

## **Shared trajectories and ‘figures of the fan audience’ in comics studies and fan studies: Arrested development ... or transmedial developments?**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay argues that comics studies and fan studies can be seen to be connected via their relationship to ‘figures of the audience’ (Barker 2018), chiefly figures of fandom. But where fan studies has embraced the hybrid position of the ‘aca-fan,’ comics studies has recently defined this as an outright problem, especially via the work of Marc Singer and others (Singer 2018; Woo 2020). Comics studies has thus positioned aca-fandom as a threat to the area’s professionalisation, whilst fan studies has tended to view it as a marker of positive difference. Whilst exploring the diversity of aca-fandom, and the emergence of tripled hybridities such as aca-fan-writers and activist-aca-fans, I argue that comics studies’ opposition to aca-fandom risks othering such allegedly ‘improper’ scholarship as on the side of neoliberal consumerist excess, whilst nevertheless aligning ‘proper’ comics studies’ academia with norms of neoliberalized knowledge. The figure of the fan has not only been perceived as a threat to comics studies, however, and key work on the cultural (de)legitimation of comics has analysed how the stereotype of ‘immature’ comics fandom has been linked to comics’ wider cultural status (Pizzino 2016). I conclude by considering alternative ways in which comics studies and fan studies may be brought into more productive dialogue, not just through the mainstreaming of comic-cons that both have begun to analyse (Woo et al. 2020), but also via the ‘transmediatization’ (Fast and Jansson 2019) now confronted by media and comics fandoms alike.

**Keywords:** comics studies, fan studies, aca-fan, fandom, transmediatization

## Introduction

It might be assumed that comics studies and fan studies represent very different academic enterprises – one centres on a medium, the other on a type of audience. However, I want to consider their shared debates, especially those surrounding aca-fandom and the figure of the fan. Both are youthful areas of study; comics studies was bolstered by ‘the launch in 2014 of the Comics Studies Society, the United States’ first professional association for comics researchers’ (Beaty and Hatfield 2020, 2), whilst the Fan Studies Network was formed in the UK in 2012 (Bennett and Phillips 2013, 52). Each has its own journals and yet despite these academic legitimations, neither could be described as securely consecrated. In *Of Comics and Men*, Jean-Paul Gabilliet argues that comics have attained only an ‘imperfect academic legitimation’ (2010, 304), and the following statement would remain equally true if we substituted ‘fan studies’ for ‘comics studies’: ‘there are no signs on the horizon that departments of Comics Studies are soon to be created, and tenure-track jobs [...] are [...] scarce’ (Beaty 2011, 107).

I will argue that comics studies’ and fan studies’ scholars share a relationship with figurations of fandom, and this has led to a series of debates surrounding academics as (fan) audiences. Fandom is not merely an object of study in multi-disciplinary fan studies (Turk 2018, 540); it has been implicated within ‘hybrid’ aca-fan identities (Jenkins 2006a, 4) in multi-disciplinary comics studies (Steirer 2011, 278; Hatfield 2010, 1–2) and fan studies. Aca-fandom has been significant in comics studies and fan studies because each formed through a cultural revaluation of its objects of analysis driven, in part, by fan partisanship (Lopes 2009; Jenkins 1992). Axiological struggles have carried over from objects of study to the aca-fannish *subjects* of comics studies and fan studies alike. And whilst the aca-fan may seem to belong to foundational fan studies’ arguments from the nineties (Duffett 2013, 275), curiously the figure has recently emerged as a focus for impassioned debate in comics studies (Singer 2018; Woo 2020). I will consider how the figure of the fan continues to be evoked (in the guise of the ‘aca-fan’) as an improper audience, distorting supposedly ‘proper’ scholarship. Drawing on Christopher Pizzino’s (2016) *Arresting Development*, alongside Bourdieusian studies of comics’ cultural value (Lopes 2009; Gabilliet 2010), I will address how the aca-fan and imagined fandom (as ‘figures of the audience’ within academia; Barker 2018, 8) stand accused of arresting comics studies’ development as well as posing as-yet-unresolved difficulties for fan studies.

In the final part of my discussion, I will address another media-cultural development which comics studies and fan studies have begun to respond to. This concerns not just ‘fan engagement’ (Woo 2020, 118), but the question of fan engagement *with what?* If comics studies has assumed a degree of medium-specificity, then so too has fan studies, focusing on types of ‘media fandom.’ However, work in audience studies has challenged understandings of medium-specificity by analysing transmedia engagement (Evans 2020), and how dedicated audiences might ‘see past’ different media in order to engage with the ‘universe’ presented in a transmedia franchise (Barker 2012, 191). At the same time, social theory has argued for the generalised importance of ‘transmediatization’ (Fast and Jansson

2019, 33), implying that future comics studies and fan studies may be called upon to coalesce via analyses of 'transmedia experience' (Hills 2018; Kohnen 2020, 13). If 'arrested development' has been a threat for comics and fan studies as 'undisciplined' (Ford 2014) and 'dynamic, unruly' projects (Beaty and Hatfield 2020, 1), then perhaps transmedial developments offer opportunities for cross-pollination and collaboration. Indeed, as comics scholars have argued in the *Journal of Fandom Studies*: 'Comic cons and "con culture" more generally ought to be a point of convergence between comics studies and fan studies,' despite this not having materialised thus far (Woo et al 2020, 11). By highlighting how comics studies and fan studies have wrestled with shared 'figures of the [fan] audience' within academia, I want, ultimately, to argue for their closer affiliation, rather than viewing fandom as a problem that any 'properly' enacted comics studies is duty bound to symbolically police/eject. The first step in this argument involves returning to the aca-fan.

### **Arrested Development: Fandom as an Obstacle to Legitimation, or 'Jenkins Does Not Speak For Me'**

Attempting to define any point of origin can be fraught, but Gregory Steirer (2011, 265) argues for the 'early 2000s' in relation to comics studies' emergence. However, his 'start-date' also refers to a 1999 journal launch, and precursors slightly 'before the current century,' suggesting that comics studies may have had a late-nineties genesis (Steirer 2011, 265). Analysing related ground for fan studies, Lucy Bennett and Tom Phillips (2013, 52) refer to 'the "1992 moment" [...], when a number of significant works in the field were published' (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992). Using this as a secure date is just as awkward as Steirer's oscillation around the turn of the millennium, though: none of the cited publications identified themselves as ushering in 'fan studies.' Their positioning is an academic 'retcon,' a retroactive narration after the fact. Nonetheless, comics studies and fan studies occupy similar timelines, emerging in the early/late nineties and consolidating a decade or so later.

