

## **Desperately seeking methodology: New directions in fan studies research**

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### **Abstract:**

Fan studies has been critical and groundbreaking in a number of respects. However, in regard to methodology, discussion seems decidedly thin on the ground. Such a missing discourse has wider implications, raising questions such as: what kinds of knowledge do fan studies researchers want to produce? What are the objects being studied? How does fan studies inform a general approach to research? And how is the area going to maintain itself, if we don't start talking about our methodology and world-view? This paper is an attempt to bring the discussion of methodology to the fore in fan studies. In doing so, we show how the history of methodology in media and cultural studies implies certain methods. We then turn to newer methodologies in interpretative qualitative research. From here, we argue that there is room for mutual dialogue between fan studies and methodology: namely in work around the 'aca-fan' subject position of the researcher; and in digital research opened up by online modes of fandom and fan activism.

**Keywords:** Fan studies research, methodology, aca-fan, autoethnography, digital ethnography

### **Methods, methodology and fan activism**

In 2013 we co-wrote a module within our department that looked at methodologies in digital contexts. In this module we wanted students to recognize methodology as distinct

from 'methods', or the practice of using different tools, e.g. interviews, focus groups, and techniques of interpretation. Instead we wanted students to appreciate the viewpoints, approaches and 'ways of seeing the world', that then come to inform the way research is practiced, and which in turn come to influence the kinds of knowledge that is produced.

Throughout the module, we presented a series of research-based journal articles that were read closely for the methodological approaches at work in qualitative empirical research. We selected articles that covered contemporary issues in digital culture, including pro-ana communities, suicidegirls, reality TV, and online barebacking sites. In the course of writing the module we searched for a paper in fan studies that specifically drew on a distinct 'fan' methodology. We went into our search believing that we would find plenty of material. We thought this for two reasons: first, the areas in which fan studies is situated has a long tradition of methodological discussion; and second because the use of both digital ethnography and the subject position of the academic fan (or 'aca-fan') presuppose some form of methodological turn. We searched all the major media and cultural studies journals for explicit discussion in fan studies research of methodology or substantial research methods sections, accounts of lived experience, or discussions of textual analysis, that would make understanding these papers more straightforward for students. Despite a variety of published research in the area of fan studies, explicit reference to methodology or research methods was often missing.

One of the few examples that we found was in Lopez's (2012) paper on the anti-racist fan activism produced as a result of controversy surrounding *The Last Airbender*. Where the animated version of *The Last Airbender* drew on (albeit orientalist) representations of Asian culture, in the film version, the cast were 'whitewashed' (only white people were hired to take on the roles). In response to the racist casting, the fan community protested through online petitions and activities that called on fans to boycott the film. When one of the original white cast members dropped out, Asian actor Dev Patel was hired to play Zuko, the villain, and so deepened the racial stereotypes that the protesters were attempting to challenge.

In Lopez's (2012) paper, she produced what could be loosely described as a digital ethnography of one internet-based community, who were engaged in activity with members of the fan base to protest the casting decisions. Lopez's (2012) research included on and offline conversations with key informants, and participation at events. As part of the discussion, Lopez (2012) reflects on her position as an academic non-fan of *The Last Airbender*, whose access point and reciprocity with the group were enabled through her own participation in Asian-American advocacy. During the course of the research, Lopez (2012) identified the group's unexamined assumptions of textual authenticity. The cartoon version of *The Last Airbender* was perceived by fans as 'authentically oriental' – despite having been made in the USA for an American audience. Thus, although on the surface the protest was about the under-representation of Asian actors, the fans were more invested in maintaining the 'original' fan text.

In this paper we pick out two aspects of Lopez's (2012) research – her digital ethnography and reflections on her location in the fandom – as a starting point to think about methodology in fan studies research. Of course we want to do so in a way that recognizes the flourishing interdisciplinary field of fan studies work, and we proceed in this article with a few forewarnings. Fan studies is located at an inherently interdisciplinary space, with both bridges and divides between those positioned across the humanities and social sciences. It constitutes a melting pot area, with scholars coming from disciplines including English literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, film studies, communication studies, gender studies, and media and cultural studies, along with these disciplines' attendant methodological perspectives. We ourselves come from backgrounds in psychology and literature respectively, but both now locate ourselves within media and cultural studies; one of us places our work in new and creative qualitative method/ologies, the other is interested in media fan studies.

In thinking through fan studies methodology, we therefore have to recognize our own locations and approaches to fan studies, and we think it's important to outline upfront some of our terminology and the necessary limits we've placed on our discussion. By 'fans', we are talking about a particular media fan, as a sub-section of fan studies that also includes music fans, sport fans, celebrity fans and fans of consumer items. Our media fan, by contrast, is found in certain media outputs: specifically film and television, and this influenced both our search criteria when deciding the paper for the module, and, importantly, our discussion below. We are also very firmly locating our discussion in qualitative research methodologies, and particularly those with a radical edge. We're aware that 'research' comes in many different forms and styles. Given our interest in thinking about fan methodology through the lens of fan activism, our own methodological tendency seems, to us, consistent.

