others that the writing environment should not be confused with school: there are no assignments here, no grades, no rules that seem arbitrary. Instead, there is a desire to develop as readers and writers, and to help one another to do this, as well.

There is much more to say about the processes of informal learning that go on at *Pens*, but for now, as I move to the final section of this chapter, let me just pause to name some of the most important aspects of these processes. In addition to inviting and encouraging people to write themselves into an active role at the site, experienced *Pens* writers advocate that site members read thoroughly, imitate and emulate the work of more experienced writers, respect the opinions of others, express gratitude for the reading and

writing that their peers do, and, perhaps most importantly, commit their responses in writing to the developing archive.

Grimlock72	Posted: Thu Nov 14, 2002 6:11 am Post subject: Re: Part 100
Guest	<p>Katharyn,</p> <p>You've written Giles just fine, no problems there. It is the Giles I would expect in the Wishverse. If you wrote anyone wrong regarding this point it's Tara, if you wanted her to be a believable/likely threat to the world that is (maybe Tara's character makes that impossible).</p> <p>I do understand Giles' reasoning, I just don't agree with it. Trouble is that I (reader) know a great deal more about Tara than Giles does. As such it's really hard for me to see Tara as a threat. She herself cares to much to have it happen in my opinion. Besides, I like Tara...so I tend to disregard reasons to kill her, bit biased here.</p> <p>Tara is powerfull yes, but I trust her to use that power wisely. Tara herself has had some moments where she 'felt' the magic calling out to her but she has always remained in control. I didn't see much of a problem there, keeping control is needed when using magic itself and Tara handled it fine. Now if she had had more trouble keeping control, or felt forced to cast some spell to let out some magic... that would be worrying.</p> <p>That control was what Giles feared Tara would lose sooner or later. But she already knows what to avoid and control, her mother taught her well (as opposed to Willow in season6 who was all self-taught). Heck, she worries about it most of the time she uses magic.</p> <p>Whatever happens, I'm glad at least Tara herself got rid of the Dark Magic calling out to her. Should give her some peace of mind, Lord knows she worries about lotsa others things already.</p> <p>Grimmy</p>

Figure 12. Sample feedback post by Grimlock72 in “The Sidestep Chronicle”

4.4 THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Candace Spigelman, in *Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups*, suggests that “writing group theory relies on a postmodern appreciation of intertextuality—the idea that no text is totally original, the private property of an autonomous creator” (17). In Chapter 2, I noted the importance of acknowledging the inherent intertextuality of fan fiction; fan writers themselves are well aware of the nuances of such an acknowledgment; here, I want to talk briefly about the importance of acknowledging the collaborative aspect of fan writing, as well. At *Pens*, individual writers compose individual posts, but these writers are also collaborating to produce larger texts that not only document groups of people’s responses to fan fiction but, more importantly, tell a story about how they carry out their shared critical project: to encourage one another to become better readers and better writers.

At *Pens*, as I have shown a number of times throughout this and previous chapters, “creative” and “critical” work—fiction and feedback—appear together in story threads, with no formal distinction made between the two kinds of writing. A feedback post and a chapter of a story carry equal structural weight: they draw on the same set of canonical expectations, they use the same posting mechanism, and they appear in the same form as text. It is certainly true that in any given story thread, a single author is providing a text for reading and discussion, and to a certain extent all subsequent feedback is subordinated to that story, but the feedback posts that accrue in a thread contribute a significant amount of writing to the text. In “The Sidestep Chronicle,” for example, Katharyn Rosser provides 103 chapters, but some of her readers provide almost as many comments; LeatherQueen comments 73 times, Mollyig comments 78 times, and Zahir al Daoud comments 90 times;

in all, there are 950 documented responses to Rosser's 103 chapters; even with the addition of the posts in which Rosser responds to her readers, the accumulation of their text far outweighs hers.⁶³ In this way, the volume of critical response makes for a sustained critical discussion of Rosser's story; furthermore, it becomes part of the story itself in a very real sense.