One obvious difference between the two concerns their cultural/symbolic proximities to fandom as a type of audience. Fan studies has typically involved professional, institutionally-validated academics studying fans of the same type as themselves. In *Fan Cultures* I described these as 'scholar-fans,' distinguishing them from 'fan-scholars,' or fans writing predominantly for a fan readership while using academic terms. Whilst the scholar-fan 'allows academic authority to be reconstructed and preserved in the face of a challenge from fan knowledge,' the fan-scholar 'exacerbates this challenge, suggesting that academic language cannot be kept safely "in" the academy' (Hills 2002, 21). Since I wrote this, the sense of any definitive 'inside' and 'outside' to academia has become less clear (if it ever was). Liminal cultural spaces between professional academia and fandom have become far more visible, e.g. through 'academic Twitter' and neoliberal emphases on knowledge transfer, impact and engagement. Academics such as Henry Jenkins have also reached beyond the traditional academy by podcasting and blogging, with Jenkins' blog helping to

disseminate his terminology for the hybridised scholar-fan: the ‘aca-fan’ (Jenkins 2020a).

Given its unavoidable centrality, fan studies has expended considerable energy discussing the ‘aca-fan’ role. As Jenkins has observed:

I have been ‘credited’ [...] with coining the term, ‘Acafan.’ Unfortunately, I don’t remember when or how this occurred. Like many rich concepts, the term took shape over time, refined through conversations with students, colleagues, and fans [...]. ‘Acafan,’ however, does not appear in *Textual Poachers* which starts with my personal declaration as someone who is both a fan and an academic (Jenkins 2011).

The term itself thus enters fan studies’ lexicon as an after-effect which is, again, retroactively read back into the ‘1992 moment.’ Jenkins goes on to discuss the need for such terminology in relation to earlier work in media/cultural studies, which he argues had studied fandom without being identifiable as ‘fan studies.’ This opposed scholarship had adopted a very different position:

I do not remember when [...] we first used the term, ‘acafan,’ but I do recall why we felt such a word was necessary. A [...] body of pre-existing scholarship about fandom pathologized [...] [fan] enthusiasms [...]. Often, fans were depicted as inarticulate, incapable of explaining their motives or actions. This [...] was typically coupled by the scholar’s refusal to engage with the community [...]. Part of what allowed this pathologization of fandom was that the researchers were not implicated in their own analysis and were not accountable to a fan community. [...] [Such] researchers treated fans [...] as bugs under a microscope (Jenkins 2011).

Part of fan studies’ foundational self-narrative concerns its *claimed positive difference* from conventional, detached, supposedly critical (but contextually uninformed) scholarship. And regardless of worries over the term ‘aca-fandom’ (Stein 2011), fan studies scholars’ relationships to their own fan practices have remained a badge of difference through to the present day. Professing aca-fandom has become a standardised ‘discursive mantra’ in fan studies (Hills 2002, 67), masking differences between disciplinary ‘aca’ identities and different pathways taken through fandom, whilst proclaiming a desired combination of academic theory and fan passion/knowledge. It has even been suggested that fan studies’ has done away with the need to profess such hybridised identity (Phillips 2010).

Aca-fan debates in fan studies have not gone away, though: Louisa Ellen Stein (in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020) has discussed ‘felt scholarship’ as a fan studies’ methodology. For Stein, this is about articulating the (personally and affectively) fannish with academic discourses. But she continues to perceive a number of risks with ‘felt scholarship,’ noting that Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* reserves its more personalised discussion

for an introduction, before letting ‘that serve as the remembered (or forgotten) frame for the case studies chapters that follow, which on their own do read as more traditional academic analyses’ (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 16). Stein writes in defence of this strategy, where aca-fan identity is stressed only at specific moments:

I don’t think I really would advocate for [...] scholarship where we are present in all elements of ourselves in relation to our work at all times. Rather I would advocate for a strategic personal scholarship where we offer models for the value of personal insight and perspective in key moments – a register we can shift to that in turn can inflect our field’s conversation overall. This shouldn’t be a checklist, [...] but rather an opening within the field to respect and acknowledge the role of lived and felt experience and investment in our scholar-fan and fan-scholar work (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 17).

Stein’s take on aca-fandom remains highly alert to its problems, concluding that ‘if we engage with felt scholarship uncritically and let it limit what we study, whom we include in the conversation, or what we consider fan studies (or even whom we consider a fan), we’ll be in deep trouble’ (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 44).

Even its champions in fan studies tend to view aca-fandom as risky (Roach 2014, 37). I have argued not simply for an aca-fan perspective, but rather for a relation of ‘proper distance’ between one’s fan and academic ‘selves’ (Hills 2012). This means self-reflexively addressing exactly ‘how each half – the aca and the fan – is commenting on the other’ (Jonathan Gray in Stein 2011); analysing how they can be aligned at certain moments, or in tension, or shifting across dominant/subordinate roles. ‘Proper distance’ means allowing fan knowledge to enrich academic theories and judgements, yet being careful not to subordinate academia to fandom in a way that weakens produced scholarship. However, it also means trying not to subordinate fandom to academia; if aspects of fan experience are lost in translation, then this fannish ‘excess’ should be taken up in academic self-critique.

As Stein has pointed out, if we collapse our fan identities too readily into scholarly production of knowledge then this risks ‘uncritically focusing on the limits of our own experiences, communities, pleasures, and displeasures, and assuming that those experiences represent fandom at large,’ substituting subjective positioning for a spuriously ‘objective’ fandom (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 38). We need to remain acutely aware of just what *type* of fandom and fan activity is being mobilised and refracted by an aca-fan in their scholarship, for as Joseph Brennan has relatedly argued, any aca-fandom that focuses primarily on the canon of official media texts threatens to subordinate or render invisible fannish productivity such as fanfic creation or other fan works (2014, 225–26). However, the opposite surely also remains true, i.e. an ‘emphasis on the individual tastes of researchers perhaps explains why aca-fandom has tended to focus on fanfiction,

and [relatively] less on non-written textual forms and fannish practices such as fanart [...], vidding [...], cosplay [...] and manips' (Brennan 2014, 226).

And if aca-fandom is maintained as a fan studies' badge of belonging, then there's the additional 'risk of creating a field in which only certain felt scholarships [or aca-fandoms] are welcome, with others dismissed or not recognized or simply not invited to be part of the conversation;' this disciplining of fan studies leads to 'the risk of graduate students and junior scholars feeling the pressure to self-disclose in order to be part of the field, when their specific position, department, or publication needs do not value (or indeed devalue) felt scholarship' (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 38).