With these caveats in mind, we believe that opening up this discussion is important. Not having an open dialogue about methodology raises ontological and epistemological issues: especially, we argue, in a digital context. We also believe that such discussion is important, both for those new and emerging researchers in fan studies, and in orienting people who are coming to fan studies for the first time. In this article we reflect on the reasons for the absence of methodological discussion in fan studies. Our first aim in this article is to review where fan studies is currently, through providing a brief history of methodological discussion within media and cultural studies. We suggest that this history is rich and deep, and therefore demonstrates an incongruity with the absence of methodological discussion in current published fan studies research. In discussing this incongruity, we identify reasons why we feel methodology has been so ignored. We want to ask: Why are we not discussing methods more extensively, in a field that has seen a variety of methodological approaches within the last twenty years? What is the reason for this absence? And is it time to review?

Our second aim is to suggest one possible line of research for developing and discussing a more explicit fan studies methodology. Here we question: How does fan studies

define its object, the 'fan'? What kinds of knowledge can it produce on the basis of this object? And how do these knowledges change in light of the ways the culture of fan studies organizes itself in online, with its complex material and immaterial locations in space and time? We do not want to be prescriptive in this aim, but feel that one possible space could be opened up by drawing on innovative and developing digitally-influenced ethnographic and subjectivist autoethnographic approaches arising from qualitative research agendas. We link these approaches to emerging topics within fan studies research: namely, the study of fan activism, and the researcher's subject position of the 'aca-fan'. Following on from Lopez (2012), we argue that these topics provide opportune spaces to map out a fan studies methodology, allowing fan studies to continue to be progressive and groundbreaking in its contribution to media and cultural studies.

### **Methodology in Fan Studies**

Over the last twenty years, the study of fan research has seen work documenting the fan's cultural, social and personal labour, starting with the now classic and floodgate 1992 studies of Fiske (1992) Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992). These studies kick-started a growth area of approaches dealing with 'fans', represented by a boom in publishing and academic discussion. For example, the area of fan studies has seen a range of anthologies (e.g. Jenkins 2006a), edited collections (e.g. Gray, Sandvoss and Lee-Harrington 2007; Lewis 1992; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Harris and Alexander 1998), and specialized journals (e.g. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Journal of Fandom Studies*). Ideas that have emerged from this area have also been groundbreaking. 'Transmedia narrative' and 'intertextuality' are key concepts regularly taught on media studies syllabi at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Equally, the notion of 'convergence culture', as defined by Jenkins (2006b), has understood how fan works transpose narrative across multiple media platforms. Such a concept has been significant for making sense of the contemporary mediated landscape, where media regularly shift and change forms and intentions (Hay and Couldry 2011). However, among this otherwise groundbreaking work, there appears to be a missing discourse and discussion of methodology.

Methodology is typically seen as solipsistic. Freud is cited as stating that '[m]ethodologists remind me of people who clean their glasses so thoroughly that they never have time to look through them' (in Hammersley 2011, p.17). Such a statement in relation to methodology could be interpreted as a suggestion to avoid armchair procrastination and actually produce research. But if we ignore methodology – if we don't polish the glasses – then at some point we stop being able to see far or wide enough. We risk taking for granted the way the discipline is organized, which raises concerns of single-sightedness and forecloses possibilities for the future of knowledge.

Our observations that media fan studies has yet to truly open up discussion about methodology is arguably mirrored in 'sister' areas of research, such as celebrity studies and film studies. For example, Turner (2010) points out the limitations of a predominantly textual and discursive approach within celebrity studies<sup>1</sup>. Stacey's (1993) has likewise noted

the paucity of the topic in film studies. Here Stacey (1993) suggests that the area of film studies has eschewed methodological discussions for a variety of reasons. These reasons include: a split between humanities and social sciences, such that social science's empiricism is assumed to be naïve and concerned with 'objectivity'; an obligatory relationship between methodology and method, wherein the dominance of psychoanalysis in film studies assumes textual reading; and a specific tension within feminist film research, so that research with an audience presumes exploitation and hierarchization between researched and researcher. Stacey (1993) cites these reasons, among others, as producing a favouring of a 'one-lens' method of textual analysis, which she argues constitutes an irrelevance and lack of awareness of the constructs of knowledge in the area of film studies. As Stacey (1993) suggests, the missing discourse of methodology in her discipline raises questions pertaining to the reasons why it is missing, despite two decades of theoretical discussion of the textually produced audience. Interestingly Stacey's paper was published in 1993 – one year after the now canon texts in fan studies itself.