Because there is so much text at *Pens*, so many thousands of responses, this interweaving of fiction and feedback can challenge some readers (and can be difficult to represent adequately); however, to fully participate at the site, members ultimately learn that they must read other people's critical comments, even that doing so becomes part of the pleasure of the experience. Vix84, for instance, writes,

I hated reading people's feedback (not for my stories, I love that!) at first, it distracted me, and made it harder to read. After a while I started to like reading it, I find some people have really interesting comments/analysis/ideas. Particularly in the longer fics. . . . I love how the little community has come together and can discuss, argue, explain their ideas, and make you think about the fic in a whole new way. ("Reading and Writing Fan Fiction")

These readers, in posting their responses, are authoring texts as much as Rosser is, and as I discussed earlier, they want to be acknowledged for their contributions to the story thread. Just Skip It, for example, writes

RETURN THE FAVOR! If a reader writes you 150 words on what they liked/did not like, don't say "thanks for your comments." Elaborate on what they said. Was that your favorite part too? Did they pick up on what you

⁶³ In the shift from Novogate to Ezboards in 2001, some of the responses to chapters 1-7 were lost.

were trying to convey? If they are a good reader, tell them that and tell them why you say so. (“Art”)

Similarly, Insanity comments, “If I make the effort to write it all down...then I really appreciate a reaction of some kind” (“Art”). What Just Skip It and Insanity are getting at here, I think, is that readers at *Pens* feel a sense of authorship; they are not just respondents who are either emoting or doing a favor for a fiction writer who craves feedback. Instead, they are crafting critical comments, and they see those critical comments as worthy themselves of enthusiastic response.

In response to a reader who asked if there was a story-only document available to download—this person hoped to read the story without any feedback between chapters—Rosser offered this response:

I think it is important to view multipart fic with the feedback intact—so much so that I save every completed page of the thread. . The fic, my fic at least, changes with feedback. Also I get to explain things to readers and they get to ask questions that are (hopefully) of interest to others. I love to see this in fic I am reading to. (“Reading and Writing Fan Fiction”)

In Figure 12, for example, Grimlock is responding to a question that Rosser herself has asked: has she portrayed the character of Giles in a way that her readers find satisfactory? And in their responses to this question, Grimlock and other readers see what the others have said as they formulate their own responses. This question, and the series of posts that emerges in response, become part of the narrative of the text and cannot, finally, be separated from the story itself.

It is not only the exchange of fiction and criticism that cannot be separated; it is the production of this vast amount of text and the learning that it fosters. *Different Colored Pens* is not an explicitly educational site, but its members clearly understand the work they are doing to be educational. Just as fan fiction can tell us a lot about the media texts on which it draws, feedback can shed light on fan fiction; however, as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, feedback can also offer insight into the work that its readers and writers are doing. And because this writing is archived—because in fact the archive itself is available to its own readers, who use it as a resource—every comment made to a story, every question a writer asks her readers, every clarification a reader suggests, every first foray into critical response that a new site member makes—all this happens in writing, and all this is documented. And because it is documented, compositionists have a unique opportunity to study in detail the written negotiations of reading and writing that happen at this site. In this chapter, I have begun to touch on some of the questions that arise in an exploration of the work of *Different Colored Pens*. In my concluding chapter, I talk about a few of the specific areas which I think are most suggestive for future study.

5.0 CONCLUSION: WRITING RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER

[F]anfic is the result of an enormous investment of thought and feeling. There is **so** much work in every single fic. People took the time to study and plunged themselves into the characters and plotlines I hold so dear. I can see that in their writing. [. . .] It's amazing, it fascinates me. I can't get enough of it.

—Mrs. Vertigo, “Reading and Writing Fan Fiction,” *Different Colored Pens*

A sequence of assignments is repetitive. It asks students to write, again, about something they wrote about before. But such a project allows for richness; it allows for the imagination that one thing can lead to another, that the world can give and give.

—David Bartholomae, “Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins”

Susan Miller begins *Textual Carnivals*, nearly 20 years after its publication still one of the most compelling calls for alternative composition practices, by talking about the power that is at the root of disciplinary story-telling and the way that, in order to understand the politics of writing and writing instruction, we need to have “good” stories that can

challenge the “bad” ones. Miller’s discussion aims to revisit and understand a set of oppositions that she argues have shaped the evolution of composition as a field: debased/established, marginal/central. She suggests that in composition studies as in the culture at large, there remains an “entrenched national ideological function for ‘literature’ or ‘English’ as a set of unrealized ideals—a content and linguistic execution that the majority of ordinary citizens aspire to but never attain” (178).