Fan studies has repeatedly picked over aca-fandom, rather than simply treating it as a 'finished' stance that offers a 'special type of fandom or academia' (Gray in Stein 2011). Fan studies' scholars have remained alert to the possibility that aca-fandom could be devalued in other contexts, and so may need to be justified for particular academic audiences, and to the fact that an aca-fan position doesn't translate into one singular stance. As a result, fan studies needs to go on

working to include [...] multiple felt scholarships, perspectives, and histories, and even multiple definitions of what counts as fandom, while continually working to create and recreate multiplicity. [...] [T]hat multiplicity needs to include felt and more traditional scholarship together. We're not there now, and it's going to be hard, ongoing work for the field to be truly as robust and diverse as it should be (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 45).

Aca-fandom is viewed here as representing one option for fan studies rather than its foundational difference; 'more traditional scholarship' is expected to co-exist with aca-fan work thanks to multiple (and presumably relativist) fan studies' approaches. Whether arguing for 'proper distance' (Hills 2012) or 'strategic personal scholarship' (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 17), aca-fandom remains a source of scholarly distinction *and* danger, rather than a fully settled, resolved way of working.

Aca-fandom has remained unsettled in another way, however: as Jonathan Gray observes, the term suggests 'that one only needs to be those two things, an academic and a fan. But I'm more interested in what *else* an acafan is' (Gray in Stein 2011). Combining skills in humanities' textual analysis, or social science, or information science, with fan knowledge could result in very different epistemological issues, for example, particularly when fan practices are more or less distant from various disciplinary discourses. Aca-fans are always types of academics (and types of fans; Hills 2017a). And as Catherine Roach (2014, 39) has argued, the hybridity of the aca-fan can be complicated by a 'triple hybrid term,' such as the popular romance '*aca-fan-writer*.' Roach herself sought to inhabit this 'multiplicity of identity' by occupying 'the position of the academic outsider, studying the genre; the fan consumer, reading it; and the inside practitioner, writing it. I thus set out to write a manuscript, following all norms for mainstream historical romance fiction' (2014, 39).

While remaining an unresolved, frictional combination of identities, the aca-fan has therefore multiplied not just epistemologically and relativistically (among varieties of ‘felt scholarship’ and alongside ‘more traditional’ work) but also through a number of triple hybridities. Where Roach (2014, 37) compounded aca-fan ‘tension’ with the performed identity of a ‘wannabe’ professional fiction writer (2014, 34), other scholars have pondered the ‘triple hybrid term’ of activist-aca-fandom (Turner 2019a and 2019b) or ‘African American acafandom’ (Wanzo 2015). Georgina Turner and Rebecca Wanzo raise vital issues of how fan identity can intersect with sexuality, age, and race. Each resists any sense of ‘a “generic” or “normalized” fan’ (Gatson and Reid in Martin 2019, 2) – whether this is structurally youthful/white fandom – disarticulated from older LGBTQ, or BAME representations and fans’ ‘civic’ desire for such representations (Martin 2019, 5).

Turner (2019a) analyses the fan community among viewers who felt they were represented by a relationship depicted between two older female characters, Bernie Wolfe and Serena Campbell in the BBC drama *Holby City* (1999–present). Positioning herself within her ‘object’ of study, Turner aligns herself with aca-fan debates: ‘I am not peering through a microscope looking at these [...] creatures; I am one of them’ (Turner 2019a, 1000). But when this ‘older women-loving women’ storyline, termed ‘Berena’ by fans (Turner 2019a, 997–98), was terminated by the characters’ break-up and Bernie’s off-screen death – after producers had assured fans that the narrative would be treated with respect – Turner became a campaigner for better LGBTQ representation (2019b). Combining fan studies’ scholarship with activist commitments thus complicated Turner’s aca-fan hybridity, calling into question the concept of ‘detached’ academic analysis through both fan and campaigning identities.

Rebecca Wanzo’s intervention with regard to African American aca-fandom also destabilises settled figures of the fan (in fan studies) by contrasting ‘the most high-profile aca-fan community’ in *Buffy Studies* (2015, 1.1) with an additional

group of scholars who often could be categorized as acafans but who do not claim the name [...] many black scholars of popular culture. A number of scholars who study black popular culture have [...] been acafans, with an intimate knowledge of the black community that has often been essential in fields where black histories have not been addressed (2015, 1.2).

By extending the nomination of aca-fandom, Wanzo challenges fan studies to perceive how its genealogy has been dominated by structural whiteness (Pande 2018), and how aca-fandom’s hybridity has not typically been extended to black scholars. Such work reconfigures the ‘imagined subjectivity’ of the fan (Hills 2002, 3), insisting on the intersectional identities of fandom and aca-fandom.

By contrast, critics of aca-fandom writing about fan studies or within comics studies tend to rely on highly generic figures of the fan audience. By referring to figures of fandom, I’m drawing on Martin Barker’s analysis of how audiences are frequently imagined and

hence spoken for or about in disciplining discourses lacking empirical audience studies' evidence. Instead, such 'master' discourses speculatively generalise about audiences (Barker 2018, 8). A good example of this process is Ian Bogost's rejection of aca-fandom. Here, Bogost mobilises a stereotypical figure of the fan to make his case:

Embracing aca-fandom is a bad idea [...] because it's too great a temptation. Those of us who make an enviable living being champions of media, particularly popular media, must also remain dissatisfied with them. We ought to challenge not only ourselves, our colleagues, and our students – but also the public and the creators of our chosen media. We ought not to be satisfied (Bogost 2010).

For Bogost, 'the media scholar ought to resist aca-fandom,' given that scholarly identity is counter-essentialised as one of critique/scepticism: 'There are plenty of fans [...] out there. The world doesn't really need any more of them. What it does need is skeptics, and the scholarly role is fundamentally one of skepticism' (Bogost 2010). In case there is any doubt about the root cause of Bogost's objection, he further emphasises that fan studies' embrace of aca-fandom, via Henry Jenkins' work, is his critical target: 'the problem lies in the notion of the "aca-fan," a concept Henry Jenkins popularized' (Bogost 2010).