If we apply Stacey's (1993) arguments to fan studies, there are important differences. Fan studies comes out of a rich tradition of methodological discussion situated at the intersections of media and cultural studies, with its concerns about the audience, the production of media texts, and the way texts, identities and industries interact. But locating fan studies within media and cultural studies itself poses particular issues for thinking of 'methodology'. In media and cultural studies there is some resistance to questions of methodology, where '[a] codification of methods or knowledges (instituting them, for example, in formal curricula or in courses on "methodology") runs against some main features of cultural studies as a tradition: its openness and theoretical versatility, its reflexive even self-conscious mood, and, especially, the importance of critique' (Johnson 1986 p.38). Media and cultural studies has characteristically been an 'outlaw', 'non' or 'anti-discipline', by its very nature willingly showing disdain for definitions and categories, emphasizing flexibility and fluidity with the aim of proceeding as a bricolage collective of methods, theories, ideas and concepts (Bennett 1998, see also Couldry 2000 for a critique of cultural studies scholars' resistance to definitions in method and approach).

We see the openness and methodological fluidity of media and cultural studies as both a strength (in not being tied indiscriminately to one method) but also being one of the potential reasons for the lack of programmatic methodological discussion in fan studies (being an area that is tricky to pin down to one definition in and of itself). We do not want to overstate our case; we are aware of a growing interest in critically and explicitly discussing methods (Bennett 2014; Booth 2013; Busse and Hellekson 2012; Freund and Fielding 2013), in emerging work by PhD students (Anderson 2012; Phillips 2013), and where this work is presented at conferences (Dilling-Hansen 2014). However, we would argue that mainstream media fan studies still needs more explicit discussion of methodologies. This is also to insist on a conceptual distinction between method and methodology, where methods refers to a set of tools and techniques for collecting and analysing research materials, and methodology reflects the set of ideas, concepts, theories and approaches that any

researcher necessarily takes with them when engaging in research. The two are of course necessarily linked: fan studies scholars do not simply choose a research design, tool or technique without it being the outcome of a distinct methodological approach. However, we would argue that a discussion of the approach is what we often don't see enough of in current published accounts.

In the interests of developing the notion of methodology in fan studies, or at least of bringing a discussion to the table, we want to address the why we believe such reflection on methodology has been overlooked by thinking about the field's emergence in the overarching body of media and cultural studies research. We would suggest that the history of fan studies ties it in some way to the methods and methodological viewpoints of ethnography, textual analysis, and psychoanalysis (as practiced in film studies). These themes are crude and interrelated, and we do not view them as mutually exclusive. However, each of these themes comes with their own conceptual and methodological baggage, and each open and close opportunities for researchers interested in producing knowledge about the 'fan' and of 'fandom' - as we explore below.

### **The Problem of Methodology**

Traditional histories of cultural studies trace the emergence of the discipline as conceived in the UK, and largely located in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University – although almost all complicate this direct history, suggesting that there is a longer tradition of cultural criticism, and/or highlighting the other spaces (e.g. continental philosophy, American literary criticism, communication studies) also influencing the contours of cultural studies (Hall 1992; White and Schwoch 2006). Hall (1980b) suggests that the beginnings of cultural studies were defined by two paradigms – structuralism and culturalism. Where structuralism claims that all experience is the outcome of a series of universal laws, whether in societies or in the unconsciousness, culturalism suggests that culture should be studied through the way people experience it, thus permitting a sense of agency even while this is within cultural constraints (see also Fiske 1987). These areas intersect and the division is flimsy at best; however, how one locates or positions their research within this 'continuum' changes the shape and character of the approach, with the latter 'culturalist' paradigm drawing more on ethnographic methods.

Ethnography is a core method in the canon of cultural studies, interested in lived experience as captured by Williams' suggestion that from 'structures' we get 'the most delicate and tangible parts of our activity...this structure of feeling...the particular living results of all the elements in a general organisation' (1961, p.48). It's from this approach that we get the rich documentation of the marginalized and subjugated, especially in accounts of youth, class, race, and gender (e.g. Hall et al 1978; McRobbie 1994; Willis 1977; Stacey 1994, see Hills 2005 for a more recent use of ethnography in fan studies). It's also the origins of more audience/reception based approaches, which have applied Hall's (1980a) concept of encoding/decoding to understand the active reading and interpretative strategies used by the audience when engaging with the media (e.g. Morley 1986; Morley

and Brudson 1999). Away from British cultural studies, Ang (1985), and to some extent Radway (1984), were developing similar accounts, where the agency of the reader/fan went beyond the meanings 'encoded' within either *Dallas* or romance novels. Fan studies has largely adopted this culturalist stance (e.g. in accounts of the 'active audience', see for example discussions in Barker, Egan, Jones and Mathijs 2008; Jenkins 1992), and so fan studies is necessarily situated in this history. Why, then, do we not see ethnography openly discussed more often in contemporary fan studies research?