It is not a stretch, I think, to suggest that fan writing often is perceived as occupying the devalued half of something like Miller’s oppositions: a debased imitation of established television programs, films, and novels; a marginal poaching of the central cultural reserve. However, as I hope the previous chapters have suggested, these oppositions only make sense if the text that matters in a discussion of fan fiction is the source text, a television show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. If the fan fiction itself—or the feedback that so often frames it—is viewed as the text that matters, then these oppositions cease to be productive. In composition studies as it is practiced by my professors and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and by other scholars whose work I admire, the text that matters is often, if not always, the student text. This is the text whose production we invite again and again, the text with which we ask our students to grapple, the text we spend countless hours reading and grading. The student text is, arguably, at the very center of our discipline.

But the student text is a highly specific and very limited genre of writing. Our colleges and universities compel it with general education requirements; our instructors solicit it with assignments that our students find wearying and levy judgments against it with grades and endless suggestions for improvement. At least, this is a version of the student text that circulates widely among recent graduates and those whose memories of

school are not entirely as fond as our own. As far as practitioners and theorists of composition studies have come in arguing for our field as meaningful, substantive, and engaged with the work of our students, the legacy of the red pen that slashes through a student paper persists. But success in *writing* is not always the same as success in *student writing*, and as my study of a single website suggests, there is as much yearning to write and to learn to write outside our classrooms as there is fear of the slashing pen within them.

John Trimbur has suggested that

popular literacy ... cannot be understood simply as a categorical one of occupying the underesteemed and disparaged term in a familiar cultural hierarchy. Instead...the question is better put if we ask how people...use reading and writing to negotiate the boundaries between official and unofficial literacies, the sanctioned and the disreputable. (4)

As composition studies, in particular, continues to enlarge its understanding not just of how writing is taught but of what writing *is* and how it is accomplished, it seems more necessary than ever to turn, as composition scholars like Susan Miller and John Trimbur have for some time, to an exploration of what writing looks like in non-academic settings. Although there are certainly many students who experience our classes with interest and engagement, they are still *our* classes; we name the dominant discourses, we control the vocabulary and the discussion, we assign the papers, and we do the grading. And it is useful to understand that for some students, this is the plot, and we are the characters, in Susan Miller's "bad" story. It is important that we turn to non-academic settings to see how amateur writers take on the work of reading and writing by choice, how they develop their

own ways of reading and meaning-making, how they use a genre (like fan fiction) to take on a project of reading and writing improvement, and how they help one another to do this.

I do not suggest that amateur writers like those at *Different Colored Pens* are somehow magically free from academic influence; most of them have been through (or are still in) high school and college, and they inevitably struggle with their own particular anxieties of influence. However, as with any meaningful alternate universe, there is as much that is different as the same, as much that is revised as borrowed. At *Pens*, there are no teachers or students, but there are conventions and a canon; there are no grades, but there are assessments. And there are no explicit assignment sequences, but there are readerly expectations, and people do, to borrow David Bartholomae's description of student writers in my second epigraph, "write, again, about something they wrote about before." We can recognize these structures because they line up in certain ways with the structures we have in place. At the same time, there are surely elements that we do not recognize because they come from another universe, one we have viewed, perhaps, but do not quite understand.

Writing about internet fan fiction as a practice of composition, as will be clear by this point, presents a number of challenges that I have struggled throughout this dissertation to negotiate in meaningful ways. First, the sheer volume of text and number of readers and writers has necessitated that I find ways to limit my goals and the texts I discuss, at least for the time being; working with the website *Different Colored Pens* has allowed me to do this. As I have noted, the work of *Different Colored Pens* is meant to be suggestive rather than representative of broader internet fan fiction practices. Second, the relative novelty of fan fiction as an object of study has required that I do a significant

amount of describing and contextualizing. Assuming that many of my readers will be unfamiliar with fan fiction, let alone with the critical reading and feedback practices that it involves, I have tried to offer a sense of the richness of internet fan fiction archives and practices. Third, the dominance of the textual poaching metaphor in the literature on fan studies has shaped the discourse on (and in) fan fiction, as well; in order even to suggest the need for alternate critical lenses, including those of composition studies, I have had to engage with this central metaphor at some length. And finally, the complexity of fan fiction itself—its relationships to its sources and to its feedback, the conventions and expectations of its readers and writers, the constellations of texts it creates—has meant that my work in this dissertation has raised more questions than it has answered.