This takes us back to a rigid binary of fan and academic – something which has been repeatedly critiqued in fan studies (Phillips 2010; Gray in Stein 2011). The difficulty seems to be that aca-fandom is supposedly too fannish by definition; it allegedly loses sight of scholarly critique and becomes all about gushing celebration. The one-dimensional fan is figured here through the 'imagined subjectivity' highlighted in *Fan Cultures* (Hills 2002, 3) – this figure of the fan taints academia, reducing it, even rendering it indistinguishable from outright fandom. 'Proper' scholarship – which can be motivated by passion (Bogost 2010) – is nevertheless surrendered when it loses essentialised scepticism. Bogost is in danger of replaying the ideology of enjoyment identified in Alfie Bown's *Enjoying It*, where pleasures are split off into 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate,' or 'productive' (such as reading critical theory) and 'unproductive,' such as time-filling or supposedly mindless consumption (Bown 2015, 1–2). Bown sets out to challenge any such binary of enjoyment, but his work goes an important step further by addressing how popular culture and its pleasures have been rationalised and appropriated via the 'university discourse' of media studies, game studies and, presumably, fan studies (2015, 39–40). Indeed, following Bown's work opens up the possibility of a meta-analysis of both aca-fandom and fan studies as facets of a broader 'Enjoyment Studies' aimed less at opposing aca-fandom than potentially exploring its cultural operations in relation to mastering discourses of enjoyment's containment and (ideological) legitimation (2015, 40–41). Given recent scepticism in relation to the very term 'fan studies' – resulting from discussions of its structural whiteness to date (Busse and Hellekson 2020, para 1.7) – 'enjoyment studies' may even offer one significant re-orientation and critique of such scholarship.



Given such current contentions, Bogost's professed opposition to aca-fandom may seem, at this point in aca-fan debates, somewhat predictable. After all, fan studies knows that its double or triple hybridity can still be devalued in some scholarly/institutional/disciplinary contexts (Stein in Largent, Popova and Vist 2020, para 38). And the lack of critique posited through Bogost's figure of the fan (without any empirical study of fans) can, of course, be countered via the detailed study of fandoms' criticisms of franchises, representations, showrunners etc. However, I am interested in the tenacity of negative figures of fandom: what cultural work do they do for areas of study such as comics studies? And how can comics studies' rejections of aca-fandom be read back into fan studies to help theorise struggles over academic legitimation? We might expect comics studies to share affiliations with fan studies, alongside a number of scholars moving between the two (e.g. Henry Jenkins, Benjamin Woo and others), yet the figure of the fan – perhaps surprisingly – remains contentious.

Nowhere has this been more visible than in Marc Singer's (2018) *Breaking the Frames*. Singer takes issue with Henry Jenkins' (2012) introduction to *Critical Approaches to Comics*, arguing that

his introduction continues to privilege fan modes of reading (leisurely, random, secretive) over academic ones (professional, orderly, public). Presuming to speak for the collection's editors and contributors— and perhaps all comics scholars? – Jenkins declares, 'We want a homeland where comics geeks of all disciplines can come together – perhaps a return to the treehouse where we used to talk about the latest comics with our buddies, or perhaps something which is one part local comics shop and one part university bookstore' ([Jenkins 2012, 2]; Singer 2018, 5).

Reading this as a form of cultural populism which values fan expertise rather than academic knowledge, Singer is unhappy at the 'presumption that comics scholars should be first and foremost comics fans' (2018, 6). He asserts that:

*Henry Jenkins does not speak for me. I hope he doesn't speak for the majority of comics scholars [...]. I have no interest in returning to some prelapsarian or prepubescent treehouse, and I'm not looking to establish a geek homeland. I'm looking for a professional academic discipline, one that is open to scholars from other disciplines, and comics fans too, but also those who have never read a comic before. I hope comics studies will welcome any methodology or theoretical framework, provided that scholars are willing to put in the work of familiarizing themselves with the field and its subjects. I also hope those scholars will maintain the highest professional standards of their chosen methodologies [...]. The practices of academic scholarship [...] help to ensure that our research is informed by the most relevant theories, supported by the*

best available evidence, engaged in dialogues with other scholars, and able to withstand intellectual scrutiny. [...] [T]hese standards are not always sustained, but without them comics studies will not be an academic discipline at all. We'll just be a bigger treehouse (Singer 2018, 6, *my italics*).

Singer contrasts childish, amateur fandom with a 'professional academic discipline' which maintains 'the highest professional standards' regardless of methodology or discipline. Comics studies has to break with, and oppose itself to, comics fandom, or it risks replaying fan identities, and so failing to attain 'proper' academic status. Again, there is a binary of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' enjoyment set out here which Bown's posited 'enjoyment studies' would seek to problematise as ideological, countering that 'productive' enjoyment in the form of (properly professional) theorisation can reinforce capitalist structures of consumption and normative labour just as powerfully as supposedly immersive media pleasures (2015, 12).

And given Bown's interest in reconnecting the 'enjoyment' of 'university discourse' with hegemonic forces of consumerism, it's striking that Singer's distaste for the figure of the fan – positioned as a threat to comics' studies legitimation as an 'academic discipline' – is represented as part of his opposition to higher education's marketisation and neoliberal ideology. Singer argues that cultural populism (with which he aligns Jenkins and aca-fandom) bleeds into 'market populism' (2018, 9–10), making the figure of the fan not just a challenge to 'proper' disciplinary scholarship but also an emblem of neoliberal 'consumer sovereignty.' These issues appear to collide when

scholars who have sought to build a comics studies that conforms to traditional notions of literary prestige [...] transform into the most effusive fans when the time comes to discuss the comics they deem worthy of inclusion. [...] [This] style of scholarship [...] assumes comics, because they are a popular form, don't warrant the rigors of sustained critical attention (Singer 2018, 11).

Fandom is hence said to be an obstacle to comics studies' academic legitimation; like Ian Bogost's (2010) invocation of the figure of the fan, we are returned to fandom as the non-critical, the non-rigorous, and the emotionally 'effusive.' But this figure of the fan is also aligned with neoliberalism, or what Norman Fairclough has identified as 'the marketization of discursive practices in contemporary [...] universities' (1995, 140).

Strangely, though, Singer's opposition to aca-fandom through his figure of the 'effusive' fan starts to self-deconstruct. This is so because neoliberal forces are present both in Singer's critique of 'improper' fandom *and* his celebration of 'professional' comics studies as a supposedly 'proper' academic discipline. By exnominating or expelling (aca-)fandom, comics studies allegedly becomes able to justify its 'place in the academy and the culture at large' (Singer 2018, 245) in the face of attacks on the humanities. Yet it does so by taking on

the role of a discipline invested in ‘the hard work of scholarship’ and its ‘purposes of verification as scholars propose and test competing truth claims,’ rather than carrying out self-indulgent ‘affective reading’ (Singer 2018, 246–47; see also Woo 2019, 9 & 15). And as Wendy Brown has indicated in her article ‘Neoliberalized Knowledge,’ appealing to ‘professionalization’ has been a common response to neoliberal incursions against the university as a public institution:

The wager, I think, has been that professionalization will save the humanities from budgetary chopping blocks. Protected by our journals, societies, ladders of recognition, protocols of research, [...] we imagine a security that would not be available if we bucked these conventions (Brown 2011, 126).