One of the reasons for the lack of discussion of 'ethnography' in fan studies may derive from the critique that media and cultural studies do not practice ethnography 'properly'. For example, the 'culture' in cultural studies has produced a skeptical response in anthropology, such that, for example, '[i]n the mid-1990s, bookshops set up "cultural studies" sections in prime positions that were once devoted to New Age religion and before that to self-improvement' (Kuper 1999 p.2). The sentiment that media and cultural studies is merely faddish (shared by popular discourse on its 'Mickey mouse' status in education, see Buckingham 2009 for a rebuttal) may account both for the use of loosely 'empirical' ethnography in fans studies, and more broadly as a response to the critique of ethnography in media and cultural studies. The practice of becoming deeply immersed in the culture being studied, more evident in anthropology and sociology, is not practiced in as much depth in media and cultural studies. As Nightingale (1996) suggests, the use of fan letters or interviews does not, from an anthropological perspective, constitute ethnography and may simply act as a byword to authenticate what is otherwise 'thin description'. This deviation from traditional ethnographic practices means that the term 'ethnography' may provide the illusion of rigorous science to study popular culture, but has led to the claim that 'ethnography' has simply become 'a trendy methodological claim for some in cultural studies' (di Leonardo 2006 p.204).

Critiques of cultural studies may serve to rarify the practice of ethnography; but the historical emergence of ethnography and its interest in the social processes of populations and cultures (in the broadest sense), does sit in contrast to cultural studies' interest in the way people consume and make use of the media. Given this critique of media ethnographies, it may be that fan studies researchers have shied away from specifically naming ethnography as the approach, in studies otherwise interested in the lived experience of people's engagement with a media text. Yet there are further issues with the nature of ethnography that make it problematic for fan studies researchers to adopt it – namely that ethnography presupposes an unethical relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Ethnographic practice is typically understood as having a murky history and conceptual baggage associated with a colonial gaze that has attempted to objectify 'other' cultures and document their (lack of) civilization, especially in its past associations with sociology and anthropology (Said 1978). These disciplines have thus spent time de-colonizing themselves; however a 'trace' still remains. This trace of the ethnographic 'outsider' has further implications for the fan studies researcher. Where ethnography has

been used, fan studies research has often struggled to find a 'proper' positioning vis-à-vis the fan community. For example, Bacon-Smith's (1992) study of *Star Trek* female fan communities in *Enterprising Women* shows signs of an internal tension between the 'fan' account and the 'objective' researcher subject position. In the early days of fan studies, researchers employing ethnography may have felt the need to justify and legitimate what was a new, emerging subject matter, and so may have distanced themselves from 'coming-out' as a fan. In *Enterprising Women* (1992), the researcher persona won out, and thus the work can be understood as de-emphasizing the researcher's fan positioning and potentially colonizing the fan. Meanwhile, in fan communities themselves, 'academic' positions have often been heavily managed and policed, where fans have reacted with concern about the possibility of being studied from the 'outside': for example, fan-run mailing list Virgule (1992-2003) asked fans to declare themselves as non-academics, and prohibited the use of mailing list content for academic research.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, ethnography risks being understood as both badly done by other disciplines, and worse, as objectifying 'the fan', which is also often the very thing the researcher themselves identifies with. Finally, the lack of discussion of ethnography could simply result from an older division between humanities and social sciences. Although divisions are blurry, they still often shape the way research is understood and practiced. The historical lineage of cultural studies draws influences from literary criticism, representing a key shift from the 'canon' text of elitist critical analysis to the popular text of the mass media (Johnson 1986). In this approach, the focus is on the meanings inherent in the text.

Within literary criticism the 'preferred method is to treat the forms abstractly, sometimes quite formalistically, uncovering the mechanisms by which meaning is produced in language, narrative or other kinds of sign-system' (Johnson 1986 p.50; this can also be seen in Hall's (1980b) concept of 'structuralism'). From this approach, fan studies has claimed that if fandom is to be taken seriously, then the texts that fandom produce must be taken seriously as well. An example of such an approach can be seen in readings of fan fiction as archontic literature, where the text is read as an archive. In this method of analysis, the fan text acts as an intertext, or part of the structure of the 'original' text, but no lesser to it, and the meaning of the text is never finite, but always already located in the webs of meaning it creates (Derecho 2006).

From the perspective of fan studies, textual analysis understands power as diffused within systems of meaning, rather than owned by one group or individual at the top of the structure. This refiguring of power challenges the structure of the text's relationship with other texts, where deconstructing the hierarchy means that power may be renegotiated (e.g. by getting rid of the 'genuine' author, there is no longer one 'preferred' meaning – as was the case in more classical literary criticism). However, from another perspective, the movement towards de-centralized notions of power creates problems for activist and marginalized groups. In fan studies, the fan becomes a mere illusion of the text, in which there 'is no "actual" audience that lies beyond its production as a category, which is merely to say that audiences are only ever encountered per se as representations' (Hartley 1987



p.105). We see parallel debates taking place in feminist theory. At a time when women were finding themselves a subjectivity that was recognized as such (through access to education, reproductive rights, and equal pay/economic independence), an academic elite identified a new theoretical shift towards a de-centralized and deconstructed subject: '[o]nly a subject who historically has profited from the entitlements of subjectivity and the rights of citizenship can afford to put his 'solidity' into question' (Braidotti, 1996, p. 310)