In the previous chapter, for example, I noted that readers posted 950 responses to the 103 chapters of Katharyn Rosser’s “Sidestep Chronicle”; in all, more than 125 people contributed to this one story thread at *Different Colored Pens*.⁶⁴ Even with the limits I have already placed on my reading of this text—this thread represents one iteration of an online writing group, which itself is one of thousands of such iterations produced by members of this particular discourse community, which itself has carved out a very narrow slice of fan fiction written around the characters of Willow and Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—potential lines of inquiry abound. Some of the respondents to “The Sidestep Chronicle” participated in the critical discussions I examined in Chapter 4; does their feedback differ in meaningful ways from that of readers who did not participate actively in those discussions? Does the feedback of an individual respondent change over the course of this story, or does it remain stable from beginning to end, and does an individual reader’s

⁶⁴ Rosser is still posting chapters to the sequel, “Second Chronicle” in the same thread, and so this number continues to grow.

feedback change substantially from story to story? When and how does this feedback seem to change in response to interventions on the parts of other readers or the story's author? And how does an individual reader's feedback intersect with that person's own fiction writing?

I have written about several important aspects of the feedback work of *Pens* writers, and each of these could open up more questions, as well. For instance, if expert readers and writers in this discourse community find ways to model ideal forms of critical writing for novice site members, as I have suggested, then how can we read the work of those novice members for signs of change or development? Do such attempts to instruct, however informally, have legible results? For that matter, does the feedback of the experts live up to the expectations they announce? In other words, is it possible to read this archive of fan fiction feedback for signs of compositional learning? This is just a small sampling of the questions that remain at the close of this dissertation, questions I hope to pursue in my future research. There is much to learn about the reading and writing of internet fan fiction.

5.1 FAN FICTION MODELS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION

My aim here is decidedly not to suggest that composition instruction in general is impoverished or that it in itself constitutes a bad story in need of rewriting, although this appears to be the perception of some fan fiction readers and writers. Throughout this project, I have gestured toward what I see as a productive analogy between fan writing and student writing; I have hesitated to take this analogy too far because I do not wish to erase issues of context on both sides of the analogy. Context matters, and no amount of

analogizing can change the fact that fan fiction writers have chosen their work and, to a certain extent, have chosen the terms by which they do this work. Similarly, no amount of creative revision can turn a university classroom with assignments, requirements, and grades into a website with voluntary and enthusiastic participation. We simply cannot write this kind of fan fiction about our own classrooms, and it is not always practical or desirable to poach the texts and strategies of amateur writers for our own instructional uses.

I am, therefore, wary of suggesting a one-way application of amateur fan writing practices to the composition classroom. Rather, I want to highlight a few of the practices that make *Different Colored Pens*, and perhaps fan fiction writing more broadly, so dynamic and so full of potential for enriching our work.

5.1.1 Archives of Feedback

One of the benefits of a fan fiction website—and this is a potential benefit of the internet in general—is that it offers an archive of the work of reading, writing, and learning that fan writers do. As I have suggested, everything that happens on a fan fiction website happens in writing, and the archive of that writing is an invaluable tool for teachers and students alike. While not replacing the oral discussions that happen in a classroom setting, archives could serve as textual models and critical resources for students who are learning to formulate their ideas in writing. Composition instructors are already well versed in using textbooks, articles, non-fiction, essays, and other texts (at the University of Pittsburgh, we have also used fiction and poetry) as springboards for student writing. My training as a writing instructor has also taught me to use student papers as texts of equal importance: photocopying them for distribution to a class, using excerpts from them in discussion,

sending them home to be read and marked up and considered as preparation for class. These are all, in a sense, archives of a sort.

Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille M. Schultz write in the conclusion to their study of nineteenth-century composition texts that

[e]very textbook is an archive of instruction—it holds traces of past books and traditions, sometimes literally in silent borrowings or explicit citations, and sometimes in more deeply embedded ways. It carries out inherited attitudes, visible, for example, in a proposed sequence of learning, in notions about student work or progress, in evaluative terms or standards, in its pedagogical routines. We would like this project to recall the value of attending to the material archive, both past and current, in which we are always immersed. (209)

Chapter 4 began the work of reading a fan fiction archive for traces of “inherited attitudes” and “pedagogical routines,” and as I have suggested, there is much potential for further inquiry. For a composition scholar, there is no doubt that *Different Colored Pens* and similar websites capture a great deal of information about the ways that amateur writers and readers take and reinvent critical projects, and I find the vocabulary that Carr, Carr, and Schultz offer valuable for understanding such websites not only as discourse communities but *as* archives.

Their way of reading an archive is equally useful, I would suggest, for student writers, who have the very difficult task of applying what happens in the classroom to their written work. The internet offers a versatile and virtually limitless platform for creating archives that would allow students to access, re-read, and think at more length about such

work, and the mechanisms through which *Pens* writers post responses to one another would be quite easy for a composition instructor to adapt for classroom use. Some instructors already use asynchronous computer-mediated communication in the form of online bulletin boards, e-mail lists, and blogs to facilitate students' written responses to one another; I have experimented with all three myself in classroom settings. While each presents new challenges in soliciting and managing interaction among students, each also offers new ways for students to engage one another in writing and to share textual models for the work they are asked to do.

But I suggest that even offline, we would do well to create material archives of learning in our classrooms. At *Different Colored Pens*, readers expect writers to respond to and engage with their feedback; Katharyn Rosser, for example, has responded in writing to each and every one of the 950 feedback posts to "The Sidestep Chronicle." To be sure, we instructors respond in our written comments to the work that our students do, but perhaps we need also to ask our students to write back every time, and to include both our own responses and theirs in a kind of written thread that accompanies the texts they ultimately submit; electronic submission and exchange would mitigate the unwieldy paper trail that such threads might create. Granted, such a practice would create more text and more reading, but if we follow the fan fiction model, even a simple "thank you for reading" would suffice. If we are serious about valuing the process of writing that leads to the final products that we read and evaluate, then perhaps we must more explicitly value the informal discussions that inevitably contribute to that process by constructing them as a necessary part of those texts.

5.1.2 Beta Reading

The only major textual element of internet fan fiction that does not appear in website archives is the work that goes on in beta reading exchanges. In previous chapters, I have referred to beta reading as a common fan fiction practice: before posting a story online, a writer will submit it to a beta reader who reads, edits, proofreads, offers suggestions and constructive criticism, and so on. A beta reader is a dedicated reader, a person who takes on the responsibility of reading everything that an individual writer produces and of responding to it, again in writing. The creation and circulation of archives that I proposed in the previous section would begin to capture the interactions of various student writers and readers, but there remains the question of how to carry out this work without producing an unmanageable volume of text. It is possible that in the best classroom, one populated by the most invested, most curious, most engaged students, no management would be necessary: students would, in true fan fiction fashion, respond to the texts that interested them and spark discussions in this way. But even in classrooms that place a premium on peer review practices, there is an element of arbitrariness at work. A good peer review situation often depends on the particular groups that form on any given day. Ideally, of course, the available mechanisms for peer review create an environment in which the most accomplished and most challenged writers benefit equally, but in practice, this is not always the case.

A form of beta reading would introduce a greater sense of intention and accountability to this process. In my experience as both a teacher and an observer of other people's teaching, the only dedicated reader of any individual student's work is the instructor, the person who ultimately controls the discourse and assigns the grades. If a

feedback culture that involves everyone in a classroom as readers and writers is truly to flourish, then every student needs a beta reader, a person who takes on the task of reading everything before it is submitted to the group, before it is subject to public evaluation. This beta reader would have a stake in the writer's process and would be acknowledged for her share in the final product; she would be in a very real sense a collaborator. Both participants in this process would benefit from putting into practice the collaboration and critical response that are essential to good critical writing.