Neoliberalism cannot be securely positioned on the side of aca-fandom in Singer’s account, and returns as a framing for comics studies as a ‘proper’ discipline, undistracted by the fannish ‘abandoning [...] [of] standards and practices of academic scholarship’ (2018, 11). At the same time, as Benjamin Woo has pointed out, existent comics studies is

the work of fan scholars [...]. Indeed, many works of comics scholarship incorporate a confessional moment where the author outlines his or her fannish bona fides. [...] If both lay and professional comics scholars tend to emerge from the culture of comic book fans, then one might well ask how this background impinges upon their scholarship (2020, 118–19; see also Kashtan 2018b, 21).

To seek to attach neoliberal ‘market populism’ to the figure of the fan – and therefore the aca-fan – whilst exnominating the underpinning role of fannish enthusiasm in comics studies’ practices, even when it is seemingly neoliberalism that renders a greater push for ‘professionalization’ necessary (see Singer 2018, 248–49), results tacitly in a form of *competitive neoliberal aca-fandom*. Singer cannot definitively break with fannish identity, despite the fan/academic binary his account depends on, just as he cannot secure the impacts of neoliberalism on one side of the fan/academic ledger. The result is a suppressed version of aca-fandom which presumes to justify itself in relation to neoliberal pressures of funding/cultural recognition, therefore adopting a superior competitive position vis-à-vis established aca-fandom – ‘Henry Jenkins does not speak for me’ (Singer 2018, 6) – and the stereotyped figure of the uncritical, non-rigorous fan. By claiming to bracket off comic book fandom while nonetheless typically emerging ‘from the culture of comic book fans’ (Woo 2020, 119), competitive neoliberal aca-fandom complies with forces of neoliberalism, trying to satisfy the ‘instrumentalist imperative that drives the modern university’ (Singer 2018, 247–48). Singer’s othering of neoliberalism therefore remains unconvincing.

Although his work is less strident than Singer’s, Benjamin Woo sets out related arguments ‘that comics scholars ought to be [...] less beholden to [...] the culture of comic

book fans' (2020, 119) and that a 'more thoroughgoing reevaluation of our assumptions [...] as fans [...] is required' (2020, 120). Indeed, Woo makes some of the same arguments concerning aca-fandom's risks, and distortions of comics studies' scholarship, that fan studies has been reflexively aware of for some time: 'the tastes and priorities cultivated in comics fandom have distorted our picture of the field of comics. Superhero comics, "literary" graphic novels and memoirs, and especially quasi-literary superhero comics dominate the academic literature' (Woo 2020, 121). Likewise, it has been argued that fandoms for 'quality'/'cult' TV have distorted work on television texts/fans (Hills 2017b).

Both Woo (2020) and Singer (2018) are wrestling with issues surrounding the academic legitimization of comics studies. Multiple cultural histories have analysed the gradual cultural-historical legitimization of comic books using a Bourdieusian framework (Lopes 2009; Gabilliet 2010), but Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men* has paid specific attention to the activities of fandom within struggles over cultural consecration. Gabilliet argues that different versions of fandom have effectively been omnipresent within the field of comics, contributing to all types of internal consecration including 'commercial interest' (the fan as speculator or collector; 2010, 268), 'technical interest' (the fan as apprentice artist/writer; 2010, 270), 'historical interest' (the fan as an accumulator of knowledge, or a collector not purely motivated by economics; 2010, 272), and 'critical interest' (the fan as commentator/evaluator, accumulating a variant form of fan cultural capital; 2010, 274). However, in terms of comics' external consecration from outside their own field, such as academic legitimization, Gabilliet argues that this has been 'imperfect' (2010, 304), crucially viewing fandom not as a source of external legitimization, but as a problem. He argues that a number of scholarly texts from the 1990s onward have demonstrated 'the possibility of a "scientific" discourse on comics that is detached from the stigma of fannish subjectivity' (Gabilliet 2010, 304). Gabilliet draws on empirical Bourdieusian work carried out in France by Eric Maigret (cited and translated in Gabilliet 2010). Maigret emphasized how comics' 'artistic consecration is constantly subjected to the reappearance of factors that recall the infantile and commercial characteristics of the form, that is, the [capitalist] heteronomy of the field, at the expense of its [artistic] autonomy' (Gabilliet 2010, 282). Of course, it should be noted that 'infantile' and 'commercial' significantly relate to superhero comics and their geeky, younger fans:

Maigret was concerned to demonstrate that, despite the undeniable reality of of the mechanisms of legitimization that appeared in the 1960s and which have always been present since, comics are still stigmatized because of their allegedly infantile and infantilizing character, from which the concept of 'incomplete recognition' [...] is used to qualify the type of social legitimacy that comics enjoy (Gabilliet 2010, 280–81).

The same argument has also been made in a non-Bourdieusian study of comics' legitimization, Christopher Pizzino's (2016) *Arresting Development*. Read alongside Gabilliet's

analysis, it is striking that the imagined, stereotyped figure of the fan operates not just in comics studies' work aimed at purifying 'proper' scholarship of the distorting aca-fan but also, again, more widely in the external delegitimation of comics:

Haunting the background of any attempt to discuss the problem of comics' illegitimacy [...] is a stereotype of the comics nerd – a pathetic figure, both driven and inept, and one whom the arrival of the graphic novel has done little to demystify – creeping up from the basement into the light of day to defend the medium before a contemptuous public (Pizzino 2016: 14).

Pizzino convincingly argues that the 'discussion of comics has been suffused with figures of development, such as maturation, growing up, or coming of age, which now regulate the status of the medium and normalize its ongoing marginalization' (2016, 22). This discursive framing is referred to as 'the *Bildungsroman* discourse' (Pizzino 2016, 30), consistently identifying the 'journey' that comics have been on – from a medium intended for children to one 'sometimes fit for adults,' and from crudely-produced, disposable commodities to 'aesthetically complex work created by self-directed writer-illustrators' (Pizzino 2016, 30). But all the 'Bildungsroman discourse' surrounding comics leaves in place a sense of the lingering past of comics' illegitimacy – i.e. that some comics are still juvenile, or are championed by fans yet lacking in cultural value.