Focusing on the text places the author/fan in the background, instead foregrounding meaning, form and structure within the text. In doing so, textual analysis risks overdetermining the meaning of the text, assuming and enacting the fan response, and so silences the actual living fan (Morley 1980; Moores 1993). The end result of textual analysis is that the fan is bracketed out of the relationship between text, consumer and producer (Moores 1993; Press and Livingstone 2006). Where ethnography risks 'othering' the fan, textual analysis risks making them merely a subject created through textual functions: textual analysis risks losing the fan altogether.

A third approach to research in fan studies, which intersects with textual analysis, and re-invokes Stacey's (1993) paper on film studies, is psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis in media and cultural studies typically analyses the audience, but this time from a structuralist approach – and so is broadly concerned with the 'universal' laws that form the unconscious. The use of psychoanalysis has been successful in fan studies, and provides an interesting set of tools for making sense of fans: for example, Hills (2005) has employed a psychoanalytically informed ethnography to understand the nature of people's commitment (or otherwise) to particular fandoms by applying the analytic of 'aleatory objects' to make sense of how changes in fandom are negotiated. While other work has usefully explored the constructs of the male gaze in, for example, Buffy and Lara Croft fan communities (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Middleton 2007).

However, more often than not, the fan is again a spectator position, not a lived experience (see for example Doane 1989, in Stacey 1994). And, in the same way that ethnographic approaches still bear markers of colonial 'others', a biological essentialism evident in Freudian concepts of the structure of psychic life appears to underlie many applications of psychoanalysis in fan studies.

Psychoanalytic essentialism is most evident in accounts of slash fan fiction, where fans re-write the characters of the text, and in doing so incorporate homosexual relationships between the male characters. This sub-genre of fan fiction has been of particular interest in fan studies, given that the authors of slash works are typically female. For example, Bacon-Smith (1992) suggests that slash reflects a history of trauma and dysfunction in the damaged psyche of the female fan. And Cicioni (1998) identifies the main function of fan fiction as a psychological one. Slash here works as a means for women to write the self anew, and provide an ideal self (in a similar way to the Lacanian formulation) as part of the fictional dyadic romantic relationship created in the re-storying. For Cicioni (1998), the limits of real-life relationships are transcended through the utopian view of the imaginary couple. Such accounts thus privilege more monogamous, romantic and

heteronormative relationships, by suggesting that the slash author's own relationships are lacking.

The figure of the fan that emerges from psychoanalytic accounts of slash is one who is writing from her pain: a damaged and tragic individual who lives through fantasy. Moreover, because of a fundamental essentialism, the fan in this account has no way of overcoming this position. Her identity is already determined through the mechanisms of psychic development, and so has no agency or means of using her fandom otherwise. While psychoanalysis has potential as an interpretative tool for understanding the formation of subjectivity, it also too often comes close to reinvesting heavily in notions of pathological femininity and the public figure of the discursively produced 'crazy' fan.

Above we have identified the major methodological approaches that we would suggest influences fan studies research, with a view to understanding why explicit discussion of research methods is underdeveloped. It may of course be that because fan studies is still a relatively new discipline, and that this newness means that the discussion of methodological approach has been left by the way-side, as the area develops and debates its key concepts. With this in mind, below we outline the methods we feel could make a difference to fan studies research, and, in doing so, turn to the second aims of our paper by exploring what kinds of knowledge we want to produce, and how these are shaped by definitions of 'the fan' and the online practice of fandom (using fan activism as our example). We identify these methods without wanting to place limits on what researchers should do, and we make no claim that these methodologies and their associated methods are 'new': we instead offer them as one of the many ways of opening up lines of thought and dialogue.

### **Desperately Seeking Methodologies**

In thinking through what kinds of knowledge we want to produce in fan studies research, we want to draw parallels between fandom and research in relation to autoethnography and fan's online engagement alongside digital methodologies. As we have documented above, media and cultural studies has always been ambivalent towards methodology. Media and cultural studies have remained critical of the realism of empirical work in a discipline that aims to show how the media create particular world-views, or is at least partly interested in the way the media (or, to use fan studies terminology, 'world-building') is *produced* (Couldry 2000; Hills 2012; Stacey 1993). However, the view that empiricism equates to realism misses the shifting conceptions of qualitative research and the impacts of the crisis of representation since the 1980s, that allow for more flexibility and 'bricolage' between social sciences and humanities, and which understand the researcher as also 'world-builders' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Kincheloe 2001).