5.1.3 Canonical Revision

A third model that fan fiction offers to composition is less a specific strategy or practice than it is a way of seeing the work of writing from sources. I would argue that fan fiction writers and readers at *Different Colored Pens* understand themselves not to be borrowing, or plagiarizing, or poaching, but to be *revising*. They write freely, comfortably, and enthusiastically from a canonical text: they place familiar characters in new contexts, they alter plot lines, they erase major events, they introduce new conceptual frameworks that alter the original text in ways its own writers might not have imagined. These are all processes which, with a little alteration for context, might make more sense to student writers than the processes of revision that our textbooks and our received models offer them.

Now, to think of revision in this way means that it is not a process that is limited to writing that one has created oneself, but I see this as a way to overcome the hurdle that teaching revision presents. Students are reluctant to revisit their own work when they think they have already said everything they have to say; at best, they edit thoroughly. But if

revision is simply what writers do, and the canons of writing are not only the texts a student is writing *about* but the text he is producing—and this is the model that fan fiction proposes—then I think students are likely to find this a model worth trying. The question we ask of a revision might not be “what has changed from the original draft,” but “how does this draft read the canons with which it is working?”, with the understanding that the original draft is one of those canons: a minute textual universe that offers up something worth writing about better. Similarly, we might ask “what new characters or crossovers has this draft introduced or attempted?”, “how has this writer remained true to the relationships from canon while recasting them in such significant ways?” and so on.

I noted in an earlier chapter that what fan fiction writers do, above all, in creating new stories, is to ask the question “What if”? This question, and the diverse acts of writing it allows, is a forceful invitation to revision, and I suggest that finding ways to advocate for this work in our classrooms might come closer to eliciting the substantive revision that so many of us want to see.

5.2 CONCLUSION: INVENTING THE UNIVERSE

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the fact that fan fiction writers assume that their writing is indebted to a variety of sources—not only a television show or other media text but also the reading and research they have done, the conversations they have had, even the responses they have made to other writers. Whereas students seem to understand sources as little mines to be dug for nuggets of useful material around which they can develop a paper (and mines, no less, that they are often required to visit), fan fiction writers

seem to understand their sources as a necessary foundation on which to build. I have spent entire semesters teaching in the hopes of getting to the point at which many fan writers seem to start.

I want to share one final critical exchange from the *Different Colored Pens* archive to illustrate this point, from a thread entitled “Reading, Writing, and Originality.” In the series of excerpts that follows, five participants discuss what we might think of, to borrow Harold Bloom’s term, as anxiety of influence, which in the case of fan fiction might be exacerbated.

Raspberry hat: I also have the view that there’s very little true originality in the world and a lot of writing is about subtle interpretation and pov on things that have been told in other ways. I hope I am wrong. I just struggle with finding my own originality. [. . .] The frustration I have is everytime I think of an idea I can usually build some kind of relationship in a few steps to something I’ve already read/seen/heard.

The Lord J: The way I see it, true originality is limited; it’s SO rare that something is *truly* original, however, it is possible to create something that seems MORE original than most things by combining two or more influences. Music, for example. When you’ve got one person writing material when they only listen to one or two bands of the same genre, the music will inevitably turn out sounding like those bands. Put 5 people together who listen to all sorts of diverse music, (but have a common theme) and you’ll end up with something a bit more original.

Raspberry hat: I absolutely agree with your point about how a band works. [. . .] I know my ideas have gone in different directions from small comments I've been given. I also know my thinking can be shaped by things happening around me.

Hemiola: It's worth remembering that "originality" as a concept is over-rated. Shakespeare, for example, never wrote a single **original** story: all of this plots come from somewhere else—history, literature, or myth. The "Cult of Originality" is something that dates from the 19th century and the "High Romantic" era. . . .

Sassette: I something think that if anyone ever had a truly, wholly, uniquely original idea, no one else would have the frame of reference to understand it.