Just as Marc Singer mobilises the figure of leading fan studies and comics studies' scholar Henry Jenkins alongside stereotyped figures of the fan, so too does Christopher Pizzino, albeit less acerbically: 'the shift from Adorno and Horkheimer to Henry Jenkins (if one had to sum it up in a phrase) has not dissipated all the regulatory energies at work when we theorize media' (Pizzino 2016, 21). Pizzino is interested in reflexively analysing figures of the fan rather than reproducing them, however, suggesting that *contra* notions of the mainstreaming of fandom surrounding events such as San Diego Comic-Con (Gilbert 2018; Hanna 2020), the stereotyped figure of the 'immature' and 'geeky' fan continues to regulate and, in point of fact, delegitimize specific versions of comics rather than univocally contributing to the form's increased status. Pizzino argues that 'the growth of comics studies has been inseparable from the *Bildungsroman* discourse. Comics scholarship and teaching has been driven by the passion of scholars determined to make a place for comics in the academy' (2016, 43), though this typically focuses on the 'graphic novel' whilst implicitly leaving aside other, still culturally devalued, incarnations of comics (Labio 2011, 126). But Pizzino takes issue with Gabilliet's Bourdieusian division of the field of comics into 'internal' and 'external' consecration at the same time as focusing on both the 'stereotype of the comics nerd' *and* potential mechanisms of fannish legitimation:

Jean-Paul Gabilliet and Paul Lopes [...] describe legitimation as something that begins within the medium, and the culture devoted to it, and then spreads into wider fields [...]. At first glance, this model is simple common sense.

Dedicated producers and consumers of any medium [i.e. fans – MH] are those who first take it seriously, and subsequent legitimation can be seen as following from what initially happens among devotees. But as it is typically understood, this model can ignore the degree to which ‘internal’ legitimation of a medium actually means applying external standards that have been used to devalue it (Pizzino 2016, 42).

By refusing to separate out ‘internal’ and ‘external’ legitimations of comics, Pizzino is able to demonstrate how fannish valuations of comics – and by implication, typical aca-fan discursive practices – draw on discourses that leave certain types of comics positioned as non-art. The result, as Benjamin Woo has noted, is that specific versions of comics are far more rarely analysed academically, e.g. ‘romance comics or Dell and Disney comics for children,’ whilst objects of fan revalorisation, e.g. using ‘literariness’ as a criterion, such as ‘quasi-literary superhero comics dominate the academic literature’ (2020, 121). Writing in *Comics and Stuff*, Henry Jenkins likewise notes how

[T]he ‘graphic novel’ rhetoric claims for comics an artistic and literary status otherwise lacking. If anything, the result has been an even more intense contestation as the academy often absorbs those works that look like texts already included in the curriculum – for example, works that stress their literary qualities or experiment with more abstract visual styles – while excluding those that are grounded in Bourdieu’s popular aesthetic (2020b, 139).

Rather than the result of ‘disputes that surface when fans try to discuss forms of culture where everyone can reasonably claim a share of expertise’ (Jenkins 2020b, 139) being a uni-directional movement from comics’ ‘internal’ legitimation to ‘external’ cultural value, then, fandom continues to operate, via the figure of the fan, as an apparent obstacle to wider legitimation, and hence as a figure that comics studies has recently sought to bracket off or expel. But comics fandom has also incorporated problematic hierarchies of cultural value rather than merely acting as a positive agent of legitimation. Indeed, until relatively recently these imported hierarchies focused non-reflexively on the tastes of the comics industry’s ‘default fanboys’ (Kashtan 2018a, 246; Orme 2016, 404).

Fan studies has already begun to productively address the problematics of ‘default’ fandom, addressing how this can be gendered (Scott 2019) and raced via structural whiteness (Pande 2018). There have also been calls for more empirical work on male fandoms: rather than scholars accepting ‘the premise that the popular media serve the existing patriarchy and thus men must simply be reading along with the text [...] a great deal more work needs to be done on how masculine fan groups *really* relate to media texts’ (Brown 2001, 200–01). But fan studies might also learn from comics studies by paying greater attention to Pizzino’s (2016, 30) ‘Bildungsroman discourse.’ If fandom has, akin to

comics, been on a cultural ‘journey’ – from devalued stereotype (Jenkins 1992) to a ‘mainstreamed’ but disciplined regulatory identity (Gilbert 2018) – then Bildungsroman discourse raises several key questions. How might the figure of the ‘immature’ fan continue to delegitimize specific fan objects and tastes, and how might fandom continue to import hierarchies of cultural value that construct some fan practices/tastes as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad’ or ignored: the place of the child-fan in these debates calls for especially acute consideration, I would suggest (Hunting 2019). Fan studies should, perhaps, not be too quick to embrace a narrative of its – and fandom’s – legitimation if, like comics and comics studies, this development may remain an ‘imperfect academic legitimation’ (Gabilliet 2010, 304) haunted by stereotyped and imagined (i.e. not empirically studied) figures of the fan audience. As I’ve shown, such a scenario can lead to aca-fan identities being rejected in potentially reactionary defences of competitive neoliberal aca-fandom – a self-divided aca-fandom which implicitly draws on fan knowledge/identity while explicitly pursuing a ‘professionalized’ academic culture purified of ‘effusive’ fannishness, and thereby presumed to be secure in the contemporary university. Such compliance with neoliberalism aims to shore up pop-cultural analysis in the humanities at a time when instrumentalism and marketising discourses (Fairclough 1995, 158) are becoming ever more dominant.

If comics studies and fan studies can be analysed as inter-related in more ways than we might have assumed, with the role of fandom within each remaining an unresolved and ongoing debate at best (and an attack on problematic figures of the fan at worst), then I want to conclude by touching on a further meeting point between comics/fan studies’ multi-disciplinary trajectories. I will briefly focus on the issue of transmedia engagement, and what this could mean for analyses of comics’ media-specificity and ‘media fandom.’