Qualitative research has challenged notions of an Enlightenment belief in the final truth, and instead acknowledged that the study of human life is conducted by human life (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). And because the body of work around the crisis of representation was interested in how powerful world-views matter, it was also interested in

what kinds of knowledge mattered; and so it tried to understand how research, like the media, is itself constructed (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). More recently, along with a critical and politically aware use of media techniques, qualitative research has positioned itself as a direct challenge to a contemporary era of political conservatism (Denzin 2010). These shifts in understanding have moved alongside media and cultural studies, as a discipline concerned with showing how particular ways of seeing are made to count (Clough 1992).

One notion that has developed from the crisis of representation is researcher reflexivity. When we produce research, what we're really doing is the work of representation, which means researchers are responsible for the way others are represented (Ellis and Flaherty 1992; Lather 2007; Pillow 2003). The politics of representation and researcher reflexivity may be especially useful for fan studies for a number of reasons. Reflexivity highlights power, where the public representation of the fan (as somewhat crazy, overinvested, and highly gendered) places the researcher in a powerful position, in a context where research already assumes hierarchization between researcher and researched (Press and Livingstone 2006). Furthermore, the crisis of representation calls on the researcher to reflexively produce different forms of knowledge, for example through creative writing (see Richardson 2000), which may itself be part of the currency that fan research is studying (e.g. fan fiction or other forms of fan creativity). And, following on from this, self-reflexivity has the critical capacity to call into question the ways in which fan studies researchers represent 'the fan' when the *researcher* and *the fan* are often the same thing.

The usefulness of the crisis of representation for fan studies means that abstraction in theory must be 'brought back to bear upon the individual's experience of culture' (Couldry 2000 p.4) – especially when the researcher may themselves not only be a member of the academic community of fan studies, but also a fan. This means that fan studies is already doing the ontological work of the crisis of representation, in which the object of study (the fan) and the researcher merge. Fan studies therefore already has the critical capacity to implode subject/object binaries as a practice of research, which has long been a concern for feminist methodologists (Cook and Fonow 1986). Jenkins' construction of the 'aca-fan', for example, responds to this type of impasse, creating a reflexive representation of the researcher where object and subject come together. As Jenkins puts it in the introduction to his website:

[M]y...work has been written from the perspective of an Aca/Fan — that is, a hybrid creature which is part fan and part academic...The goal of my work has been to bridge the gap between these two worlds. I take it as a personal challenge to find a way to break cultural theory out of the academic bookstore ghetto and open up a larger space to talk about the media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view.<sup>3</sup>

A methodology that emerges from the aca-fan position is self-reflexive autoethnography. As Hills (2002) suggests, fan studies' autoethnography would mean to practice self-reflexivity in a way that: avoided common-sense notions through continuous self-reflexive questioning; did not use theory to disguise personal attachments; challenged academic power and/or convention; and treated the self and others identically (p.51-2). Hills (2002) argues that fan-based autoethnographies, adhering to these principles, have the potential to avoid a position of the single text and would instead respond to the fandom's intertextuality. For our own purpose, such an approach to research could overcome some of the issues identified above in terms of the othering within ethnography and the lack of audience in textual methods. Moreover, the practice of self-reflexive autoethnography is already evident in fan studies research (see for example Hills 2002 himself, but see also Couldry 2007, Hellekson and Busse 2006; Monaco 2010, and the series of online exchanges between Jenkins and other scholars on his blog in 2011).<sup>4</sup>

The practice of autoethnography might provide a critical and innovative tool that can be drawn on in fan studies research. In addition, we see opportunities to develop fan studies research into more embodied accounts that deal not only with the discursive practices of fandom (e.g. the constructs and constraints of identity), but with what it means when people actually take up these discursive practices and really live through them. This is to say, the practice of autoethnography might allow for more than simply the textually created audience, but instead would develop narrative accounts of what it means to take up these subject positions and use them to create a sense of self as a lived experience.

Such accounts would not only break down barriers between object/subject, but would also cycle between wider social constructs and subjective investments. But there are risks. For example, critiques of autoethnographic methods include, among others: being merely self-absorbed vanity work (Van Maanen 1988); re-inscribing the authority of the researcher (Hills 2002); and as a privileged practice of academic faddishness that does little to challenge or change social structures (Patai 1994). For example, Jenkins' definition above of the aca-fan as someone who reaches out to the cultural context is reductive since his aca-fan bridges academia and culture simply by privileging 'media that matters to us from a consumer's point of view'.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on 'media that matters' speaks against what we see as innovative in autoethnography by ignoring the wider structures of power that might make that media matter in the first place. Furthermore, by talking of 'consumers', Jenkins problematically frames the aca-fan within the language of economic relations.