Binky: I agree with The Lord J on this. Writer's mystique or creator's privilege? Not for me. As long as it's not plagiarized, I'm all for intertextuality. [. . .] I think there's plenty of chops to be made by either being the first person to make an utterance, or the third person who's said it in their own way or added something new to the mix. If you look at it that way, as an ongoing multi-party conversation or like a party, there's no shame being second, third, last, the latest, etc. ("Reading, Writing, and Originality")

What I want to note in this exchange is the way what starts as a problem is transformed into an opportunity. Raspberry Hat begins by constructing the relationship between creativity and derivation as a problem, as a source of frustration. She writes that with every new idea she has, she "can usually build some kind of relationship in a few steps to something [she's] already read/seen heard."

Now, Raspberry Hat raises this issue of relationship as a problem, but I'm sure many of my readers will agree that this is precisely the kind of awareness of the inherent connectedness of ideas and texts that we would want our students to have, and in fact The Lord J's response casts this connectedness as not only an inevitable state of affairs but also an opportunity, and a desirable one at that. The Lord J uses the band analogy to argue that "originality" does not, in fact, come from thin air but from combining influences to produce a new interpretation; this post constructs a kind of hierarchy of originality, with those ideas that result from a combination of influences being "more original" than those that do not. The Lord J's response seems to be persuasive: Raspberry Hat's next post suggests some movement from her original position. She acknowledges the truth of what The Lord J is proposing, and the tone of her second post is to my mind slightly less hopeless, or at least less frustrated and more optimistic.

Hemiola's contribution to the thread situates the discussion in a brief history of "the cult of originality," suggesting that the best art shows its influences and precedents. Her response both acknowledges the debt that this very discussion owes to a tradition of anxiety over issues of originality and validates Raspberry Hat and The Lord J as writers, as people who, in the same tradition as Shakespeare, struggle with the challenge of every writing something "new." In effect, Hemiola's response is a powerful reminder that these participants are discussing not just their work at this website but all writing, which like fan fiction is deeply indebted to a canon, a range of sources, a set of conventions and combinations that make writing possible. Sassette's brief comment offers a firmer pronouncement of what was, in Raspberry Hat's original post, a tentative suggestion; for Sassette, derivative work benefits not only the writer, who must draw on a range of

sources, but also the reader, who might not otherwise have the frames of reference to understand it.

Finally, Binky's post begins with what seems to me a fairly pessimistic closing, raising the specter of plagiarism as perhaps the one thing that might put the brakes on intertextuality. But rather than pursuing the risks of plagiarism, she instead offers a Burkean metaphor of conversation that suggests a powerful way to think about the previous discussion: the idea that has built through this interchange that the work of writing, at least in this context, depends less on personal inspiration than on combinations of resources and influences and previously existing ideas. In fact, personal inspiration comes precisely from those influences and doesn't exist apart from them. This is the way, Binky suggests, that ideas are formed, that critical responses develop. This is the way that writing—not just fan writing but all writing—happens.

The title of my dissertation borrows from David Bartholomae's essay on the acclimation of first-year writing students to the academic conventions of higher education, "Inventing the University"; in the 21st century, an even more apt characterization of writing, including academic writing, might be "inventing the universe." In my work as a compositionist studying the vibrant textual culture of fan fiction, I have faced this question again and again: what does it mean, in the end, to go to an alien world (a world of vampire slayers, or space stations, or overnight laundrettes) to discover something about writing if we are only going to come home again?

Fan fiction texts, even when read individually, are powerful reminders that the writing instruction we do is only one universe; it exists in a much larger network of alternate writing universes. Some of the characters in those universes may be the same—

certainly the English teacher with red pen in hand and the eager young writer who wants to try something new show up again and again—and what those universes create certainly shares some of the same properties, processes, and goals as what we create. In fact, just as *Buffy* producer Joss Whedon has been reputed to lurk on the fan sites of his own television shows, there are academics participating in amateur communities without necessarily announcing their presence there.

But the existence of these universes is a reminder that our ways of constructing the work we do compete with other ways that are just as forceful, and sometimes more so. *Different Colored Pens* is only one such universe, and just as it is one of thousands of such archives, internet fan fiction itself is only one of countless sites of amateur writing and reading, teaching and learning that happen outside academia. As composition studies as a field continues to explore these sites, I hope that we will be mindful of the ways in which we invent the universe, the kinds of stories that comprise our canons, and the different routes that amateur readers and writers take to form alternate universes that matter.

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