### **Transmedial Developments: Blurring Film, Comics, and Fandom, or the ‘Jenkins Legacy’**

Fan and audience studies, along with comics studies, face a situation where separating out specific media-focused audiences/consumers may be increasingly difficult. Martin Barker has analysed how audience ‘investment,’ something that usually characterises levels of fandom, ‘can lead people to see past and to transcend the medium in which a cultural experience is presented’ (2012, 191). Rather than different media contributing different elements to the overall consumption of transmedia storytelling (Barker 2012, 195), Barker’s analysis of audience data shows that for ‘the most invested *Lord of the Rings* followers, their commitment is less to its *bookishness* than to its *integrity as a story-world*. It is how the story matters to them that simultaneously generates enthusiasm and critique’ (Barker 2012, 197). It is an extensive story-world that these fans are focused on, and they project this commodified transmedial world as existing behind, beyond and through its mediated realisations. Similarly, Margaret Mackey has shown how younger consumers in the early noughties – her participants were recruited in 2005, aged between 18 and 21 (2011, 34) – had even by this time lost an ability to address

any explicit question about a single medium [...], no matter how monomodally phrased [...], from any standpoint but that of a multimodal interpreter. However singular the focus, their stance is unavoidably comparative. Although I deliberately selected texts without cross-media cognates, I know that all 12 participants came to the project with an extensive background of comparing the same narrative across a variety of media projections. Their comparative instincts may indeed be almost as highly automated as their ability to process print or moving image (Mackey 2011, 200).

Audience questions about specific media (monomodal) were thus understood as comparatively multimodal, bringing in issues of transmedial adaptation or content flow. More recently, Karin Fast and Andre Jansson have argued that analyses of transmediality should no longer be restricted to ‘fan culture in particular [...] the social significance of transmedia today stretches far beyond fan cultures and other enclosed communities’ (2019, 20). They argue that the ‘prevalence of transmedia work is part of a broader social trend, whereby transmedia, taken as a dominant *mode of circulation* and a *regime of mediatization*, makes its way into ordinary culture’ (Fast and Jansson 2019, 20). This means that the restriction of transmedia analysis ‘to focus on how people’s identities unfold in relation [to] *particular types of transmedia texts and formats* rather than [through] the broader social implications of transmedia technologies’ (Fast and Jansson 2019, 22) belongs to what Fast and Jansson call ‘the “Jenkins legacy”’ of work on transmedia storytelling (2019, 22). By contrast, their work explores how

it has become more difficult to identify stable cultural ‘objects.’ [...] [T]ransmedia technologies and open-ended flows have become integral to people’s everyday life environments, and as such they are also carriers of social norms, expectations and demands on how individuals should communicate with others, for what purposes, and ultimately how they should organize their lives at large. This is why we speak about transmedia as a regime of mediatization. The on-going expansion of this regime, in turn, is what we call *transmediatization* (Fast and Jansson 2019, 33).

What, then, are medium-specific ‘comics’ at this point of transmediatization? Digital comics are not simply a dematerialization of print, after all; they offer up a differently configured materiality, making comics more multiple and less stable as media objects, and making print one ‘option’ among others that supports specific fan activities such as collecting and reselling (Jenkins 2020b, 6–7; Steirer 2014, 455–56). The decreased stability of transmediatized comic book ‘objects’ has also been linked to their (insecure) cultural consecration via specific mediations such as the ‘graphic novel’:



*Watchmen* is not the 'same' text when read as twelve individual comic books, or as a perfect-bound trade paperback, or as a digital file [...] and [...] these are all different media through which the art form of comics can be delivered. Comics creators, retailers, and fans know this intuitively, as illustrated by recent controversies in creative and fan circles over practices like 'waiting for the trade' or the digital distribution and downloading of comics. [...]. Moreover, [...] the physical form of a comic is not culturally neutral. When comics are repackaged in different print or digital formats, this repackaging affects the cultural and economic status of these texts (Kashtan 2018b, 25).

Transmediatization also extends, of course, to comics' relationship with blockbuster film adaptations/reversionings, and as Jared Gardner has suggested:

For many film critics, the 'comic book movie' is another nail in the coffin of film art, the ultimate triumph of style over substance [...]. And while one might imagine that comics fans [...] would delight in the greater exposure film gives to their historically neglected medium, many in the world of comics worry that the increasing partnerships with the film industry have doomed every new comic to being essentially a Hollywood pitch. [...] [W]hat is feared is that comics are becoming more like film and movies more like comics (Gardner 2012, 180–81).

Building on this anxiety surrounding medium-specificity, Liam Burke's study of *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* goes on to demonstrate empirically how stable cultural objects, e.g. the 'comic book,' have become more difficult for audiences to identify. In his survey of 113 audience members for movie blockbusters featuring comics superheroes, Burke notes that

only 38 identified themselves as comic book fans. [...] Furthermore, this study's audience research showed that little more than half of the self-described 'comic book fans' who attended the adaptations (55 percent) actually still read comic books of any kind, with two 'comic book fans' indicating that they had never read comics (Burke 2015, 132).

The reverse self-identification, i.e. being a comic book 'non-fan' in the film audience, was also problematic, as 'six [of these respondents] currently read comic books' (Burke 2015, 133). What Burke's data shows is that as transmediatization destabilises media boundaries, it concomitantly *problematizes self-identifications of medium-based fandom*, calling into question the separable and separated versions of 'media fandom' analysed in earlier fan studies' work *and* the previous analyses of comic book fans as 'true believers' in a supposedly singular medium (Pustz 1999). For instance, Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) carries 'Television Fans' in its subtitle, yet television and film have increasingly become

indistinguishable and 'platform agnostic' via the form and delivery mechanism of digital video, again rendering audiences ever more 'medium agnostic' at the same time (Newman 2014, 87; and see Barker 2012, 204).

It is in this context of 'transmediatization' that a burst of current fan/audience studies has turned to explorations of transmedia engagement (Evans 2020), transmedia experience (Kohnen 2020), and transmedia consumption in everyday life (Tosca and Klastrup 2020). Engagement has been a significant concept, both to indicate a type of action involving immersion and felt intensity for audiences, and a specific temporality. As Elizabeth Evans has noted: 'Transmedia culture [...] is inherently temporal and so engagement must also be understood as inherently temporal. [...] In practitioner interviews [with transmedia producers of various kinds – MH], a clear sense of audience engagement beginning and ending emerged' (Evans 2020, 171). Yet practitioners' sense of 'audience engagement' was notably different to audiences' discourses of engagement:

[A]udiences offered a far hazier understanding of engagement's temporal boundaries. Engagement was seen as beginning when participants' type of behaviour shifted to a greater focus on the content [...]. However, common throughout focus group discussion was the idea that engagement only became apparent in retrospect. It could not be planned for or created [...]. Similarly, focus group participants saw truly engaging experiences as something that never ended. [...] Engaging content stayed in their memories, becoming part of their cultural identities (Evans 2020, 172).