Just because the researcher is both academic and fan, the outcome is not necessarily politically engaged research in practice (Gray 2011; Bennett 2013), and indeed 'autoethnography' risks overlooking or reproducing sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia in research contexts where the aca-fan is not critically reflecting on their own engagement. We see a possible way to avoid the traps identified above would be to draw on new methodologies that respond to the digital world. Digital ethnography is a relatively new approach, applying ethnographic methods that emphasize deep immersion in a culture or community. To enable this immersion, digital ethnography borrows a range of practices and

research tools from more traditional ethnography, including observation, participant observation, interviews with key informants, visual data, and the researcher's analytical, methodological and personal reflections through field-notes (Hine 2000). These are then applied in online spaces. In traditional ethnography distance and access have often limited the method; but in digital ethnography, communities are no longer bounded to particular places, and the method has been valuable for 'difficult to reach' populations (Jones 1999; Murthy 2008). The benefit here is that fan communities are often widely distributed networks who share a global online space. The online configuration of fans has resonance today; the mainstreaming of fandom means that there is an increasing amount of people who are more 'mobile' across fandoms, and only loosely classifiable as a 'typical' subculture. The use of digital technologies has become a mundane aspect of everyday interaction (Hine 2000), making the internet a significant part of how fans communicate.

Our argument then is that autoethnography may end up focusing too much on the individual feelings, and risk oversight of the larger cultural structures that are interacting with those feelings: in short, it can be hard to criticise your own tribe - or indeed yourself. Digital ethnography provides an opportunity to contextualise individual reflections as part of a broader structural and politicised analysis of the way fandom is networked and communicated through online practices. It puts into action the organisation and politics of community, alongside individual and lived experience.

We have argued that the aca-fan and self-reflexive autoethnography appear to coalesce; in the same way, internet technologies have been central to the way fan communities work and organize themselves today, and so the use of digital ethnography should be conducive to fan studies research. But again we find few examples of published fan research that uses both methods concurrently. One exception is Bury's (2005) *Cyberspace of Their Own*. In Bury's (2005) research, she produces a digital ethnography of two fan communities: *Due South* and the *X-Files*. Following the mailing lists of these communities she explores the social organization and experience of online female fandom. There was a core political and personal investment in feminist methodology, allowing the work to speak to politics through methodological notions of 'voice', reflexivity, and positionality (as a 'newbie' *X-Files* fan, marking her as an 'outsider'). Elsewhere, she also participates in the debate over the ontology of the aca-fan and its 'political' and affective consequences: in a 2011 interview on Jenkins' website<sup>6</sup>, she suggests that 'aca-fan' should not be equated with progressive politics without questioning the wider social structures that take place in the context of neoliberal politics, and that the term itself should be problematized through concepts of difference (e.g. it might be easier to claim aca-fan status for men, when it is female fans who are often deemed 'hysterical').

Busse and Hellekson (2012) and Freund and Fielding (2013) similarly address larger 'political' questions by discussing the ethical implications of digital ethnography. Busse and Hellekson (2012) reflect on the disciplinary positioning of the researcher, focusing on the ethical implications of online fan studies. Where traditional humanities approaches of literary criticism would not question whether the text's author should be contacted to ask

permission, digital ethnography presupposes some kind of informed consent from the community and from gatekeepers. Freund and Fielding (2013) also address the ethics of online research, when the aca-fan may enter spaces of contestation, suspicion and fan community protection. In doing so, their work raises questions about research subjectivity and researcher disclosure: if, how and when the researcher reveal themselves as ‘fan’ and/or ‘academic’, and how such considerations change the nature of the knowledge they can hope to produce.

Our argument so far has followed on from Lopez’s (2012) research into fan activism. In this work she adopts some of the principles of the methodology discussed above, and employs a loose digital ethnographic approach, with an awareness of her positioning as a researcher vis-a-vis *The Last Airbender* fan activism. We see possibilities for developing our own methodological reflections above alongside the growing academic attention to fan activism (as exemplified by the 2012 special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*). Such work has the potential to enact the political ethos of auto- and digital ethnography, and to recognise the limitations of current activist communities – especially as activism and movements for change more generally have increasingly moved online, and where media fan and fandom are progressively mainstreamed. The work discussed above that moves us into this space thus allows us to introduce digital ethnography as a politically engaged methodology within fan activism research; and opportunities exist to define digital ethnography more thoroughly within the realms of ontologies of the aca-fan and the possibilities this proposes for an exploration of the fan subjectivity. Below we finish this paper by concluding what bringing together these areas could mean for fan studies research.

### **It’s research, but not as we know it...**

In this paper, we have argued that few published accounts of fan studies research explicitly discusses methodological considerations, despite a long history of work that has seen much methodological discussion in media and cultural studies more broadly, and the interesting parallels and intersections between world-building fan practices, aca-fans, online fan communities, and qualitative research approaches. This paper has thus had two aims. First, we have asked whether it’s time to review the field, given the complex and interesting history of methodological discussion in media and cultural studies, and the incongruity when we search for published material about methodology in media fan studies. We have noted three prevalent approaches that characterize the use of methods: ethnography, textual analysis and psychoanalysis. Each has made important contributions, yet each has shortcomings when applied to fan studies itself.