Annette Hill observes a similar pattern in her audience data in *Media Experiences*, concluding that 'from an industry perspective media engagement prioritises the here and now of audience experiences; it is the moment of engagement that is given value' (2019, 126). But again, this industrial focus on quantifiable 'engagement' in the moment of consumption (or soon after) misses audiences' 'embedded engagement.' This involves

the kind of long lasting relationship we form with media content during the course of our lives. [...] When we embed media in our lives, time becomes enfolded in our everyday media practices over weeks, months, and years. [...] We might think of [...] embedded time in the context of fandom (Hill 2019, 121).

And Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup's *Transmedial Worlds in Everyday Life* also focuses on 'the time of the audience' as 'transmedia experiences are integrated into our life stories [...], and they can therefore be both part of our memories and triggers of nostalgia' (2020, 164). Tosca and Klastrup were surprised by how their

transmedial empirical work throughout the years has yielded an impressive

record of strong emotional reactions by our participants whenever they were asked to reflect about their histories of engagement with a particular [...] [transmedial world]. One striking fact that made us aware of time as a theme for analysis is that many participants clearly remember the first moment of contact with their beloved universes (Tosca and Klastруп 2020, 164).

These multiple audience studies all capture a notion of ‘media time,’ and industry discourses of audience ‘engagement,’ as opposed to ‘fan time’ where ‘fans can assert [...] their ability to determine the temporality of their engagements with media texts’ (De Kosnik 2016, 158). Audiences’ life course narratives of ‘transmedial engagement’ (Tosca and Klastруп 2020, 8), ‘embedded engagement’ (Hill 2019, 126), and ‘truly engaging experiences’ (Evans 2020, 172) all analytically relate to aspects of transmedia fandom, I would argue, even if the term ‘fan’ is not always used by engaged audiences, given transmediatization’s destabilising of self-identified fandom (Tosca and Klastруп 2020, 8).

Such work, examining transmedial and industrial uses of ‘engagement’ in relation to audience practices, should be placed into further dialogue with both comics studies and fan studies (Perren and Felschow 2018, 309). Theorizing contemporary comics fans *and* so-called ‘media’ fans as operating within emergent cultural-industrial norms of ‘transmediatization’ would offer one way of contextualising both comics studies and fan studies as dealing centrally with audience ‘investment’ in Martin Barker’s (2012, 191) terms. Such a move would enable a shared focus on comic cons, say, as one version of ‘transmedia experience’ (Hills 2018) uniting comics studies and fan studies. At present such meeting points are instead often viewed as a distraction from comics studies’ literary-theoretical emphasis on comics-as-texts, or comic cons are placed within a very different fan studies’ emphasis on the ‘incorporation of subversive fan audiences’ (Woo et al. 2020, 11).

## **Conclusion: Towards Fan/Comics/Transmedia Studies, or the Jenkins Articulation?**

Despite the fact that Fast and Jansson position ‘the “Jenkins legacy”’ as being about an allegedly misguided focus on transmedia storytelling (2019, 22), a far more apposite ‘Jenkins articulation,’ given the ongoing importance of Henry Jenkins’ work to fan studies (Jenkins 1992), transmedia studies (Jenkins 2006b) and comics studies (Jenkins 2020b) would in fact be the creation of greater links, resonances, and collaborations across these areas. In this discussion, I have sought to show the ways in which comics studies and fan studies have shared debates around the risks of aca-fandom, as well as how comics studies has drawn on a stereotyped figure of the fan (Singer 2018; Woo 2020), very much rejected in fan studies, in an effort to counter comics’ delegitimation via ‘Bildungsroman discourse’ and the imagined figure of the ‘immature’ fan. By seeking to purify professionalized comics studies in relation to fandom, even whilst comics scholarship remains permeated by fan knowledges/ identities, a distinctively implicit form of competitive neoliberal aca-fandom is

posited, complying with the marketised instrumentalism of contemporary higher education, and seeking to surpass or overcome other forms of more visible aca-fandom.

But rather than comics studies and fan studies becoming antagonists, I am calling for much more of a team-up. Marc Singer, having requested a new professionalism in comics studies, *contra* devalued explicit aca-fandom, ends his manifesto by citing superhero/franchise discourse, acting as a 'good' aca-fan in the final instance and speaking to academic readers and fan sentiments: 'Comics scholars, assemble,' he concludes (Singer 2018, 249). It is tempting for young, multi-disciplinary areas such as comics studies or fan studies to promote their own coherence, or their own sense of scholarly mission. But shared trajectories, such as the struggle for academic legitimation and the need for empirical engagement with transmediatization, suggest that comics studies and fan studies might have far more to gain from joining forces rather than slugging it out.

At the same time, though, the delegitimizing figure of the fan, previously thought of as non-critical and emotionally effusive, may be in the process of culturally mutating into a *hypercritical* or even 'toxic' reactionary form (Salter and Blodgett 2017; Stanfill 2020). Fan studies and comics studies alike may therefore need to empirically analyse new otherings of figures of fandom, potentially split apart from aca-fandom (I am not aware of any published aca-fan positioning that aligns itself with 'toxic' expressions of fandom, for example, and this may yet constitute a limit-point to performances of fan identity within scholarship). In these altering co-ordinates, seeking to exnominate aca-fandom (Singer 2018, 6) where there may also be, as Mark Duffett writes, a 'crucial role for researchers who *do not* proclaim their own fandom' (2013, 275) – seeking to normalise aca-fandom rather than expelling it as problematic – still risks closing down reflexive discussion of the (sub)cultural capital that scholars are drawing upon. Arguably, this could make forms of raced/gendered privilege within comics studies and fan studies less contestable.

If the *Bildungsroman* discourse 'figure of the fan' (Pizzino 2016, 14) has played a role in devaluing comics and rendering comics studies' academic legitimation 'imperfect' (Gabilliet 2010, 304), then the figure of the aca-fan has potentially played a related role in fan studies' internal consecration (as a positive marker of difference or an unresolved marker of multiplicity) and its external consecration (or relative lack thereof; with the aca-fan still being marked as 'improperly' academic in a range of institutional/academic/instrumental-neoliberal contexts). The point is not, finally, to arrive at a 'coming of age' for fan studies or comics studies at a time of shared transmediatization, but rather to go on analysing how *maturational audience figurations* – e.g. the new immaturity of 'toxic' fandom (Whiteman 2018) alongside mainstreamed 'ordinary fandom' (Sandvoss and Kearns 2014) – impinge on disciplinary discourses, and not only fandoms/comics/comics fandoms as objects of study but also our very selves as the *subjects* crafting these contemporary pop-cultural studies.

### **Biographical note:**

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