Our second aim was to ask what kinds of knowledge fan studies wants to create. In addressing the gap, and following Lopez (2012), we have identified areas where increased methodological awareness can make a contribution, by drawing on methodological discussion in critical and creative qualitative research agendas. Our paper is not simply a critique of fan studies research. We do not intent to berate an area of work that has to fight

against a neo-conservative context that deems research on fans both trivial and in opposition to the market value of media and cultural artefacts. We want to see a continuation of fan studies research where the fan consumer-producer relationship appears something other to capitalistic tendencies, and where dominant approaches aim to variously suppress, manage or co-opt the fan. Neither do we think that our contribution is the only option. We welcome other approaches and perspectives that speak alongside the largely ethnographic methods proposed here, and some of the points we are making are starting to be developed elsewhere (e.g. Booth 2013; Bennett 2014; Busse and Hellekson 2012; Hills 2002). We are, however, advocating for a larger methodological awareness, where an explicit upfront discussion of methodological assumptions and choices can be thoroughly incorporated when discussing research.

While ethnographic practices have themselves become more researcher-reflexive, the internet has provided new ways of engaging with ethnography that take account of the way fan communities are themselves organized. The methodologies discuss above could, however, be self-limiting, turning in on themselves, and may risk silencing the contributions that fan studies research could be making to broader discussions of methodology. A more political reflexive gaze in fan studies research could be addressed by exploring the contours of fan activism. Paying attention to fan activism provides opportunities to explore and problematize contemporary political engagement that takes place online. An increasingly global media celebrate instances of online activism and its claims to transparency; exploring fan activism offers the possibility of interrogating the uses and abuses of online political activity, and could develop more critical and reflexive accounts that show how politics can work in this new digital age (Castells 2012). Through a self-reflexive and methodologically aware digital ethnography, fan studies would be able to map the complex material and immaterial locations in space and time embodied by both academic and research communities, and where those fold over into people's everyday media/fan engagement. Fan research has often adopted ethnographical tools; we argue that by adding an explicit methodological reflection on its digital (auto)ethnographical practices, fan research could make a deeper and more incisive critical interjection into current political engagement.

In the digital ethnography of *The Last Airbender*, for example, Lopez was able to define how the appeal to anti-racism in online fan activism was not always progressive. Lopez's (2012) discussion of racebending.com shows how the site is increasingly performing a politicized debate over racial representations in the media; however, Lopez (2012) also identifies instances of more problematic negotiations where fans ignore the original text's orientalist constructions of the 'East'. Fan activism needs critical interrogation, as race, gender, class, sexuality, and other structures of oppression become more evident in academic discussion of digital culture (Nakamura 2008). Fan communities can resemble political constituencies in their structure, activities and emotions (van Zoonen 2004), but the potential for politicised fan activism needs to be realised in a specific situated context. For example, the increasing attention to fannish charitable enterprises such as the Harry Potter Alliance, which tackles a range of 'social problems' with the motto 'the weapon we have is

love', suggesting an individualised, depoliticised neoliberal approach to structural injustice (Hinck 2012; Jenkins 2012; Willis 2010). For example, campaigns such as those on immigration declare that Superman (an American icon) was an immigrant too, and so foreground a problematic militaristic discourse directed towards immigration policy in the US, closely implicating it with neo-colonialism, hegemonic masculinity and 'all-American values'.

What we are proposing is that digital ethnography and reflexive autoethnography is already being done. The aca-fan often works through online forms of communication with other fans. But this use of digital ethnography is not being made explicit as part of the doing of digital ethnography. We believe that more discussion on methodology in the field of fan studies can give rise to exciting and radical possibilities to do something different. For example, teasing open the methodological relationships between the aca-fan subject position, autoethnography, and digital ethnography would provide greater depth to the ontology of the aca-fan; but it would also offer different approaches for doing qualitative research, where, for example, calls exist for reflexive approaches to engaging with digital ethnography warn against an assumed progressivity (Hine 2000; Illingworth 2006). What we are suggesting is an approach that critically incorporates a conversation around the methodological choices behind different approaches in field research conducted in fan studies. These sites of research, we believe, have the potential to produce forward momentum and a critical imperative to continue fan studies' growing relevance to the political and radical discipline of media and cultural studies; to boldly go where fan studies has never gone before.

### **Bibliographical notes:**

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Turner's point seems to gain momentum: the 2014 Celebrity Studies conference included ten papers discussing methodology.

<sup>2</sup> [http://fanlore.org/wiki/Virgule\\_Mailing\\_List](http://fanlore.org/wiki/Virgule_Mailing_List).

<sup>3</sup> <http://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.henryjenkins.org>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml>.

<sup>6</sup> Part one: [http://henryjenkins.org/2011/09/aca fandom\\_and\\_beyond\\_rhianon.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2011/09/aca fandom_and_beyond_rhianon.html) Part two: [http://henryjenkins.org/2011/09/aca fandom\\_and\\_beyond\\_rhianon.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2011/09/aca fandom_and_beyond_rhianon.html).